

ARTnews

Pope.L, Daredevil Artist Who Invoked Heady Ideas About Blackness, Dies at 68

ALEX GREENBERGER | December 27, 2023 3:49PM EST



Pope.L, an artist whose daredevil performances and conceptual artworks unraveled the concept of race and explored the complexities of language, died at 68 on December 23. His three galleries—Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Modern Art, and Vielmetter Los Angeles—announced his death on Wednesday, saying that he died unexpectedly in his Chicago home.

Across the past four decades, Pope.L amassed an oeuvre of works that thwarted easy readings, offering up situations that alluded to the condition of Black Americans without outright stating what they were trying to communicate. The sculptures, installations, performances, and conceptual artworks that Pope.L created were often provocative and sad—and, more often than not, funny, too, in ways that could be shocking.

Despite the fact that his artworks were intentionally somewhat inscrutable, they amassed a wide audience, and were shown in venues ranging from the Whitney Biennial to Documenta. A 2018 profile of Pope.L that appeared in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* said that he was “inarguably the greatest performance artist of our time.”

He cast his art as a larger quest to understand the opposed concepts of Blackness and whiteness. “Black folks’ political and historical circumstances are at odds with whiteness, whether we want them to be or not,” he said in a 1996 interview with the artist Martha Wilson. “There are societal limitations to how much one can reconstruct one’s conditions. We are born into whiteness. On the surface, it seems wholly to construct us, and the degree to which we may counter-construct sometimes seems very limited. But, I believe we can be very imaginative with limitations.”

Pope.L was most famous for his crawl performances, for which he traversed set distances on his hands and knees. These works, first begun in 1978, were staged in locales around New York City and beyond, and were always conducted outside art institutions, in the view of the general public. The formula for his crawl performances, though seemingly simple, ended up being flexible, broaching knotty issues about success, suffering, and Blackness.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Beginning in 2001, working in parts, he undertook the most epic of his crawl performances, making his way all the way from the southernmost of Broadway in Manhattan to his mother's home in the Bronx. He wore a Superman uniform and a skateboard strapped to his back, and kicked off the performance at the Statue of Liberty, making his way to Manhattan by ferry. The work hinted at the difficulty of achieving freedom while also indirectly hinting at an exploration of the racism that hinders that quest.



Left: POPE.L, *THE GREAT WHITE WAY: 22 MILES, 9 YEARS, 1 STREET*, 2002. ©POPE.L/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK. Right: POPE.L *BENEATH HIS SCULPTURE TRINKET* (2015). PHOTO STEFANIE KEENAN/GETTY IMAGES

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He staged dozens of crawls, repeating the grueling act so many times that he reportedly ended up with several fused vertebrae. These performances rankled some onlookers: Pope.L once recalled that a Black viewer nearly kicked him in the face during one performance in which he crawled across a gutter. For some critics, his willingness to debase himself before an audience spoke to a larger exploration of his own value to society as a Black man.

"Pope.L uses his own body instead of crafting mute sculpture to reflect on the treatment of the self as an object," artist and writer Aria Dean noted in an *Art in America* essay about Pope.L. "'Am I, a black man, for myself? How much?' his oeuvre asks. And it offers a pessimistic answer: potentially not at all."

Later works would prod how white viewers considered Blackness. For an ongoing project known as the Black Factory, begun in 2004, he asked people to submit objects they associated with Blackness. What he amassed—extra-large condoms, bandanas—spoke to a range of stereotypes.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, he said of the project, "I realised that for a lot of white people, mostly white people, their experience of race is personal. I've never thought of my experience of race as just mine."

Pope.L was born in 1955 in Newark, New Jersey, to a mother that he described as an addict and an alcoholic. (He initially began working as William Pope.L, then dropped the William. His surname draws its L from his mother's last name, Lancaster; Pope was the last name of his father, who did not raise him.) He said that his early upbringing had ultimately moved him to create the work that he did.

"My family life was very uncertain," he said in the 1996 interview with Martha Wilson. "I'll never get rid of that uncertainty. We never knew from one moment to the next when we would move, what we were going to eat . . . You grow up scared. You realize that there's not much difference between you and street people."

