

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

## HYPERALLERGIC

# Pope.L Invites Us to “Enter The Mess” When Things Fall Apart

Whether through expansion or confusion, Pope.L plays with the instability of time and shows how tapping into this instability can unlock creative shifts in thinking.



by Allison Conner  
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Installation view, *The Ritual Is for All of us*, Vielmetter Los Angeles, 2022 (photo by Robert Wedemeyer, image courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles)

LOS ANGELES — When asked by Martha Wilson about the affinity for contradiction within his work in a 1996 *BOMB* magazine interview, artist Pope.L pointed to his own family experiences as one clue, noting how the “desire to keep things together,” kept coming in conflict with “this tendency

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for things to fall apart.” Rather than accept these impulses as mutually exclusive and in opposition, Pope.L, who is known for his gonzo interventions into art and life, dives into the tensions, curious as to how one makes meaning within such a shifting and unstable environment. He embraces contradiction and nonsense as but one method of engaging with our social realities and understanding how those realities are structured by ideologies like racism, consumerism, and more.

I thought about Pope.L’s desire to “produce a world or object with these types of tensions,” as he explained to Wilson, while visiting *The Ritual Is For All of us*, the artist’s second solo exhibition at Vielmetter Los Angeles. Spanning video, projection, objects, and paintings, *The Ritual Is for All of us* offers another view into Pope.L’s legendary durational practice. Though he is often linked to his “Crawl” series — public performances that found the artist dragging his body across the asphalt of the New York City streets from one location to another — Pope.L’s practice resists categorization, flitting from theater to writing to visual art with a mischievous glee. Whether he’s using a VHS camera or found objects, his work considers the slipperiness of language and time, inviting the viewer into absurdist encounters that leave us contemplating our own perspectives and social conditions.

When I entered Vielmetter, I was greeted by a series of sheds, arranged throughout the space like a deconstructed maze, creating improvised pathways and edges. A dripping sound filled the gallery as I inspected the sheds, unsure of what I was looking at or for. I circled the box until encountering a side with a beige curtain and stepped into a dark cube, my attention drawn to a video playing on one of the walls. “Shed Film” (2006–2022) was shot on pre-high definition mini DV, and follows a nonlinear stream-of-images. One thread

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Installation view of *The Ritual Is for All of us*, Vielmetter Los Angeles, 2022 (photo Allison Conner/Hyperallergic)

concerns two figures in hazmat suits investigating mulch near a garden bed, their action intercut with close-ups of pastel flowers and scenes of two masked figures chatting in a dank apartment. The screen would then cut to an extreme close-up of a bleeding eye, with my body sinking every time, the same sensation I feel when witnessing a jump scare in a horror movie.



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Detail of Pope.L, "The Collective" (2007–2022), shot on mini DV, digitized, and edited digitally, TRT: 19:07 minutes (photo Allison Conner/Hyperallergic)

As I stopped by each shed, certain images reappeared like nagging ghosts. Many videos feature performers donning vinyl Condoleezza Rice or Donald Rumsfeld masks. The bleeding eye, for instance, returned in "APHOV" (2005–2022), which features a performer in a Rumsfeld mask and their hands painted black, tinkering with a miniature sinking ship while crying bloody tears. "The Collective" (2007–2022) unfurled like a bizarro family sitcom, with the drama (or comedy?) centering on two masked Condeleezas pontificating about the '70s show *Good Times*, while another masked couple engaged in a messy kink ritual in the basement. The videos scaled a medley of tones, at once goofy, deranged, heartfelt, and roundabout.



