

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

**THE BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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# WILLIAM POPE.L: *Proto-Skin Set*

*by Alan Gilbert*

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH | MAY 23 – JULY 14, 2017



Pope.L, *Truth and Time a.k.a. Now You Can Bring Black History Home*, 1994. Gel medium, magazine photos and peanut butter on plywood with thumbtacks in plywood container. 13 1/8 by 15 1/4 by 3 in. © Pope.L. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

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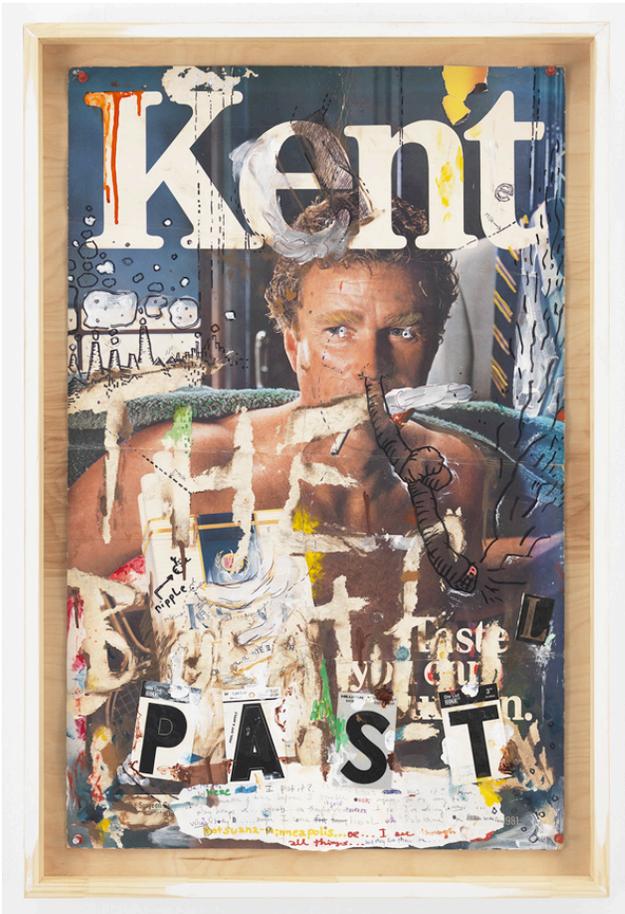
When Kendrick Lamar performed at the 2015 BET Awards in front of William Pope.L's massive, frayed American flag, it was a spectacular display of a work by an artist who for decades has explored the hyper-visibility and simultaneous inscrutability of "blackness" as a racial category. *Trinket* (2008/2015)—Pope.L's title for his forty-five-foot-long by sixteen-foot-tall flag featuring fifty-one stars (the extra one, he says, represents "you") blown by a massive industrial fan—captures this bifurcated quality to Pope.L's approach to language and the meanings it generates. It might seem ironic to call a massive American flag a "trinket," but in certain ways any flag is: its meaning is purely symbolic, and yet countless millions have been slaughtered beneath its unfurling. So it's not symbolic, but it is. But it isn't. Pope.L's employment of words and categories is far too charged for the cool distance of irony.

Crucial concepts like blackness and whiteness, and related notions of gender (especially masculinity, and particularly African American masculinity), function this way in much of Pope.L's art. In being rendered extra-visible, they are shown to be unknown; as a result, they are partially wrenched from their conventional modes of circulation, whether these function for good (e.g., solidarity built within the African American community around uplifting notions of blackness) or bad (white racism). It's not a surprise, then, that language is fundamental to Pope.L's work, more so than for most artists. Moreover, it's a language akin to poetry in the way that the best poetry strips away hardened knowledge—or, it might be more accurate to say, the presumed. *Proto-Skin Set* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash made a substantial contribution to this understanding by presenting early examples of Pope.L's object work (during this time he was also doing cutting-edge performance) and spotlighting its text-based qualities.

Pope.L's most extensive engagement with language and its racial categories appears in a series of drawings now called *Skin Set* (1997 – present; they were previously grouped as "Black Drawings," "White Drawings," etc.). Generally the size of a standard piece of paper, they are brilliant, funny, painful, angry, and absurd declarations about blackness and whiteness: BLACK PEOPLE ARE THE CUPOLA; BLACK PEOPLE ARE THE RAIN AGAINST THE WINDSHIELD; BLACK PEOPLE ARE THE CHRISTMAS TREE IN THE DRIVEWAY; BLACK PEOPLE ARE A POSITIVE CANCER; BLACK PEOPLE ARE IN THE BUILDING; BLACK PEOPLE ARE THE HATRED OF THE CICADAS; WHITE PEOPLE ARE NICE TO THEIR IDEOLOGY; WHITE

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PEOPLE ARE MY TEARS; WHITE PEOPLE ARE NOT WHITE PEOPLE; WHITE PEOPLE ARE THE SEX OF THE POLAROID; WHITE PEOPLE ARE THE CUPOLA; WHITE PEOPLE ARE THE SKY THE ROPE AND THE BONFIRE—at the bottom of this last one, Pope.L has scrawled in cursive: *Race is corny.* (These examples are all taken from the 2002 exhibition catalogue *William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America*, although many more examples can be found online.)



