

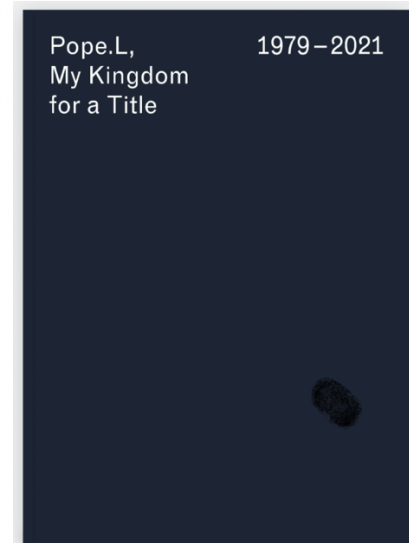
Art Books

Pope.L, *My Kingdom for a Title*

Equal parts a peek at the artist's sketchbook and a career retrospective through Pope.L's iterative textual analysis.

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DEC 2021 – JAN 2022



One might presume that a collection of Pope.L's writing spanning the artist's decades-long career would be, itself, a performance. *My Kingdom for a Title* enlivens the artist's fascination with language as a core mode of inquiry. An artist known for his strenuous public crawls that often include pedestrian and volunteer participation in a mixture of rehearsed and spontaneous study, such as "The Great White Way" (2001-09) and most recently "Conquest" (2019), *My Kingdom for a Title* is equal parts a peek at the artist's sketchbook and a career retrospective through Pope.L's iterative textual analysis.

While *My Kingdom for a Title* is a powerful record of introspective play, it is not intimate. Instead, it manages to be outward facing, observant, and in dialogue with quotidian ritual. A monograph published on the occasion of the artist's recent shows, *Pope.L: Four Panels* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash and *Notes, Holes and Humours* at Modern Art in London, *My Kingdom for a Title* spans the artist's early investigations with field notes, text strike-throughs, and alliterative gestures, captured on airline menus, ticket stubs, and other ephemeral scraps, all in the pages before the table of contents and after the bibliography. Their location in the book offers a specific

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pronouncement of the terms for engaging with the text—observational, interdisciplinary.

Like much of the artist's work, the prose intentionally utilizes illegibility and distortion, a nod to the aesthetic of opaqueness in abstract work made by Black artists, calling forth Jack Whitten for his complex thought steadily flickering under the surface. If you examined your own ambulatory musings recorded on the back of a napkin with the same critical analysis of hallowed text, you may not encounter the same invitation the artist has entrusted us with. Instead, there is the sense that what might be considered obsessive documentation is a proxy for an invitation. Here, *My Kingdom for a Title* is, if not emphatically personal, is inexplicably so. Keeping in line with his collection, *Black People Are Cropped - Skin Set Drawings 1997–2011*, Pope.L's approach to the absurdities of not only language, but labels—purple, green, red people—confounds race-based truths into hyperbolic signifiers: “A magical language I understood intuitively.” An early play, *Aunt Jenny Chronicles* (1991)—included in the first half of the book, “Part 1: Performance”—subtly foreshadows this experiment, “It's a trial of patience to articulate the nuisance.”

Courtney Willis Blair, a partner at Mitchell Innes & Nash and the book's editor, describes this as a “durational book”—one that both documents the journey and never meanders from it. *My Kingdom for a Title* is dedicated to Pope.L's project of ongoingness, aligning with quixotic notions as prompts, resisting a demonstrable thesis. Kandis Williams offers endnotes to the book as contextual framing, compiling texts and images which include Saidiya Hartman's imagined monologues for enslaved captives in her magnificent memoir, *Lose Your Mother* (2006), and stills from the 1973 film, *Ganja and Hess*. By inserting this extended bibliography, Williams calls forth the lineage already present in the room. From here, readers will surmise, a new transcendent layer from an artist who portends an already vulnerable practice. For instance, the book's fabric cover has an intentional thumbprint on the front and two fingerprints on the back, a move that invites Pope.L's presence, but also the presence of someone else, a “secondary” reader (“you”) who will also experience

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this encounter, illustrating the meta-narrative circulating most of Pope.L's writing and performance.

The book also includes reproductions of Pope.L's paintings and installation. The *Skin Sets* (2016–2020) have their own dedicated section ("Part 3: Skin Sets"), but *appear* throughout the book as a study in process. Began as *Proto-Skin Sets* in 1979, their current presentation in this book is as full-page, hyper dimensional renderings, or installation views. His later work is indexed in the "Paintings & Drawings" section. In both instances—the singular, slightly more magnified color images and the final black-and-white "List of Works" display grid—readers clearly encounter the textured brushstrokes and heavy prose snapshots in these abstract works.

The metanarrative returns in "Part 2: Stories." In "Mr. Brown-Guy Stories" (c.1980s–present), Pope.L muses on how the performance project by Chris Burden, "Through the Night Softly" (1973), inspired his own crawl series. He writes, "All performance documentation is rich in what cannot be there, is ultimately abstract and reaches lamely beyond the document. This is a good lack." As with much of Pope.L's writing, there is rhetorical experiment—a mechanism deployed to keep the art blooming, alive—a performance. *My Kingdom for a Title* delivers a glimpse into Pope L.'s creative process, always perplexing and raucously brilliant, never willing to think itself alone.