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Artists and curators pay tribute to performance pioneer Pope.L who has died aged 68

The artist, known for his Crawl series, treated 'absurdity of racism in an unflinching way'

Gareth Harris | 28 December 2023



For *The Great White Way*, Pope.L donned a Superman costume and crawled all twenty-two miles from the Battery to his mother's home in the Bronx. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash

The influential US performance and conceptual artist Pope.L has died aged 68 (born 1955). His death was confirmed by one of his galleries, Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, who said in a statement that he had died suddenly on 23 December at his home in Chicago.

A raft of tributes were paid on social media. The artist Coco Fusco says in an Instagram post: "No one else but Pope.L has treated Black abjection and the absurdity of racism in such a poetic and unflinching way." UK artist Isaac Julien says also on Instagram: "I don't think I have ever seen a more profound and powerful critique of racism by any artist (of white masculinity) in capitalist American culture [referring to his Superman crawl along Broadway in 2000]."

Artists Sanford Biggers posted: "Thank you for your eternal brilliance, integrity and guidance." Mark Godfrey, former Tate curator, wrote on social media, that "he was such an extraordinarily original, radical artist".

Mitchell-Innes & Nash said in a statement that "his longstanding history of provocative and absurdist performances along with his wide-ranging oeuvre of installations, objects, and paintings undermined conventional notions of language, materiality, and meaning. His elegant, indeterminate, and often humorous, yet biting and poignant criticism of our history has only recently begun to be fully recognised." He is also represented by Modern Art, London, and Vielmetter Los Angeles; a memorial is planned next spring.

Last month we ran an interview with Pope.L to mark his new exhibition at South London Gallery (*Hospital*, until 11 February). "He was known for his provocative and often absurdist works that deal with race, economic systems

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and language. The Chicago-based artist and educator worked across multiple disciplines, from installations and film to painting and writing. His work is as distinctive as it is expansive,” wrote Margaret Carrigan.

Pope.L was known especially for his *Crawl* series, which saw him move on hands and knees across large swathes of New York City on several occasions between 1978 and 2001; the provocative interventions had a certain shock factor with the public reaction fundamental to the work. “In the beginning some people were perplexed. Some people were pissed off. Some, especially when I was doing the street version, ignored or avoided me,” he told us.

Carrigan wrote that *Eating the Wall Street Journal* was maybe Pope.L’s most recognisable work, which has been performed in multiple different ways since 1991, when he first sat on an American flag and started eating pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, washing them down with milk and ketchup.

Eating the Wall Street Journal was staged in 2000 at the Sculpture Center in New York. In 2020, during Pope.L’s solo exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), he performed a street version of the piece on top of the US flag, delivering a succinct commentary on the US’s glorification of capital and consumption.

A new version of this work is the centrepiece of his exhibition at the South London Gallery. For this iteration, Pope.L removed the live performance element and, instead, three 4m-high wooden towers, topped with toilets and in various stages of collapse, dominate the gallery’s main space.

Other key works include *I Get Paid to Rub Mayo on My Body* (1991) which involved the artist smearing mayonnaise all over his torso so as to give himself a “bogus whiteness”, challenging once again perceptions of Blackness. Sitting in the window of New York’s Franklin Furnace art space, Pope.L presented himself as a commodity, reflecting the dynamics of the burgeoning art market. He often gave out business cards describing himself as “the friendliest Black artist in America”.

The largest museum show of his work opened in 2015 at the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The show included *Trinket* whereby high-powered air from a series of fans caused the 51-star US flag to fray and fall apart over the course of the 14-week exhibition.

Pope.L told [Artforum](#): “A flag points a nation. A flag is an amulet—doo-rag symbol for national booty. Trinkets suggest a past time. The American flag suggests a past-time. It’s what we do when we are not thinking... It’s an object that rifts. It’s a division of—. It’s a dissection of—. It cleaves desire into a design that masquerades as rationality. We call this symbolic capital.”

According to Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Newark-born Pope.L studied at Pratt Institute, though lack of funds forced him to drop out, and later received his BA from Montclair State College (Montclair State University) in 1978. He also attended the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art before earning his MFA from Rutgers University in 1981. He also studied at the Mabou Mines theatre on St. Mark’s Place in Manhattan.

In recent years his career gained momentum, reflected in a number of high-profile shows such as *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration*, a trio of complementary exhibitions in New York (2019) organised by the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Public Art Fund. MoMA said that Pope L. referred to himself as “a fisherman of social absurdity”.