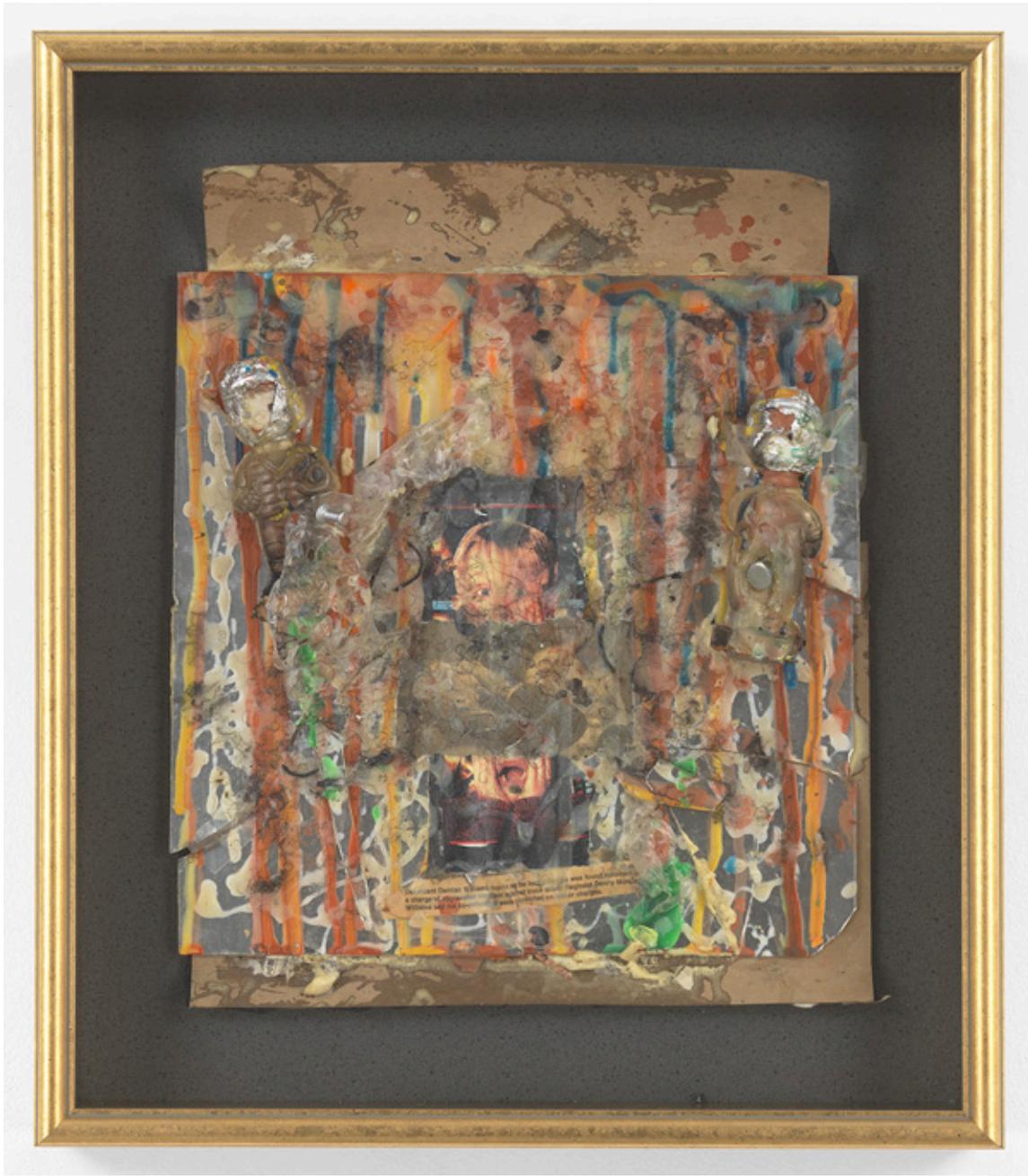
Pope.L, *Wordy Advertisement*, 1983-2013. Acrylic, ballpoint, cellophane tape, collage, graphite, ink, marker, oil stick and vinyl letters on found cardboard advertisement with pushpins in artist's frame. 36 1/4 by 24 1/2 in. © Pope.L. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

