

Grasping Colour

The New Jersey-born US artist, known for his physically demanding performances and multi-media installations, talks about care as a metaphor for wider social and political malaises and the challenges of working with colour.

Pope.L interviewed by Judith Wilkinson



Eating the Wall Street Journal (3rd Version), 2000, performance, MoMA, New York

Judith Wilkinson: Can you tell me about the title of the exhibition? Why is it called 'Hospital'?

Pope.L: hospital*, or *hospes* in the latin, meaning the visitor or the foreigner, rang true for me in terms of a contemporary feel for the general state of things in the world. as if, as if, as if in this contemporary life one is always the visitor, always the foreigner, always the client, the patient. and feel is what it's about, since trying to articulate this state of affairs is a very bodily, murky, complex and deep task. and it is not that i have abandoned words - otherwise why am i doing this interview - and yes, it is true there are not many words in this show (though i frequently use words in my work) but the feel, the feel in this case, came first and stayed. the works in this show perform. what do they perform? they perform so-called natural processes like gravity or evaporation or entropy ... in a way, these processes are a stand-in for the performing will of everyday life, material-based time itself as stubborn, wriggling human folk crawl shit ...

This is your first solo museum show in the UK. Can you talk a little about the history of your relationship to the UK? Is there anything specific about the South London Gallery (the buildings or their surroundings) that particularly appealed to you as a site to make this exhibition?

hmmm. not exactly sure what you mean by my relationship to the uk. hmhhh. of course, i am tied to this uk nation of english speakers language-wise, religion, economy and history-wise but, at the same time, i know very little about this place. i've had two solo gallery shows here, in the past, at kenny schacter's place, which used to be on hoxton square. i did a talk in faux-klinton at a performance conference at tate modern. i now have a gallery in town, modern art, i've done one solo project with them; next one will happen in fall 2024. you should come and bring candy ...

i like the south london gallery cause it's not the tate. cause it's more neighbourhood and community. cause of the people who work there: margot, rachael, dave the angus, hannah ... cause it's split geographically - that interests me, that it is split into two buildings and the visitor has to traverse, make a journey, to see the whole of for example this show - whatever it will be.

Is this the first time *Eating the Wall Street Journal (Mother Version)*, 2000-23, has been shown without you doing a live performance? If so, how does this fact alter the work's meaning?

no. this is not the first time i have shown eating the wall street journal without performers. i've done it several times in the past, i committed to doing a tour several years ago where i had to rebuild the work several



Small Cup, 2008, video

times consecutively over several years. not thinking i was preparing for this particular occasion. this is the first time i am using three towers; previously i used only one tower. the not-use of a performer subdues a live feel, i think. inserting a performer covers up the architecture with the noise of the human body, which previously made sense. but i am older now, the piece is older now, art is older now, the world – and can we dare say, time is older? ‘things fall apart’.

Many of your works, such as your crawl street performances, draw attention to racial inequality and the African-American experience. What are your thoughts on the differences and similarities between the histories and experiences of black communities in the US and the UK?

ahhh, the african-american experience ... maybe it’s a former slave-head versus a relatively recent immigrant-head? immigrating, even from a former colony, may give one a sense of choice, that one chose to become a more intimate part of the empire even though all along one knows better. of course, maybe that choice is indeed an illusion but being enslaved for 200 years is pretty defining for a group of people, the so-called african-americans. that was the deal here in the usa. that is the deal here. some people here, white, yellow and! black, think african-americans should just get over it, i mean slavery’s been over 200 years now, etc, etc, etc – but apparently some blacks can’t, haven’t, shan’t, can’t, because slavery did not just end with slavery. if our enslavers had just dropped us off in new jersey at kanye’s house all would, would, would be different. however, i think usa blacks are more openly angry and bitter, nuttier, and sadder than perhaps our uk cousins. i am not saying this makes us better, braver blacks, i am saying maybe, maybe, maybe the wound has defined us more ptsd-like. maybe to the point that sometimes we turn our hate on ourselves out of frustration, just to get a handle on it – so then there is that, hon ... and no hospital, no emergency room, no kind words can help, which i don’t want to say to believe but ... i will not believe.

i think usa blacks are more openly angry and bitter, nuttier, and sadder than perhaps our uk cousins. i am not saying this makes us better, braver blacks, i am saying maybe, maybe, maybe the wound has defined us more ptsd-like.



