The Guardian

Pope.L obituary

American artist known for his epic street 'crawls' through 70s New
York, who also showed at the Museum of Modern Art

Oliver Basciano | Mon 15 Jan 2024 13.01 EST

Pope.L crawling in Times Square, New York, in 1978. In a city beset with homelessness, it was an act of solidarity to lose his 'verticality', the
artist said. Photograph: visualresources/Pope.L

One morning in 1978, passersby along the less salubrious end of West 42nd Street in New York were met with a
curious sight. A young man dressed smartly in a pinstripe suit fell to his hands and knees and began to crawl along
the dirty pavement, not letting up until he reached Times Square.

It was the first of more than 30 "crawls" by the artist Pope.L, who has died unexpectedly aged 68. In a city beset
with homelessness, it was an act of solidarity to lose his "verticality", the artist said, the suit a symbol of power.
"We'd gotten used to people begging, and I was wondering, how can I renew this conflict? I don't want to get used
to seeing this. I wanted people to have this reminder."

Other performances by the African American artist were more overt in their approach to race and economics. In a
summer-long series of works in 1991, collectively and provocatively titled How Much Is That Nigger in the Window,
he set up a street stand to sell aspirin for $100 a pill, or approached motorists stopped at traffic lights to offer
them a free dollar bill rather than forcing a windscreen wash upon them. With these acts Pope.L sought to explore
race as a "social construct that exists around the body, the invisible padding that affects the way you move
through space".

In the same year, the artist appeared in the glass window of the New York art space Franklin Furnace, smearing
mayonnaise over his near naked body to "white up", an effect that lasted until the sauce went rancid and
transparent.

"I realised that for a lot of white people, mostly white people, their experience of race is personal. I've never
thought of my experience of race as just mine ... Within the mythology of race – it is all mythology, right – they,
white people, are separate and apart from the coding of colour."

Pope.L in front of his paintings at Modern Art gallery, London, in 2021. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Other public performances, documented but often unannounced, included White Baby (2001), when he crawled with a white baby doll in his mouth through a major park of Tokyo, and, most famously, The Great White Way (2001–09), in which, over a period of nine years, the artist crawled the 22 miles of Broadway in a cheap Superman outfit.

These works, in equal measure political and surreal, and made at great risk of injury, violence and arrest, were born out of a lack of money. "I wanted to find a way of doing anything I wanted that didn't need anyone to support it," Pope.L told the Guardian in 2021. "I didn't need a room and I didn't need objects. I just needed the opportunity, which I could create myself."

In 2000 he performed Eating the Wall Street Journal wearing just a jockstrap and covered in flour. Sat on a toilet seat perched on top of a precarious tower of furniture and broken wood he slowly consumed the newspaper, a talisman for wealth. The structure itself, now dilapidated and painted a ghostly white, is currently on show at his exhibition, Hospital, at South London Gallery. In this iteration he was, he said, "thinking about my own body, the bodies of people I care for, and bodies that may not be there in the future".

Born in Newark, New Jersey, he was the son of Lucille Lancaster, a nurse, and William Pope, who soon disappeared from his life. His artist moniker, initially William Pope.L until he dropped his first name in 2012, combined his parents' surnames. "My family was very poetic. We would be hanging out on a Sunday and my uncle and my aunt would come over and we would be in the kitchen and they would start throwing about poetry from Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks," he recalled.

His grandmother Desma Lancaster, who worked as a cleaner, was an artist whose quilt pieces were shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem in the 60s.

Despite this milieu, there were limited prospects for the boy, who was expected to enter the military. "I realised that my family, even with those Sunday mornings, were all people who struggled. All the people in that kitchen were damaged, drug-addict people."

However Desma, who looked after him during his mother's bouts of addiction and hospitalisation, had other ideas, and encouraged his creative spirit. He enrolled first at the Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, New York, in 1973, but

dropped out for lack of funds. After a few years holding down factory jobs, he got into the public Montclair State University in New Jersey, where he was studying when he performed his first crawl, graduating in 1978.

Pope.L Eating the Wall Street Journal (Flag Version) in 1991. Photograph: Pope.L

He also took classes at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and the Mabou Mines theatre company in New York, and gained a master's at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1981. In 1990 he started teaching at Bates College in Maine, staying there until 2010. More recently he taught at the University of Chicago.

His first solo show was at Franklin Furnace in 1991 and he exhibited consistently but in low-profile spaces for a decade until he was featured in the Whitney Biennial in 2002. A retrospective exhibition opened in 2004 at Rutgers University and toured the US. His work featured again in the Whitney Biennial in 2017, and that year he also participated in Documenta 14. Two years later he was the subject of three concurrent, complementary New York exhibitions, at MoMA, the Whitney and Public Art Fund. In London, his work was shown in Notations, Holes and Humour at Modern Art in 2021.

He is survived by his partner, Mami Takahashi, son, Desmond, and brother, Eugene.

 Pope.L (William Pope), artist, born 28 June 1955; died 23 December 2023