



Artist Pope.L, famous for his crawling performances, dies aged 68

US artist became known for crawling along 42nd Street in New York in 1978 and recently exhibited at the South London Gallery

Alex Needham | Wed 27 Dec 2023 16.47 EST



Pope.L crawls in Portland, Maine, in 2002 as part of an exhibit at the Maine College of Art. Photograph: Joel Page/AP

The American artist Pope.L, famous for performances in which he crawled through the gutters of busy American streets, has died aged 68, his gallery confirmed.

His first show since 2011 for a British non-commercial institution, the South London Gallery, opened only last month and was critically acclaimed. The artist attended the opening of the exhibition, which was titled Hospital. He died at home on 23 December in Chicago.



William Pope.L at the show Art After White People: Time, Trees & Celluloid. Photograph: Gary Friedman/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

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Pope.L, who was also known as William Pope.L, made his first crawling piece in 1978. Wearing a business suit and pushing a potted plant, he crawled the length of 42nd Street in New York on his hands and knees, taking him across Times Square, then heavily populated with homeless people, sex workers, drug addicts and others at society's margins.

This act of vulnerability, endurance and abjection made his name and was followed by more than 30 others, including a 2001 crawl, while dressed in a Superman costume and with a skateboard strapped to his back, from the bottom of Broadway to the artist's mother's house in the Bronx.

The Guardian's art critic Adrian Searle described the works as "gruelling, extreme, stupid and brave ... the artist adopting the position of the penitent or the religious fanatic, the most base and abject of those at the bottom".

Pope.L also gained notoriety for a 2000 performance in which he sat, covered in white chalk and naked except for a jockstrap, on a toilet placed on a rickety tower.

The artist then proceeded to eat an entire copy of the Wall Street Journal, washed down with milk, a response to an advertising campaign that suggested that one only needed to touch the newspaper to become prosperous.

He was born in New Jersey to a single mother who struggled with drug addiction; other close relatives, including his father, aunt and brother, endured periods living on the streets.

When Pope.L was 11, his grandmother introduced him to a portrait painter whose house she was employed to clean, and who encouraged him to draw.

Pope.L first studied at the prestigious Pratt University before a lack of funds forced him to drop out; after taking factory jobs he ended up at Montclair State University.

His crawl pieces were partly inspired by necessity. As he told the Guardian in 2021, "I wanted to find a way of doing anything I wanted that didn't need anyone to support it. I didn't need a room and I didn't need objects. I just needed the opportunity, which I could create myself."

Pope.L's work delved into the position of Black people in American society, the way they are perceived and their lack of power. For his work *The Black Factory*, he drove around the US in a truck asking people to donate items that suggested Blackness to them, receiving objects ranging from the racist to the random.



Black Drawings by Pope.L on exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art. Photograph: Robert F Bukaty/AP

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“I realised that for a lot of white people, mostly white people, their experience of race is personal,” the artist told the Guardian. “They don’t see it as a larger political context that you have people who are empowered and people who are not.”

The artist used to give out business cards that described him as “the friendliest black artist in America”.

In recent years, Pope.L had received the acclaim of heavyweight institutions. He won the top prize at the Whitney Biennial in 2010, and a 2019 retrospective took place across both the Whitney and MoMA in New York.

In a statement, his gallery Modern Art said: “Pope.L fundamentally challenged and changed the last 50 years of visual art in the United States.

“His elegant, indeterminate, and often humorous, yet biting poignancy criticism of our history has only recently begun to be fully recognised.” A memorial is planned for spring 2024.



Pope.L at the Modern Art gallery in London in 2021. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian