

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Pope.L, Artist and Performer Who Crawled Across NYC, Dies at 68

His endurance-based works drew attention to overlooked nuances, from systemic inequities imposed on Black Americans to absurd social rituals.

Rhea Nayyar and Elaine Velie | December 27, 2023



A portrait of Pope.L (photo by Peyton Fulford, courtesy Modern Art London)

Artist Pope.L, who worked across the interdisciplinary fields of performance, installation, and sculpture, died suddenly in his Chicago home at the age of 68 on December 23. Known primarily for his candid, endurance-based work that drew attention to overlooked nuances, from the systemic inequities imposed on Black Americans to the absurdity of social rituals, he melded the humor of incongruence with fastidious interrogations of political systems and society. The news of his death was confirmed by Vielmetter Los Angeles, Modern Art in London, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, the artist's representing galleries.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1955, Pope.L is arguably most recognized for his evolving series of ground-level crawls through New York City from the '70s through the late 2010s. Clad in various outfits and equipped with props, the artist crept along detritus-lined streets — and spotless blocks of rich neighborhoods — in an astute commentary on social norms and the nonsensical nature of America's colossal wealth divide. Beginning in 2019, Pope.L's decades of crawls were celebrated among other elements of his practice in a trio of exhibitions organized by the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Public Art Fund. His final iteration of the series was the focal point of a performance organized by the latter titled "Conquest" (2019), which invited over 100 New Yorkers to join the artist on what he described as "an absurd journey to an uncertain goal."

"We'd gotten used to people begging, and I was wondering, how can I renew this conflict?" Pope.L said in a 1996 interview about the crawls, reflecting on the spectacle of oppression in its most blatant form. "I don't want to get used to seeing this. I wanted people to have this reminder." Like many of his projects, the series forced viewers to confront their role in American society and their complicity in normalized injustices.

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Pope.L's 2017 installation Flint Water (photo Sarah Rose Sharp/Hyperallergic)

Among the artist's most notable contributions are his explorations into the racial and social politics of water access and usage in the United States. In 2017, he exhibited a show in Detroit titled Flint Water, which consisted of an immersive display that presented the likeness of a water-bottling plant inside a white-walled, constricted gallery space. The plastic bottles, adorned with Pope.L's graphics, were filled with tap water from Flint, simultaneously calling attention to the city's lead-laden life source while offering a scathing critique of the government's abysmal response. For Pope.L: Choir at the Whitney, the artist debuted a new installation expanding on the issue of safe water.

In Pope.L's installation "Trinket" (2008/2015) — an enormous, partially shredded flag hung next to industrial fans so that it is always blowing — the artist quite literally immersed his viewers in the most recognizable symbol of the US. In its 2015 iteration, the wind gradually shredded the flag's ends, a visualization of a fraying American political system.

"Can art save the world? Well, to be honest, all things being equal, can anything save the world?" the oft-irreverent artist told Hyperallergic in a 2015 interview. "And even if it could, should it? Should humanity be allowed to continue on its merry? Humans are like fish. We struggle in the open air, we wriggle and claw and flex our gills at nothing cause this is what we do when we are frightened of our own freedom, this misery we have created for ourselves is a kind of miracle and a freedom."

A memorial for the artist will be held in the spring of 2024.