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Pope.L, world-renowned performance artist and teacher at University of Chicago, dies at 68

Pope.L called himself a “fisherman of social absurdity.” He once crawled along New York’s Broadway in a Superman costume and ate scraps of the Wall Street Journal while sitting on a toilet.

By Mitch Dudek | Jan 2, 2024, 9:19pm EST



Pope.L’s work touched on nearly every medium, from writing and painting to sculpting and performance art. Sun-Times (file)

When world-renowned artist and University of Chicago teacher Pope.L needed inspiration, he’d grab an old VHS tape with episodes of the 1970s television show “Columbo” and pop it into his VCR.

The title character, played by Peter Falk, of the police detective drama would tell people he was questioning, “Just one more thing,” before asking a critical question that would eventually help crack the case.

“Pope.L was like Columbo. He never ceased to ask difficult questions that no one wanted to ask, and that’s how he showed care and love,” said Jinn Bronwen Lee, a former student in the University of Chicago’s visual arts department.

The critical questions came through in his work as an artist and in his roles as teacher and mentor.

“He gave us the constant question of ‘Are you being sincere in the work that you make?’ And that’s really all you can ask for from a person you respect,” said colleague, friend and fellow artist Theaster Gates.

Pope.L died Dec. 23 at his Hyde Park home. He was 68. No cause was given.

Pope.L moved to Chicago 12 years ago from Maine, where he was teaching at Bates College, to be closer to his son. He was already an established artist with a cult following. His work touched nearly every medium, from writing and painting to sculpting and performance art.

His most well-known performance, “The Great White Way,” came in 2001 when he began crawling the length of Broadway in New York City in a Superman costume, sans cape and with a skateboard strapped to his back. He did the crawl in segments to spare his elbows and knees.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Pope.L on his "Great White Way" crawl in 2001. Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery

In another performance piece, Pope.L covered himself in white powder and ate scraps of *The Wall Street Journal* while sitting on a toilet.

In 2017, organizers of an exhibition opening in Switzerland scrambled to meet his requirement of arriving in a white-stretch limousine, which Pope.L exited in a white gorilla suit carrying a white umbrella.

"That was the last time he did a performance himself because, physically, it was just exhausting," his gallerist, Lucy Mitchell-Innes, said.

"He always said he was a 'fisherman of social absurdity,'" said Ann Goldstein, deputy director at the Art Institute of Chicago, which has several Pope.L pieces on display.

His death comes days after the death of Richard Hunt, another renowned African American artist from Chicago.

"Hunt made space for somebody like Pope.L, who made space for somebody like me," said Gates, who counts Pope.L as a mentor.

About five years ago, Pope.L invited several students and colleagues to gather at midnight in a vacant lot on Chicago's South Side and offer a performance of their choosing. Gates sang an old slave spiritual. Jessica Stockholder, a fellow University of Chicago professor, dressed in costume and read a poem that she had written.

"It didn't feel like a vacant lot; it felt like we were giving something to the Earth, to the energy of 63rd Street, to a memory of what had been there. It was a way of acknowledging Black space and Blackness, but it was bigger than that, too. It was about acknowledging humanity," Gates said.

"He was an African American man, and his work was in some part of his identity, but it was also much much larger than that. He was empathetic and attentive to people's struggles in the world," Stockholder said.

In 2018, Pope.L put on "The Escape" — an experimental restaging of "The Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom," which was written in 1858 by freed Black slave and abolitionist William Wells Brown. Even though the performance was scheduled at the 950-seat Rubloff Auditorium at the Art Institute of Chicago, the show could only accommodate an audience of 35 because most of it took place not in the actual theater, but in a series of small spaces in the building, including the women's restroom and the boiler room.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Pope.L works on a sculpture at University of Chicago's Logan Center in April 2013. Sun-Times (file)

“This was his genius — destabilizing situations and making people uneasy and challenging people’s assumptions about what’s normal and what order looks like,” said Nancy Frej, an art collector from Bucktown who attended one of the performances.

Her husband, David Frej, bought a Pope.L painting and wanted to frame it to protect the piece, but the notion of keeping the work of art behind glass was something Pope.L was against.

“In his words, he wanted the paper to ‘misbehave,’ and he felt like putting it in a frame kind of goes against what he wanted the paper to do,” David Frej said, noting that he finally got his way, but only after a very memorable visit from Pope.L.

“We went back and forth for several months on framing techniques, and when it came down to the nitty-gritty of finalizing a solution, he came over and spent about two hours sort of poking his finger into the work in different places, and ultimately added a single pushpin into one part of the work and called it complete,” he said. “He’d found a way for it to still feel like it was adequately misbehaving.”

Pope.L was born William Pope on June 28, 1955, in Newark, New Jersey, to Lucille Lancaster and William Pope. He was raised by his grandmother, Desma Lancaster, according to Mitchell-Innes.

The name “Pope.L,” is a portmanteau of his original last name and his mother’s name that was created by students at Bates College in the 1980s.

Pope.L graduated from Montclair State College in New Jersey, now Montclair State University, and also studied at the Whitney Museum of American Art’s independent study program and the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

He is survived by his partner, Mami Takahashi, and his son, Desmond Tarkowski-Pope.L.