

ArtSeen

Pope.L: *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration*

By **Jessica Holmes**



Pope.L, *Choir*, 2019. Thousand-gallon plastic water-storage tank, water, drinking fountain, copper pipes, solenoid valves, pumps, MIDI controllers, electronic timer module, level-detection probe, flow meters, programmable logic controller, wood, scrim, vinyl letters, microphones, speakers, wires, and sound. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz. © Pope.L.

800 gallons of water is an abstract concept, until you see its volume cascade before your eyes into a cavernous holding tank. Then, that amount of water becomes visceral. It's mesmerizing to sit before a specific amount of water, and contemplate the ways we use, exploit, and waste this most important of resources on a regular basis. This is the experience of witnessing *Choir* (2019), artist Pope.L's gallery-filling installation currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The work is one-third of *Instigation, Aspiration, Perspiration*, a triumvirate of Pope.L experiences that are, or recently have been, unfolding across New York this autumn. Alongside *Choir* at the Whitney, *member: Pope.L 1978–2001* at the Museum of Modern Art presents a historical survey of some of Pope.L's most significant performance works. The opening of these shows in October was backdropped by *Conquest* (2019), a performance commissioned by the Public Art Fund that took place in September, where Pope.L coordinated more than 140 volunteers to undertake one of the artist's venerable Crawl pieces through the streets of lower Manhattan.



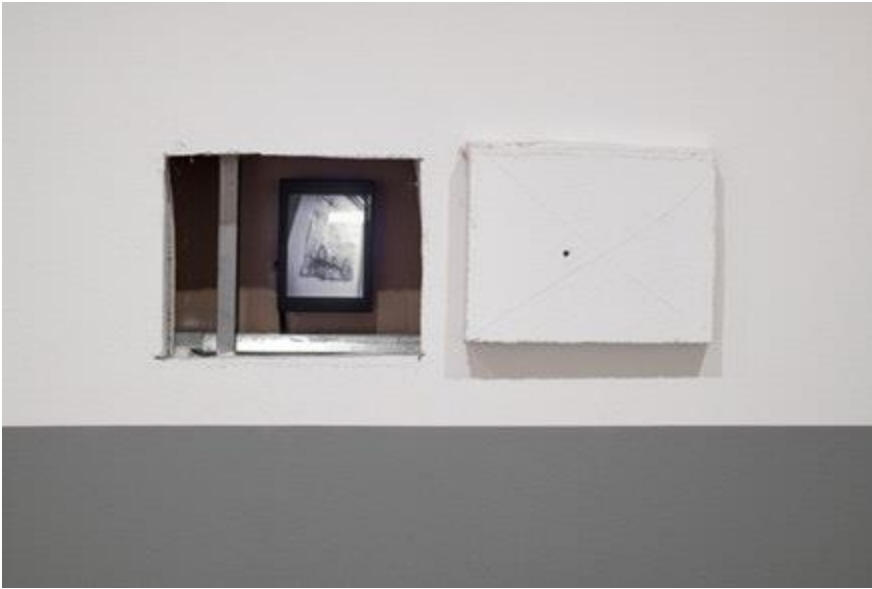
Pope.L, *The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street*, 2000–09. Performance. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Pope.L.

The exhibition *member* at MoMA, curated by Stuart Comer, the museum's Chief Curator of Media and Performance, aptly lays out the precedent for *Conquest*, displaying video footage and artifacts from several of Pope.L's most widely known, previous Crawls. This includes the first, *Times Square Crawl A.K.A. Meditation Square Piece* (1978), the crawl with which Pope.L first came to light as a performance artist. In documentation from the performance, which he undertook to highlight the homelessness crisis in New York, Pope.L crawled on his hands and knees around New York's most storied square, as passersby gawked and stared, and policemen seemed to try to determine whether he was in need of assistance. The abject position in which the artist placed himself—slinking along the floor amidst the litter, grime, and sewage systems of the metropolis—highlighted the plight of people living on the streets, of which members of the artist's own family had occasionally been subject. Homelessness also has a racial component, which was central to Pope.L's undertaking, as it disproportionately affected (and continues to affect) the Black population. Later Crawls, like *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window A.K.A. Tompkins Square Crawl* (1991) and *The Great White Way: 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street* (2001–09) continued his address of the problem, each Crawl becoming a more barbed critique of capitalism, and the ways in which White America uses its tenets to wield and maintain power. *Snow Crawl* (1991–2001) dispensed with the city altogether to make an even larger point about the debilitating effects of whiteness on Black bodies. Over the course of the decade of this work's progression, Pope.L spent his winters in Lewiston, Maine (where he was teaching at Bates College) dragging his body, clad only in his thin trademark Superman costume, through the hibernal woods of rural Maine, literally blanketed in whiteness.

