

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

## FRIEZE

### Remembering Pope.L (1955–2023)

Curators, peers and former colleagues pay tribute to ‘the friendliest Black artist in America’

BY COURTNEY WILLIS BLAIR, ARI MARCOPOULOS, MARTHA WILSON, DAVE LLOYD AND ADRIENNE EDWARDS IN OPINION | 19 JAN 24



*Pope.L, WHA, 2020–21, acrylic, charcoal, oil and epoxy on panel, 2.4 × 3.7 m. Courtesy: © Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York*

*The artist professionally known as Pope.L was born on a Tuesday in June 1955 to Lucille Lancaster. He was her second child, and she gave him his father's name: William Pope. It was a typical summer day in Newark, New Jersey, and the papers would hardly cover anything notable. Surely, then, this birth was the memorable thing: a singular event, the beginning of a storied life and career that would impact generations of artists.*

*Many first encounter Pope.L's work through his crawling performances that began in the 1970s, but go deep enough and you'll find his art grapples as often with language, duration and relationships as it does with the pursuit of it. First finding expression through writing, then theatre and music, which in turn led to public action, he eventually developed a fully fledged studio practice that encompassed his formal training. But Pope.L's study of performance, of oration, of staging and, of course, of language began much earlier. In the kitchens (one of which, as he recounted to Martha Wilson in *Bomb* magazine in 1996, his mother collaged with architectural drawings to cover its awful yellow paint), the living rooms or wherever the family would gather, Pope.L, wide-eyed, would watch his mother recite poetry from memory, her sister and brother responding with their own – an early cipher, of sorts.*

*After these gatherings came the Pratt Institute, Rutgers University, Montclair State University and Mabou Mines. The sharpening of the knife, if you will. Young and curious, with the kind of mind that gets Black boys into the sort of trouble their mothers pray against, Pope.L early on would come to the realization that the state of precarity in which so many like his family lived was to be challenged rather than resigned to, and that a sense of unease, lining the social constructions in which we find ourselves participating every day, was paramount for all of us to bear collectively in order to achieve anything of consequence. This was the heart of his work through the years: a wilful wading into the messiness of life, often alone, then encouraging us to join him.*

*If you had the pleasure of knowing Pope.L personally, as I did, you may still hear his melodic laugh bolstered by a wide smile. You may see his hunched gait and his uniform: straight-legged dungarees, a bookbag and a baseball cap with his coiled greying hair jutting out from underneath. You most certainly will remember his generosity, the way his answers were more like prompts, how clear he was on his priorities. And, more than anything, you'll have pocketfuls of stories, many of which you'll choose to hold close.*

*How do you measure the life of an immeasurable man? I believe it's with the memories that are left behind. Here are some of those thoughts. –Courtney Willis Blair*

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Pope.L, *Conquest*, 2019, performance documentation. Courtesy: © Pope.L and Public Art Fund, New York; photograph: Timothy Schenck

## Ari Marcopoulos

I first heard about Pope.L's work at the 2002 Whitney Biennial, where he had recently embarked on the multi-year performance, *The Great White Way* (2001–09). It was a confounding spectacle: a Black man crawling down Broadway in a Superman costume with a skateboard strapped to his back. I subsequently had the opportunity to hang out with him a few times. Conversations with Pope.L were just as confounding as his work. His words were thought-provoking yet funny, the sound of his laugh often formed an intrinsic part of any debate.

My last encounter with his art was 'Impossible Failures', a joint exhibition with Gordon Matta-Clark at 52 Walker, New York, last year – an aptly titled show for an artist who was dedicated to experimentation no matter the outcome. I was amazed, as I have been with so much of Pope.L's work, by what he was able to do with the simplest of materials: *Vigilance a.k.a. Dust Room* (2023), for instance, employed simple Home Depot products to create a magical scene in which Styrofoam flew around like snow in a blue, wintery light. Ever the trickster, he ensured the piece could be seen only through a small window cut into the side of a dumpster. I could have watched it for eternity. I will greatly miss Pope.L and his startling work.

## Martha Wilson

In 1991, Pope.L approached me about a summer residency at Franklin Furnace in New York. This turned into his now-iconic *How Much Is that Nigger in the Window?*, for which he performed naked, save for his underwear, in the windowfront of the arts centre. He smeared his body with mayonnaise in an effort to 'become white', but the mayonnaise oxidized and he became shiny instead. This, to me, was a wonderful embodiment of a motivation he expressed in a 1996 interview I did with him for *Bomb*, in which he said: 'Mayonnaise gave me a quirky material means to deal with issues Black people claim they don't value very much, e.g. whiteness.'

As part of the same residency, he performed *Tompkins Square Crawl*, for which he wore a three-piece suit and dragged himself through the gutter, holding a flower in a pot. A Black man crossed the street to yell at him, asking why he was denigrating the image of Black folks. An answer to that can be found in the same 1996 interview,

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where he said: 'Let us imagine a person who has a job, possesses the means to remain vertical, but chooses to momentarily give up that verticality? To undergo that threat to his/her/body/spiritual categories – that person would learn something. I did.'



Pope.L, *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl*, 1991, digital c-print on gold-fibre silk paper, 25 × 38 cm.  
Courtesy: © Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

In 2000, Pope.L was awarded a Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art grant to realize *Eating The Wall Street Journal (third version)* (2000) at Sculpture Center, for which he sat upon a toilet atop a three-metre structure and proceeded to eat copies of *The Wall Street Journal*. Occasionally, he would offer gallery-goers money to lie on the floor so that he could spit the chewed-up newspaper onto them.