Shelves With Buckfast Bottles, 2023, installation view, South London Gallery

I’ve read that the moniker Pope.L was given to you by your mother. Can you tell me about the significance of that name and the importance of names, titles and language in your work more generally?

moniker? moniker? even so, i think not. there is no particular significance in my name being pope.l, just a battle between my parents, two black people trying to work it out, one male, one female, my mom won, at least that is how she! tells it, she got the ‘l’ added to pope. you could say that this battle prepped me for collaboration, negotiation, power and losing via the whirl of words – but bottom line, names, titles, words are important in my work, mostly cause they are at hand. they are practical. they do a ton of work with less wasteful energy expenditure, unlike paint or plaster or wood or steel. they require seemingly almost nothing to procure but, of course, thinking, conceptualising and feeling requires loss, meat, expenditure – this is where trauma and repression probably come into being ... ha!

You are mounting this exhibition in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The healthcare systems in the UK and the US are of course very different, one public and one private, but both were pushed to breaking point during the crisis. Black and minority ethnic communities in both countries were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and were in many ways failed by the healthcare system. Were you thinking about this context when planning the exhibition?



Litany, 2013

of course, i lived through those covid events, just like you did, and like with so many extraordinary health crisis situations in the past 20 years like hurricane katrina, coloured people and, more importantly, poor people were disproportionately impacted. i don't think 'hospital' is just about black people primarily. *no, no.* i think for most people being in the hospital starts from a poverty, a lack, a poor experience - of course, good health care can class this out - but everyone is on their back, everyone worries, everyone sees the same ceiling *from the same meat advantage.*

There is a real sense of connectedness and integration in the exhibition. Not only do the works have shared visual and material characteristics - inexpensive materials, a DIY aesthetic etc - they also appear to be literally linked to each other. Elements of one work spill over or infiltrate the next. It's almost as if the whole exhibition is a single messy complex organism. Can you speak about how the exhibition functions in its entirety and the feelings of contamination or cross-pollination that seem to be present?

yes, i can speak about the exhibition in its entirety, i can do that - but i probably wouldn't be talking about the exhibition anymore - i would be talking about a certain pattern. and there are probably *in this thing* at least a few, a few patterns overlapping, intersecting, interrupting each other. for example, on the one hand i am revisiting a past trope - *is that what it's called?* - using shelves. i've done a bunch of shelf works in the past here and there but never an ensemble of them in relation together again at last. but in this case the shelf is not just a place to hold or support things - it is a space to enact events like *inserting objects*, pouring liquids, allowing the liquids, in this case buckfast and cactus jack's schnapps (mixed with isopropyl alcohol). *to puddle and drip, puddle and drip - and do the same thing over again a few days later and then again a few days after that - and so on - and so on ... and so on ...*

Perhaps related to that are the themes of breakdown and decay that are clearly central to the exhibition. You are an incredibly prolific artist and you often produce several iterations or variations of works. Could you speak about whether these ideas might be connected - breakdown or failure on the one hand and the compulsion to repeat or try again on the other?

i do not quite know how breakdown, failure and compulsion to repeat interact in what i do, except to say that in general in my work - if there is a compulsion to repeat - it would be towards meaning and non-meaning. and the tension between the two, how this tension organises, how it patterns, how it patterns, how it patterns, for example, for example, with breakdown, failure and compulsion to repeat - i mean breakdown does not have to be failure, that is a judgement about breakdown, it could just be transformation - and compulsion to repeat does not have to be latent, 'lurky' and mysterious - people can choose to repeat because they are curious or lazy or *get pleasure from* a certain rhythm of making - of course, repetition can offer comfort, psychic and otherwise, but just pattern for the sake of pattern, repeat for the sake of repeat, i'm not sure how many calories are in that - *maybe more than i know ...*

Your use of pink, red and white in this exhibition is particularly compelling. I'm interested in the way in which the calamine pink walls transition into the deep red of the butchers' curtains that hang at each of the gallery entrances. Am I right to associate these colours with bone, muscle and blood? Can you speak about the significance of those three colours in this 'body' of work?

i think about colour all the time, i don't know what good *it's done* - i think of colour as non-colour. as a mark, a letterform. not because it's really a mark or a letterform ... it's out of convenience or an embarrassment of not really grasping colour, but who does grasp! colour anyway, really? tell me how can one grasp, grab, *fondle*, attach to colour? i mean colour is not just tech or social coding (i'm not dissing your bone, muscle, blood analogy here) - colour's elusiveness in a way proves its utility - colour is one of those funny, amazing things, very much a part of the material world yet discursively a *ph-PH-PH-PH-PHantom* - maybe colour ain't the problem, maybe it's us - of course it's us, it's always fucking us - people say colour is intuitive, ok, OK fine but it's also phenomenal and material, you can measure it, but people's codings of colour do not necessarily follow what, how we measure - blood, bone, muscle - and plastic, fluorescent light and isopropyl alcohol, that is what i say.



Mat, 2023, dried marigolds, installation view, South London Gallery

Maybe it's my Irish Catholic background, but I also can't help but associate those colours and some of the images and symbols within the exhibition (from crosses to wine) with Catholicism, or at least a distorted form of it. And you are named Pope.L, after all. Death, redemption and resurrection are omnipresent ideas in the mythology of Catholicism - do they play a role in this exhibition?

hmmm. how can one distort catholicism? It's already been distorted, for hundreds of years, by so many before me, those much more clever, desperate and adept than myself. i can barely raise my head to that.

but back to 'hospital craft', i'm not clear or sure or anything really regarding the idea that if a patient gets well, feels better, goes into remission, just ups and walks out of the fucking hospital, whether these are forms of redemption - maybe, at the time, it feels, feels, it feels that way when it happens but, but, but, but - if i get off my stretcher and walk, am i closer to the light? or just the fluorescent tubes in the drop ceiling above me?

In describing the exhibition, you speak about how the guest or the stranger 'stages and is staged' within the works. Could we think of some of these works or installations as stage sets without the performers? Is there a relationship to theatre in this exhibition and in your work more broadly? I'm thinking of literary theatre, but also the history of political theatre as well.



Eating The Wall Street Journal (Mother Version), 2000-2023, installation view, South London Gallery

i think people 'stage set' the world all the time, as a matter of course, as a matter of survival, just to make sense of the world, to give themselves a sense of control - and well, okay and maybe, maybe, maybe just to entertain themselves while claiming this control, cause the entertainment-seeking, pattern on pattern, is also a form of control-seeking. performers not only perform themselves but also perform their environment while performing, it's kind of the complete package of what one has to do when navigating the world.

and i think all exhibitions, for example museums, deny this, that they indeed aim to manipulate their visitors, but practically all of their methodology is bent on this one task, to, to, to, to aim, to plan, to manipulate their visitors, turn them into performers, not necessarily robots but pattern them into involvement in specific ways. i think all institutions: non-profits, churches, airports, hospitals, the military, the government, corporations whoever whatever, want to and do this. manipulation, of course, is never ever benign and in a weird sense seems unavoidable; how can one be in the world and avoid changing it? liveness requires the proactive, so neither does manipulation have to always be negative, that is, against the visitor - but let the buyer beware.

*The text has been kept in the artist's preferred style, with sections shifting between lower case and italics.

Judith Wilkinson is an art writer and curator based in London.

Pope.L's exhibition 'Hospital' continues at South London Gallery to 11 February.

colour's elusiveness in a way proves its utility - colour is one of those funny, amazing things, very much a part of the material world yet discursively a ph-PH-PH-PH-PHantom - maybe colour ain't the problem, maybe it's us - of course it's us, it's always fucking us.