As these “definitions” show with their contradictions, repetitions, and phantasmagoria, Pope.L explodes racial categories at the same time that he focuses a blinding magnifying glass on them. When he started the *Skin Set* drawings, Pope.L gave himself the seemingly impossible goal of producing 3,500 of them, which further emphasizes their obsessive preposterous quality. The pieces displayed at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, which mostly precede and anticipate those drawings, show a more collage-like use of word and image than

the text-heavy *Skin Set*, though Pope. L's concern with race remains consistent. The work in *Proto-Skin Set* also utilizes alternative materials, such as peanut butter, that he would use in later sculptures and installations. For instance, *Truth and Time a.k.a. Now You Can Bring Black History Home* (1994) features a newspaper clipping of a black-and-white photograph of a small group of African American children apparently reciting the Pledge of Allegiance beneath the proclamation "Now you can bring Black History home." A red, white, and blue Pepsi logo appears beneath the image while rows of faint text and a white woman's face seep through from the other side of the newspaper page. The clipping is surrounded by slabs of now-encrusted peanut butter, with the whole thing thumbtacked inside a plywood container.

More Dada (and Neo-Dada) and less clean-lined Conceptualism, *Truth and Time* collides obedience and resistance, submission and rebellion, in both its content and material substance, the latter of which draws attention to its surface the way race inevitably seeks to draw attention to the skin. And yet—again like race—the entire construction is so obviously a fabrication. (Who uses peanut butter to make art? Pope.L has also produced rudimentary portraits by painting on Pop-Tarts [*Pop Tart Frieze*; 1998].) *Truth and Time* might be somewhat ridiculous if it wasn't so painful, so brutal in crushing hope beneath history, putting black history—with its roots in slavery and genocide—up for sale. More collaged text reads: "Enter Pepsi's 'Standing Proud' Sweepstakes celebrating Black History Month. . . ." No purchase necessary perhaps, but the transactions in black bodies crucial for the very development of capitalism were made centuries ago. Such contradictions proliferate in *Truth and Time* and throughout Pope.L's work. Peanut butter may be an intentionally base material to use in an artwork, but it's also a low-cost form of nutrition. Its smell makes the piece visceral, connecting it to Pope.L's interest in performance and the body. Combining peanut butter with the specific imagery it surrounds can't also help but evoke George Washington Carver—peanut pioneer, personally inspirational entrepreneurial figure for both African Americans and whites, and politically compromised accommodationist.

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Pope.L, *Mau Mau 2000, 1994*. Mixed media assemblage. 19 1/2 by 16 7/8 by 3 in. © Pope.L. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY.

Pope.L's work frequently cuts multiple ways like this. After all, he's an artist who produced and distributed thousands of flyers and postcards printed with the text THIS IS A PAINTING OF MARTIN LUTHER KING'S PENIS FROM INSIDE MY FATHER'S VAGINA in white on a black background (*distributingmartin*; 2000 – present). Most explicitly, *Truth and Time* addresses race and representation (with a folding in of class) that the *Proto-Skin Set* as a whole concisely plots. Other works in the exhibition

feature whiteness: *Wordy Advertisement* (1983 – 2013) partially erases a white, male cigarette model and collages the letters P-A-S-T at the bottom; *Mau Mau 2000* (1994) features a doubling of the famous image of Macaulay Culkin parodying Edvard Munch's *The Scream* in the movie *Home Alone* above a short newspaper clipping reporting the innocent verdict for Damian Williams's charge of "aggravated mayhem" against white truck driver Reginald Denny during the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings following the Rodney King beating police trial. (Unlike those officers, Williams was found guilty and given the maximum sentence on various other charges.) Intruding white penises punctuate the paintings and collages in *Proto-Skin Set* (and Pope.L once walked through Harlem with a fourteen-foot-long white tube extending from his crotch in the performance *Member [a.k.a. "Schlong Journey"]*; 1996).

From his earliest works made as an undergraduate, which include fiction, plays, song lyrics, etc., that were retroactively organized under the title *Communications Devices*, Pope.L has wrestled with language as communication, while illustrating a profound understanding that language is not a transparent medium. Neither is race, however often it's looked through. Instead, Pope.L makes the surfaces of his work murky and obdurate, highlighting their visibility while also obscuring them. He uses the discarded and neglected (*I Can Write* from 1993 is paint and collage on a kitty litter bag) to show that race is always layered and that whiteness seeks to render itself invisible—and invincible—by regulating the opticality of blackness. Pope.L's work simultaneously extends to class this concern with the disregarded. What is race and what is class? I BELIEVE IN A BLACK ART THAT DOES NOT KNOW WHERE AFRICA IS LOCATED BUT CAN POINT IT OUT ON A MAP he writes in red pen on *I Believe in a Black Art* (1988–2013). *Proto-Skin Set* provided neither questions nor answers but a turbulent in-between of messy—or, more precisely, messed-up—categories.