

ArtReview

Pope.L, performance artist who tackled race and class, 1955–2023

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Pope.L. Photo: Peyton Fulford

Pope.L, the Chicago artist whose work has been the subjects of multiple solo exhibitions in recent years, died at home on 23 December 2023. He is perhaps most recognised for a series of public performances, including the early Times Square Crawl (1978) and Tompkins Square Crawl (1991), in which he dragged himself on his belly across New York City streets and other public spaces. The works were a critique of the city’s growing inequality, while also introducing the artist’s body and persona into a durational relationship with the city. In *The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street* (2001–09), where the artist crawled the entire length of Broadway in Manhattan, he did so wearing a Superman suit.

The subject of ArtReview’s October 2019 issue cover, Pope.L, Ben Eastham writes, ‘clearly relishes the discomfiting effects of charged language’. Eastham describes how when he asked the artist over email, ‘with perhaps excessive decorum’, whether the title of his solo exhibition at MoMA member, ‘gestures at the same time to constituent parts of society and the body (it also derives from a 1996 walk through Harlem, the full title of which is *Member a.k.a. Schlong Journey*, for which he strapped a four-metre-long white pole to his crotch), he says that “it sounds funnier coming from you” before clarifying that his “original title of the exhibition was *How Much Is That Nigger In The Window*”. MoMA, perhaps unsurprisingly, “had concerns.”’

Pope.L, who used to hand out a business card describing himself as ‘the friendliest Black artist in America’ (a description he also trademarked), often used direct language in his drawings, too, which included texts like ‘Black

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people are cropped' in the Skin Set Drawings (1997–2011). The artist also introduced participation as a major part of his work. In 2004, he began a tour of the USA in a van he customised and designed to collect donated 'Black objects', which he described as 'anything a person believes represents blackness' as part of his project The Black Factory. At every stop, Pope.L introduced a programme facilitated by 'factory workers' who made irreverent pranks and interventions based on their engagement with visitors.

His recent exhibitions and performances included *Between A Figure and A Letter* at Schinkel Pavilion, Berlin, in 2022; *Misconceptions* at Portikus, Frankfurt (2021); and a trio of exhibitions in New York organised by the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and Public Art Fund in 2019. His exhibition *Hospital* is on view at South London Gallery through 11 February 2024.