I still can't quite comprehend that this formative artist of our time is no longer with us to challenge our ways of seeing.

## Dave Lloyd

Pope.L provided a kind of shelter for me, sometimes hectic and brutal. I helped him produce artworks and exhibitions for eight years until a couple weeks ago. The experience oscillated from brilliant clarity to blind grasping. More blind grasping. I lived vicariously and struggled in his conceptual universe. That gave me partial permission to make abstract paintings behind closed doors (something he would never do). There's a cache in my head with invaluable memories.

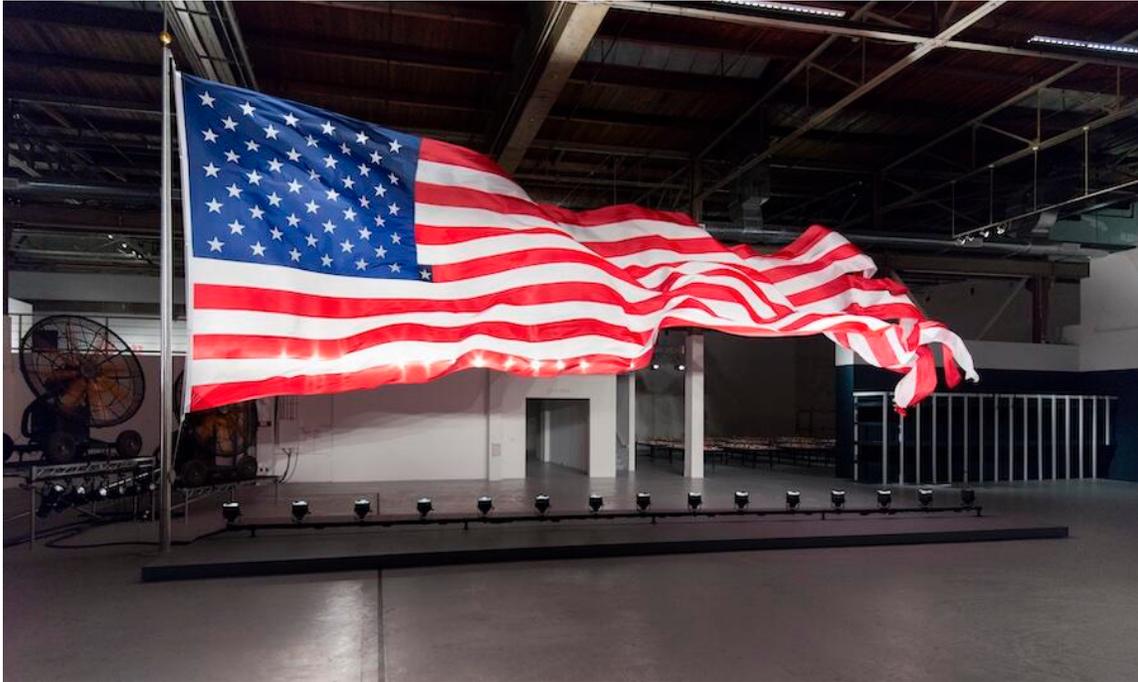
Pope.L was severely concerned with his work. He needed control but knew better, so he'd define parameters or describe an idea and then manage conditions to discover what chance could provide. Stormy contradictions lit his path to decision-making. Eventually an artwork announced itself whole. It felt like a simultaneous uncovering and covering up of what's real. Like philosophical magic.

His work championed theatrical suspense. Covert irrationality ran rampant within a broader bracketed logic. A tidy logic. Sometimes you'd have to zoom out or blur your vision. It was always personal. It was always alienated. A

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stream of vivid consciousness from an unwieldy imagination. It was rarely cool, calm or collected even if sometimes he pretended to be nonchalant. Ha! Sometimes he had a 'big' budget and other times close to nothing. Sometimes he used his own body/brain, other times other's. He was a director, and a lot more.

He was radically honest and a creative liar. He always followed his instincts. He'd act dumb as a rock right before harnessing an intellect so cutting you'd see a superman. He read my mind and I read his. Like a band. I learned so much. Goodbye Pope.L.



Pope.L, *Trinket*, 2015, installation view. Courtesy: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; photograph: Brian Forrest

## Adrienne Edwards

Welled by the unimaginable loss of Pope.L – my loadstar, instigator, co-conspirator and teacher, whose expansive, generous and rigorous imaginings profoundly changed me – I turn to another lover of language, the poet Natalie Diaz, to express what his having left us means. May her words also serve as ‘an invitation to be of consequence’ to one another – just as Pope.L was to me.

Reflecting upon Mojave migrations in the southwestern desert of North America, Diaz explains: ‘One of the stories or symbols we left for others was a circle with a dot in the middle. Those small marks were messages to those who came behind us: don’t pass here or, more precisely, it means: there are other ways to pass other than this way. The circle surrounding the dot is a resounding, an image calling us to imagine outward, beyond this particular way of moving through or across. It doesn’t mean you can’t pass or cross here – rather it is a warning about what will be asked of you if you decide this is the only pathway, a message about what passing this way will require of your body, of your life, of the lives of those you love ...’ (‘Fusings: The Alchemy of We’, The Alchemy Lecture, York University, Toronto, Canada, 10 November 2022)