

## The New York Times

### The Expansive Provocateur Pope.L, in Smaller, Potent Doses

By ROBERTA SMITH JUNE 29, 2017



Pope.L's "Jap" (1989-91), from "Proto-Skin Set" at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

The esteemed multidisciplinary artist Pope.L is having a moment. His contribution to Documenta 14, the prestigious international exhibition in Kassel, Germany — and this year also in Athens — is the slyly subversive “Whispering Campaign,” featuring performers who walk the streets of both cities, confiding in strangers the artist’s elliptical yet biting aphorisms about race and color. Last month, Pope.L’s “Claim (Whitney Version),” a beautiful vexing installation featuring an enormous pastel-colored room festooned with slices of baloney, received the Bucksbaum Award as a “boundary-breaking” work in the recent Whitney Biennial.

And now there is a modest but not to be missed show of 18 “Proto-Skin Set”

paintings executed on scavenged paper — including newsprint, posters for cigarettes and kitty-litter bags — at the Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery on Madison Avenue that offers a new key to this complex, always challenging artist.

Pope.L started these art-smart, streetwise works mostly in the late 1980s or early '90s, sometimes returning to them over several years. All but one are being exhibited here for the first time. They compress onto finite surfaces the essence of an unruly career spanning primarily performance, installation, video, sculpture and theater.

Pope.L’s provocative performances in particular mix issues of art, the body, language and race into thorny, mind-bending tangles. Most famous may be “The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street” begun in 2000 and executed in many arduous segments where the artist donned a Superman suit and dragged himself, penitent-like, along Broadway — the Great White Way — from Manhattan’s southern tip into Harlem. The piece, best known from startling photographs, can read as a brutal enactment of marginalization, specifically of the

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exclusion of many black men, regardless of talent or strength, from America's still far too "white way" of life.

Large and dense, the works at Mitchell-Innes & Nash are tangled and mind-bending and also surprisingly painterly. They show Pope.L in extravagant moments of experimentation, using painting, several drawing styles, collage and assemblage, found images and words. In them he works, with detours and sidetracks, toward the distillation of his spare, more purely linguistic "Skin Set" works. (One example is here, and says "White People Are Gas," which typically raises questions. Are they "a" gas — incredibly amusing; "like" gas — invisible, pervasive and lethal; or both?)



"Mal Content" (1992).

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY

The robust painterliness of the "Proto-Skin" works should come as no surprise. Pope.L's performances and installations have an imaginative, visceral involvement with materials of all kinds, starting with his own body. And his attention to painting, which he studied in college, has always been keen. He cites Robert Ryman's all-white paintings as inspiration for his own use of white, which has included covering himself with mayonnaise or flour, playing his brown skin against the pervasiveness and invisibility of whiteness in society.

The "Proto-Skin" works are agitated. They vibrate. Everything counters everything else, starting with the continual play of black against white and including the contrasts of brushwork, scratchy drawing and materials, among them hair, dog fur,

rubber bands, a stuffed animal, plastic dolls and peanut butter.

Their apparent improvisational air is dispelled by close attention. Little has been left to chance. The frames are cursorily painted white, so that warmer tones of wood show through. (It's like the flour on Mr. Pope.L's body and implies that, historically, whiteness is sketchy, provisional.)

Pope.L is a poet and as usual language is sharply present. A large roughly painted rendering of a rumpled white dress shirt and black tie is titled "Portrait AKA The

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American Dream Is to be Able to Think,” written across the top edge. It seems kind of optimistic. Lower down, the conclusion may be slightly obscure, but it’s not sanguine: “In Clear Acrylic Polymer.”

Wordplay is frequent. “Mal Content” centers on a newspaper image of the young Malcolm X, smiling quietly. Is this Malcolm before he became a highly effective activist? The image is surrounded (trapped or protected) by a field of peanut butter that may remind you that Malcolm X was light-skinned; it is a mulatto-like color.

The bumpy black-and-white surface of “Jap” evokes Jackson Pollock and Alfonso Ossorio, while a bent spoon affixed to its surface evokes the early 1960s gray paintings of Jasper Johns. On a grainy copy of a torn news photograph Pope.L has written “Jap” — Mr. Johns’s nickname in his youth. But that word is also a racial epithet, of course, and the photo is of a woman’s furious face from a well-known image of an anti-busing protest in Little Rock, Ark., at the dawn of the civil rights movement.

The show reveals that Pope.L’s drawing gifts include several cartoon styles. “Yet Another Excuse,” a light, linear work, is dominated by three sets of male genitalia surrounded by what cartoonists call “action lines.” “Wordy Advertisement,” a much-abused poster for Kent cigarettes that indicts smoking, whiteness and pollution includes a small deft ink sketch of smokestacks like the desert landscape in the “Krazy Kat” strip created by George Herriman (1880-1944), the mixed-race cartoonist and one of the great artists of early American modernism.

Every work in this show sustains an extended reading of process, motif and meaning that is something like a performance. A broadened understanding of Pope.L’s talents, sources and achievement awaits at the end of every one, like a gift.

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Pope.L: Proto-Skin Set

Through July 14, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, Manhattan; 212-744-7400, [miandn.com](http://miandn.com).