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Interview

'I'm not Jeff Koons!' - the endurance crawls, weird texts and guerrilla brilliance of Pope.L

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Pope.L started out doing performance art because it was cheap, once crawling through a city in a Superman outfit. Now all the big museums want his often racially charged work. As a rare show opens in Britain, he looks back

For a long time, if anyone ever asked for his contact details, Pope.L would produce a business card proclaiming him to be “The Friendliest Black Artist in America”. Sure enough, when he pops up on a video call from his ramshackle studio in Chicago, the performance artist and painter is amenable and thoughtful. In trucker cap and checked shirt, he shifts between smiles and pensive frowns as we track his journey from “difficult” childhood to one of America’s foremost artists, whose work deals with race, economics and language.

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In 2019, he was given a retrospective that, in an exceptional move, spread across both the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum in New York. The exhibition showcased his 40 years of endurance crawls, guerrilla performances, sculpture and text paintings. Those text paintings are now the focus of Notations, Holes and Humour, a show that just opened at Modern Art in London, his first British exhibition in over a decade.

“Violet people sing the praises of the omissions,” the artist has written in pen and ink on canvas for the new exhibition. The sentences in the works are often hard to discern, intermingled with painterly washes and frequently incorporating deliberate typos and nonsensical elements. “Purple people are the end of orange people,” reads an older work. “Gold people shit in their valet,” another informs us. Some are more uncomfortable: “Black people are the window and the breaking of the window”; “White people are the Gods of saying sorry.”



▲ Long way to go ... Pope L. in an early crawl, performing as part of an exhibit at Maine College of Art in 2002.
Photograph: Joel Page/AP

“I was thinking about the way people use bigoted language,” says Pope.L, who is 66. “It’s almost a physical act. It’s like you are throwing something at someone. I began doing these experiments where I would just write something and think about the delivery of it. According to how you wrote it, it could be a slogan, or perhaps something even more indifferent, a statement. Is this being said as an accusation? A description?”

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The work is rooted in his childhood. “My family was very poetic. We would be hanging out on a Sunday and my uncle and my aunt would come over and we would be in the kitchen and they would start throwing about poetry from Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. My family were working people, working with their hands. You’d think they did not have an intellectual world, but on Sundays it could blossom. After they’d dealt with Hughes and Brooks, they’d start to play with their own language, their own playful sentences.”

Pope.L started the text paintings while at art college in the late 1970s. Although he was inspired by Black literature and avant garde art, as well the Fluxus movement, writing was a form he turned to out of necessity. “I knew I was going to be as poor out of school as I was while in school. Writing was a very portable thing I could do.”

It was the same reason he started street performance. In 1978, wearing a suit as if he was off to the kind of office job that was largely alien to his upbringing, he crawled across Times Square in New York, then a magnet for homeless people, sex workers and drug dealers. The work mixes a sense of vulnerability with that of protest, undercut with sly humour: bizarrely, he clutches a pot plant throughout. It was the first of the more than 30 crawl works. In 2001, he switched into a Superman outfit and made his way, on hands and knees, from Broadway to his mother’s home in the Bronx. “I wanted to find a way of doing anything I wanted that didn’t need anyone to support it. I didn’t need a room and I didn’t need objects. I just needed the opportunity, which I could create myself.”

A 1991 crawl was titled *How Much Is that Nigger in the Window*. Why did he use a title that so many would not feel comfortable articulating? “I thought it would be interesting to frame it as a jingle, like a musical,” he says. “So you have this idea of pain and struggle sitting alongside the lightness. This language is a problem, but it’s also an interesting problem. How can I make these words approachable but not lose the sting of their character. It is a writing problem, and it is a performing problem.”

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▲ 'Maybe these people who we have problems with can still be allies' ...
Pope.L. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

While he now receives institutional backing, the idea of self-sufficiency in his performance practice is rooted in childhood. He was born to a single mother in a Black neighbourhood in New Jersey. "I realised that my family, even with those Sunday mornings, were all people who struggled. All the people in that kitchen were damaged, drug-addict people. My mum went to prison for a year or two. That was a very pivotal moment because I came to see myself as separate from her. I was a child previously. She had bouts of being sane at least, of being clean. It was working till it didn't. And then it came crashing down on me and my three siblings."

His mother assumed he would join the military after school as there was little precedent for kids in his neighbourhood beyond that, but his grandma, a cleaner whose clients included several artists living in richer districts, had other ideas. Aged 11, Pope.L was taken to help clean the house of a portrait painter, and grandma introduced grandson as an aspiring artist. The man sat him down and got him drawing. Pope.L went on to study art, first at Pratt Institute, a prestigious college, but was forced to drop out because of lack of money. After a few years holding down factory jobs, he got into the public Montclair State University. "I realised my education was my responsibility and a fancy art school was not going to solve my problems. I thought, 'Fuck it, I could go anywhere. It's up to me, I should make my schooling what I want it to be.'"

One of his biggest learning experiences has been The Black Factory, a more recent project. In 2004, the artist bought a truck and toured America, requesting people donate items

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to an ongoing archive of objects associated with Blackness. Some objects handed over demonstrate outright racism: an extra-large condom, a “pimp” car, a banana. “Then there were all these things that had nothing to do with Blackness,” he says. “It was just something personal to them.” In the database you can find children’s toys, crockery, a calculator. “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. I realised I’d learned something. Within the mythology of race – it is all mythology, right – they, white people, are separate and apart from the coding of colour. But then there is this leakage. They have some relationship to it, but it’s couched in the personal. A friend, or an experience. They don’t see it as a larger political context that you have people who are empowered and people who are not.”

If Pope.L was once an outsider, with all the disempowerment that goes with that, he is now embraced by the establishment. He has shown at the Whitney, Liverpool and São Paulo biennials and in Documenta. He is represented by various commercial galleries (though he says they sometimes despair over how to monetise his work: “I’m not Jeff Koons”) and teaches too. While he is grateful for the support, he does not take it for granted. “The institution is always about itself,” he says of museums.

In response to Black Lives Matter, the art world has been doing a lot of introspection on its own complicity in racism, widening access to Black artists and diversifying public collections. “I don’t know what young Black artists think,” he says. “If they think this is due to them because they are some genius then that might be a problem. I mean maybe you are. Maybe you’re not. But someone has a use for you.”

There is always this one question, he says: “Is an institution doing it for Black folk or is it doing it for themselves? Well, that’s an interesting question. Am I being complicit in these problems if I agree to collaborate with them? Or, as my mum would say, ‘Maybe these people, who we have problems with, can still be allies.’” He grins. “They will never not be suspect – you gotta keep your eye out, know who you’re dealing with. She’d say, ‘You gotta be a wise collaborator.’ Whether it’s your landlord, to whom you owe three months’ rent, or a museum.”