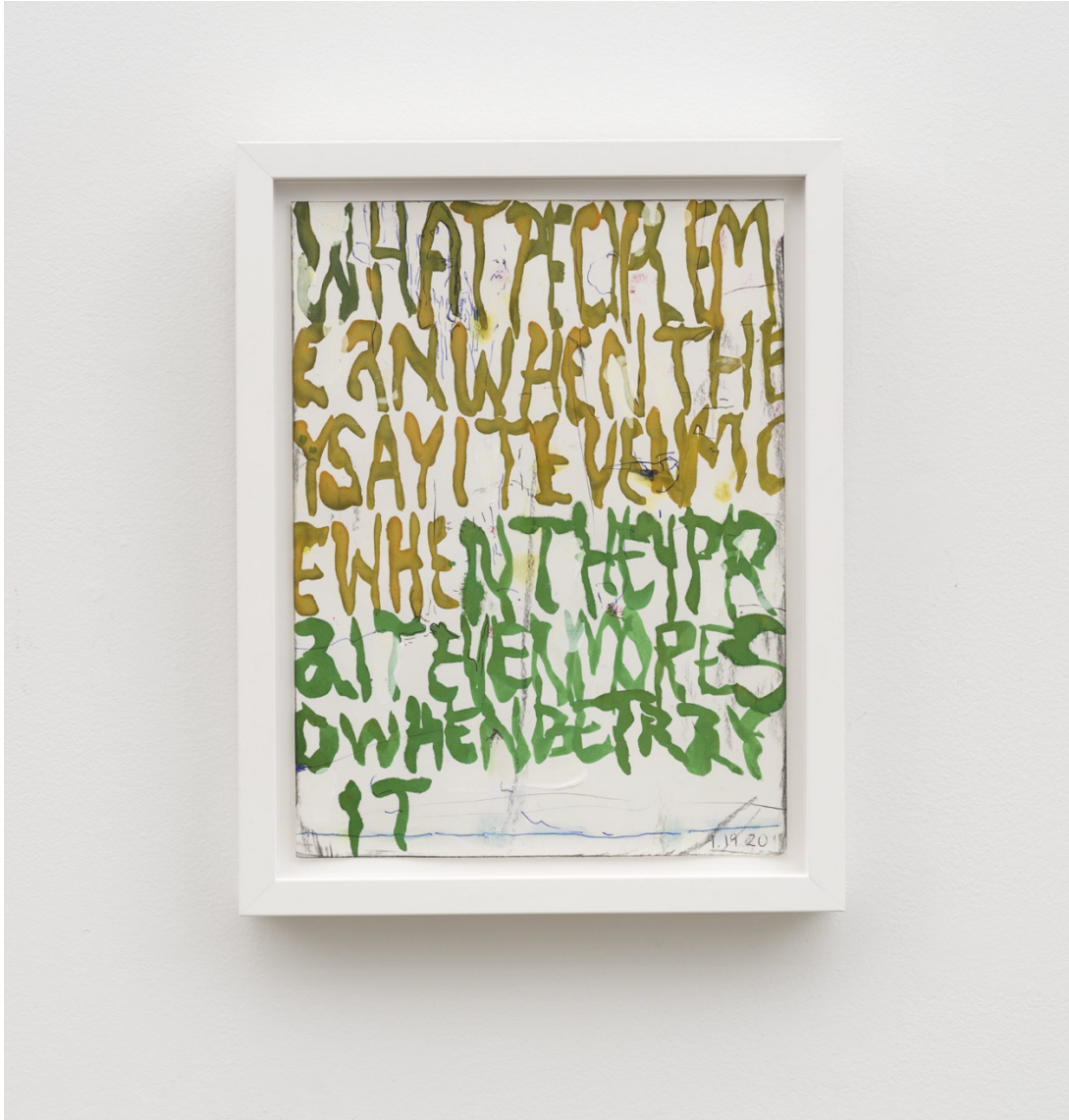
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Pope.L, "Black Factory Sainsbury's Bean Can Under Pressure #1" (2005–2020), plexi glass, hardware, Pope.L Signed Sainsbury bean can, Black Factory sticker, plywood, wood putty, cork, wooden dowel, acrylic paint (photo by Jeff McLane, image courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles)

The sheds were joined by two sets of wall-based work — acrylic paintings on paper with bright, slurry text and a collection of Salisbury baked bean cans contained in handmade gray compression boxes. Both echo ongoing projects, *Skin Set* and *The Black Factory* respectively, adding another layer of durational energy to the exhibition. *Skin Set: Calendar* features the same poetic fragment written in blocky letters, the text careening joyously into illegibility. Most were dated in 2020, but some boasted titles with future years like 2025. Whether expanding time via the Shed videos or confusing it as in the *Calendar* paintings, Pope.L plays with the instability of time and shows how tapping into this instability can unlock creative shifts in thinking.

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Pope.L, "September 19, 2020 (e)" (2020), acrylic, ink, ballpoint, and charcoal on paper (photo by Jeff McLane, image courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles)

His experiments with time and language communicate this need to disrupt the codified rhythms of our daily life. Like his other durational work, *The Ritual Is For All of us* confronts us with other modes of being, peeling back the constricting hierarchies that organize our lives. In the *BOMB* interview, Pope.L explained he wanted to create “works that allow people to enter themselves, thus, enter the mess,” of our world. That’s how I felt engaging with the sheds scattered throughout the gallery — like I was encountering the mess of our US reality and had to construct ways of making meaning out of the chaos.



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Detail of Pope.L, "Shed Film" (2006–2022), shot on mini DV, digitized, and edited digitally, TRT: 13:01 minutes (photo Allison Conner/Hyperallergic)

*The Ritual Is for All of us continues at Vielmetter Los Angeles (1700 South Santa Fe Avenue, #101, Downtown, Los Angeles) through July 23. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*