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Pope.L recalled that his grandmother, a cleaner, spurred on his interest in art by introducing him to one of her clients, a portrait painter.

Initially, Pope.L attended Pratt College, a prestigious Brooklyn art school, but he could not afford it and ended up dropping out before graduation. After working factory jobs, he finished out his undergraduate art education at what is now Montclair State University. He also attended the Whitney Museum's hallowed Independent Studio Program, then received an M.F.A. from Rutgers University in 1981.

Pope.L's earliest works were often staged in the street, beyond gallery walls. In 1978, he enacted Thunderbird Immolation a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece, for which he sat in the lotus position on a SoHo sidewalk. He surrounded himself with matches, a reference, seemingly, to the monks that set themselves on fire in protest of the Vietnam War.

Yet many of his initial experiments were waged in the world of theatre. He took classes at the famed Mabou Mines program, which is known for its experimental methodologies, and would go on to teach at Bates College in Maine. At that school, in 1990, he staged a production of the Lorraine Hansberry play *A Raisin in the Sun*, which memorably chronicles an African American family's attempts to make an insurance payment while also preserving their unity and financial stability. Pope.L's version contained a sly twist: the cast was composed not just of Black actors but white ones, too.

His breakthrough with an art-world audience came in 1991. Sitting in the front window of New York's Franklin Furnace art space, Pope.L slathered himself in mayonnaise, a material that he said lent him a kind of "bogus whiteness." The piece's plainly funny title, *I Get Paid to Rub Mayo on My Body*, suggested self-commodification in the name of art.

So too did another legendary performance, 1997's *ATM Piece*, for which Pope.L donned only a pair of Timberland boots and a skirt made of dollar bills, attached himself to an ATM by an eight-foot-long chain of sausage links, and doled out money to passersby. The work alluded to a newly passed law that made it illegal to panhandle within 10 feet of an ATM, and Pope.L seemed to know that he was flirting with trouble. He ended up being labeled an "E.D.P." (emotionally disturbed person) by a police officer; a photograph documenting the performance preserves that very confrontation between him and a cop.

Pope.L's work grew increasingly ambitious in the decades afterward.

Starting in 2000, he began creating a web-based project called *distributingmartin*. It could be accessed via a hidden portal on the website for the Black Factory, and involved attempting to disperse Martin Luther King, Jr.'s body. In typical fashion for Pope.L, when queried about the project by the digital art-focused organization Rhizome, he said that he wasn't sure what the work meant.

In 2008, he produced *Trinket*, a 45-foot-long American flag that shreds itself as it blows in the wind; a version of it later acted as the backdrop to a performance by the rapper Kendrick Lamar. (Only recently did the work find an institutional home with the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, due to its unusual format.) And in 2017, he staged *Flint Water*, an installation and performance that involved bottling contaminated water from Flint, the majority-Black Michigan city that has been mired in crisis for much of the past decade. The bottles were produced as an edition and made available for sale.

Toward the end of the 2010s, Pope.L's art began to receive mainstream recognition, appearing in the Whitney Biennial, where he won its \$100,000 prize, and in *Documenta*, where he showed *Whispering Campaign*, which emitted phrases uttered in hushed tones from speakers set throughout the German city of Kassel. In 2019, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum, both in New York, staged what amounted to an unconventional mid-career survey. *ArtReview* reported that Pope.L had tried to name the show "*How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?*," after a crawl piece from the '90s. According to the artist, MoMA "had concerns," so that title was nixed. The show ended up being called "*member*."

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Just this past November, Pope.L opened his first British institutional exhibition at the South London Gallery.

Many of Pope.L's works involved linguistic games, enlisting puns and printed texts to befuddle viewers. His performance *Eating the Wall Street Journal* involved ingesting the copies of the titular publication while wearing only a jockstrap, and his "Skin-Set Drawings" played with the language used to describe Blackness and whiteness ("BLACK PEOPLE ARE TAUT," for example). The curator Lowery Stokes Sims once called Pope.L the "the poet laureate of male performance artists."

Artists typically produce biographies and statements for their curricula vitae. But Pope.L's approach to disseminating information about himself was somewhat different. When he met people, he would hand them a business card. On it, he labeled himself "the friendliest black artist in America©."