At MoMA, in order to view the video footage of *Snow Crawl*, one must ascend a staircase and insert her head into a large hole cut from the ceiling, then peer down towards the ground through a mirrored column. The video is projected from below, then refracted and fragmented, so that the experience of watching it is akin to looking through a kaleidoscope: Pope.L crawling

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in all directions and on into infinity. In this way, his single body becomes many bodies; perhaps all bodies, and this connects it to *Conquest*, where folks of all races, genders, ages, and physical abilities congregated to Crawl together.



Installation view, *member: Pope.L, 1978–2001*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019–20. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Martin Seck.

Let's return to the hole in the ceiling, the one through which you must thrust your head, the one which exposes dust, piping, ventilation shafts, and the other innards of a building. Thematically, holes have long been part of Pope.L's thinking and practice. He consistently refers to their "lack," their "have-notness," and sees this absence as a space for possibility. The first thing a viewer encounters when entering the exhibition is a hole hacked into a wall, one of several that punctuate the show, in addition to the one that allows audiences access to *Snow Crawl*. These holes are not only structural impairments to the galleries' surfaces. In his performance *Sweet Desire A.K.A. Burial Piece* (1996–1997) the artist placed his own body deep into the earth, and then was buried up to his shoulders, rendering him immobile. A dish of vanilla ice cream, just out of his reach was placed before him, and he watched it melt under an unyielding summer sun. The second time Pope.L performed this piece, he had to be dug from the earth before the durational time frame and rushed to the hospital for severe dehydration and compression on his spine and lower limbs. The physical danger he places himself in is a metaphor for the larger danger that Black bodies in America face on a daily basis.



Pope.L, *Well (Whitney version)*, 2019. Wood, glass, water. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo: Ron Amstutz. © Pope.L.

This focus on holes links the historical work on view at MoMA with Pope.L's most recent piece, *Choir* at the Whitney. The massive holding tank is also a hole, one continuously drained and replenished with those 800 gallons of water by a modified, upside-down drinking fountain (itself a potent symbol of American racial segregation) that hangs overhead. The water gushes from the fountain and the cylinder is filled; the pumping mechanism kicks in and the water ekes out through the piping system that snakes through the dimly lit gallery. *Choir* has its roots in the artist's 2017 project *Flint Water*, where he collected contaminated water from taps in the beleaguered city, and bottled and sold it at an ad hoc storefront in a Detroit gallery. The proceeds were donated to organizations working to alleviate the water crisis in Flint, a town with a majority Black population, and one of the most egregious examples of mass, government-directed harm perpetuated on non-white bodies in recent American memory. In the galleries of *Choir* cryptic messages are etched into the walls, barely visible but chilling when spotted in the muted light. *HLLOW WTR*, reads one. *NDVSBL WTR*, reads another. Alone on one wall, the viewer confronts the message *NGGR WATER*.

The rush of water and resonant thrum of machinery intermingle with a background score of 1930s African-American field recordings, sourced from the Library of Congress, and African-themed Hollywood soundtrack snippets from the same period. Though Pope.L's work is undeniably heavy, there is always a point of light, a wry humor or even hope that undergirds it. In *Hole Theory* (2002), his treatise that expanded upon his ideas of holes, the artist wrote, "So when I say holes are conduits, a means to, or space, or intersection. I mean holes are occasions, opportunities. Which can take many forms materials and durations. Imagine a hole that has only duration." If one watches the cycle of *Choir* in its entirety, there comes at the end a brief

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moment of silence where all sound cuts out before beginning again. We sit and wait in tense anticipation before watching Pope.L's empty hole fill up again. It's a moment of suspense with endless possibilities.