

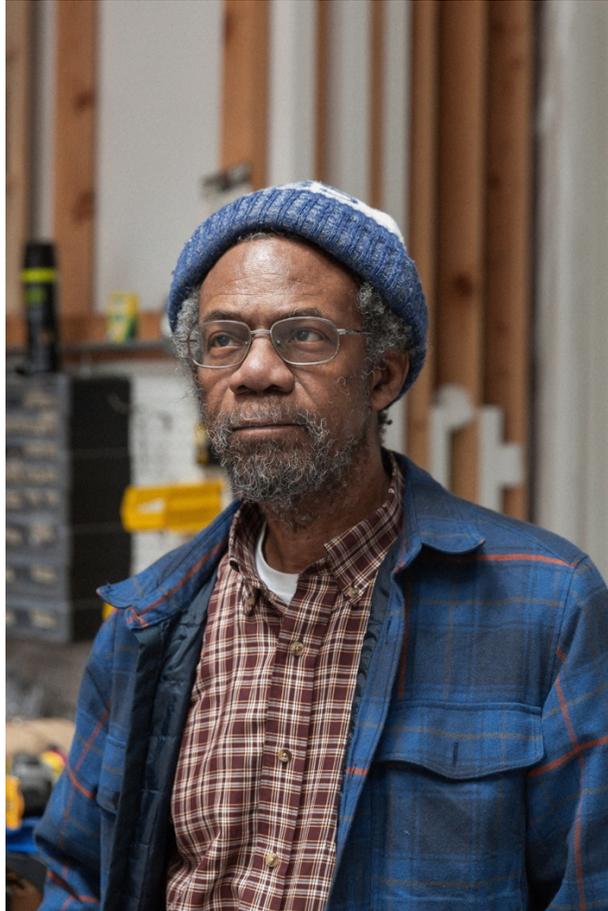
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FINANCIAL TIMES

Artist Pope.L's last interview: 'I try to set up mysteries for people'

The American, who died in December, discusses his London exhibition 'Hospital' and his fascination with spaces and uncertainty

Gervais Marsh | Jan 5 2024



Pope.L photographed for the FT by Kayla Reefer in October © Kayla Reefer/FT

I interviewed the artist William Pope.L in October before he passed away on December 23, and our conversation delved into his visionary practice, discussing conceptual and physical nuance as well as his current exhibition. Sitting in his studio at the University of Chicago, where he was a professor, I quickly realised that my questions would not be met with direct answers. He responded with open-ended, circuitous thoughts — similar to the ambiguous atmosphere that reverberates throughout his body of work, and in his new show at South London Gallery. The gallery has two sites and he leaned into the potential: “Divided space suggests growth and rupture, not always beneficial, not always obvious, but rife with possibility.” Wholeness, he said, “is a fiction”.

William Pope.L was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1955 and spent much of his early career between that area and New York City, attending Montclair State and Rutgers University and participating in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. With a background in theatre, he was most widely known for his durational, public performance-art interventions, including several “crawls”, but his broader practice spanned photography, painting, drawing, installation, found-object assemblage and video.

For his crawl “The Great White Way”, which took nine years to complete, Pope.L wore a Superman suit, strapped a skateboard to his back and, using only his elbows and knees, crawled on his stomach the entire 22-mile stretch of

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Broadway in New York City. The performance drew our attention to the ground and questions our ideas of verticality, which he associated with wealth or health. It also made us re-examine the societal factors that allow us to maintain a seemingly “upright”, successful or confident position in the world.



‘The Great White Way’, in which the artist crawled the 22-mile stretch of Broadway in New York City on his stomach

In his research for Hospital at South London Gallery, Pope.L traced the word “hospital” to one of its root meanings — stranger, or guest, which suggests the disconcerting realities of these buildings. A space of uncertainty, the hospital operates on institutional time and becomes a hub for the anxieties of its clients. It forces those who enter the doors to wait, yielding to protocols while remaining unsure about whether their needs will be met. For many, he said, it is a horizontal experience (like his crawls), most of the time spent lying on your back with the ceiling as your horizon — a site of “dislocation in your mind and your body. It’s not just a physical dislocation. There’s a spiritual dislocation.”

As Pope.L designed it, flanking both the gallery entrances are large white banners, each with a faintly visible cross stitched in white, creating an eerily sterile overtone to “welcome” visitors. In the main gallery, he described three large-scale wooden towers in different states of collapse, coated in a white, powdery substance that can be sprinkled by visitors. The towers reference Pope.L’s piece “Eating the Wall Street Journal” (2000), a performance in which the artist, dressed only in a jockstrap and doused in flour, sat on a toilet placed atop a tall, four-legged throne and proceeded to read the publication, then eat strips of it covered in ketchup and milk.

Doing so, he satirically addressed one of the paper’s advertisements that stated a subscription alone would increase one’s wealth; presumably, ingesting the publication would be even more effective. In this iteration, strewn around the towers are milk bottles, toilets, pieces of wood and copies of the newspaper, together with the precarious towers alluding to impending (in fact, already existing) economic turmoil.

He built shelves into the walls of the gallery, lined with bottles of different sizes that are filled with liquid, some dripping into a trough to mark time and the pull of gravity. “I’m interested in small phenomena and how to harness

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those things to have, on a more macro level, an effect.” By homing in on experiences of scale, he emphasised the possibilities of minute details, reconsidering elements that are often overlooked in the world’s haste.



Pope.L’s ‘Eating the Wall Street Journal’ performance in 2000

The exhibition also draws on more simplistic materials, such as familiar foods such as potatoes, onions, or flour, and extends them beyond their assumed use or value. “I like the idea that materials can perform and that you don’t have to coach them. It’s not like working with a human being . . . they have to be poetic; they have a material mind of their own that you don’t have to teach.”

Entering the Fire Station gallery, one of South London Gallery’s two sites, visitors must move through marigolds scattered across the floor. A flower of mourning, its potent colour often symbolises death and love lost. The marigolds lead to a butcher’s curtain that encloses a projection of Pope.L’s film “Small Cup” (2008), in which a group of hens and goats demolish what resembles the Capitol building in Washington, DC. The film perhaps was a forewarning of the storming of the US Capitol in 2021 by Donald Trump supporters, and of always-looming political disarray. Its soundtrack is intended to carry throughout the other galleries, accentuating a series of his drawings, some of which face away from the viewer or have been removed, and evade being discerned.

As we continued talking, it became evident that Pope.L was not interested in “showing” his work but in creating an atmosphere for the visitor to negotiate and orient themselves. “It’s really fascinating what people do, and of course it has to do with what you put in the room and where you put it . . . I try to set up a mystery or mysteries for them.”

The exhibition utilises elements from different moments in his career, though no work appears as it has before. This investment in revisiting questions was not to prove any point, but rather to engage the pleasure of conceptual and material ideas he had been tracking for decades. In conversation, he gestured to memories that he intertwined in the show, subtle hints of intimacy.

There is no prescribed way to engage with Hospital. Similarly, there is no conclusive approach to Pope.L’s work, nor did he want to dictate one. “Visitors come to exhibitions with all sorts of differences; the thing is to leave space and holes for these encounters.”