

Crawling Performance Art Pioneer Pope.L Dies at 68

“I am a fisherman of social absurdity, if you will.”

By Christa Terry • 12/28/23 2:36pm



Artist Pope.L. John Ewing/Portland Press Herald via Getty Images

One of Observer’s Arts Power 50 changemakers in 2019, the performance and installation artist William Pope.L was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1955, and much of his initial artistic studies as well as the early portion of his career were spent in and around Manhattan. He then spent decades making art that interrogated both what cities produce and who those metropolises disempower, often via the individual and collective crawling projects for which he became well-known.

Pope.L, part of the faculty at the University of Chicago, died at his home in Chicago on December 23, 2023, at the age of 68, as announced by his representing galleries Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, Vielmetter Los Angeles in Los Angeles and Modern Art in London. “Pope.L fundamentally challenged and changed the last 50 years of visual art in the United States,” the galleries shared in a statement, adding that the artist’s “longstanding history of provocative and absurdist performances along with his wide-ranging oeuvre of installations, objects, and paintings undermined conventional notions of language, materiality, and meaning.”

When Observer asked if politics affected the urgency of his work, Pope.L replied, “I’m not sure there is an urgency to my work.” The urgency, he explained, was in the need to respond to current conditions. That urgency contributed to his being included in the 2002 and 2014 Whitney Biennial, documenta 14 and Art Basel Miami Beach in 2015. In his lifetime, his work was shown by MOCA, Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Public Art Fund; and many other institutions.

Pope.L’s crawls

Pope.L conceived of crawl performances in the 1970s as part of his “eRacism” project, with the first taking place in Times Square in 1978. In Times Square Crawl a.k.a. Meditation Square Piece, he crawled a stretch of West Forty-Second Street that was at the time notorious for drug deals, homelessness and sex work to shine a light on the

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absence of opportunities for the nation's unhoused and dispossessed. These unsettling street performances, which often focused on the plight of disenfranchised and displaced communities, would become a hallmark of his career.



Pope.L crawls along a Portland sidewalk in 2002. Herb Swanson/Portland Press Herald via Getty Images

Artist William Pope.L in his own words

“As soon as you go outside, there’s this issue of where are you in space and who owns that space. So I realized that I was setting up a tension when I crawled, about where you’re located in that space and how you’re supposed to behave in that space and who can own that space and how you can own it.” — Pope.L in MoMA’s Artists Stories

“[Being an artist today] means entering the difficulty of the questions of our time and to enter these questions, these problematics, and to commit yourself to the difficulty. Without knowing what that question you’re entering is going to bear for you.” — Pope.L in an interview with Roxanne Bagheshirin Lærkesen in 2023.

“If I had one thing to say to artists, it would be to be patient. And to be ignorant of what you think you know. If you don’t get the answer that you were expecting, maybe that’s a good thing. Knowing what you’re doing is overrated.” — Pope.L speaking on Louisiana Museum of Modern Art’s Louisiana Channel

“Like the African shaman who chews his pepper seeds and spits seven times into the air, I believe art re-ritualizes the everyday to reveal something fresh about our lives. This revelation is a vitality and it is a power to change the world.” — from his Foundation for Contemporary Art Fellowship bio

“The link between language and performance is duration; both exist only via the crucible of time and are continually remade in time.” — from an interview for member: Pope.L, published by The Museum of Modern Art

“I mean, those of you who remember New York in the ’70s, New York was having a really tough time, fiscally. There were tons more people visibly on the street, and my image was that all these people were not pieces of shit. They had families, they had histories. What if all these people en masse began to move as one? That was my image. But at the time I could only convince one person to do it, and that was myself, so you do what you have to do, right? I figured if I crawl long enough I’ll get company, and that’s where we are now.” — Pope.L at a press breakfast for Conquest in 2019

“I am a fisherman of social absurdity, if you will... My focus is to politicize disenfranchisement, to make it neut, to reinvent what’s beneath us, to remind us where we all come from.” — from Mark H.C. Bessire’s William Pope.L: The Friendliest Black Artist in America