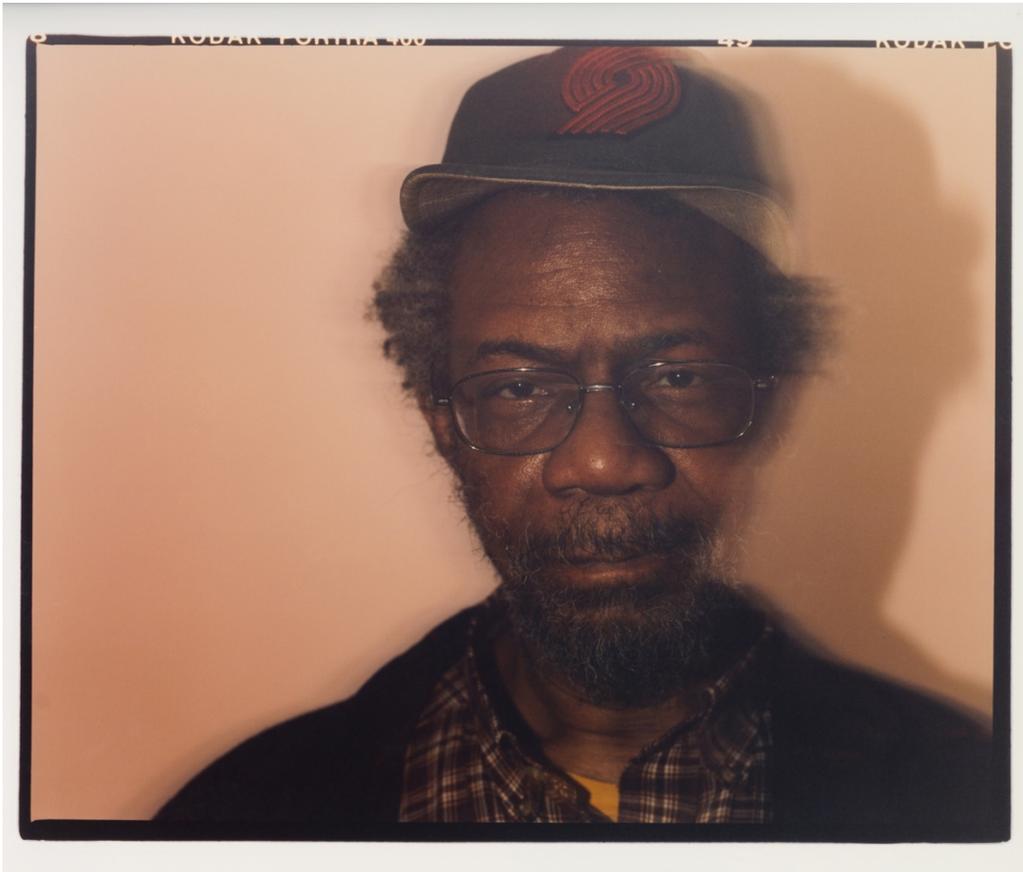


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PLASTER

Pope.L: “The problem still itches. The wound will not close”

Amah-Rose Abrams speaks to American artist Pope.L about ‘Hospital’, his first UK institutional show
12/12/23 | Words: Amah-Rose Abrams



Pope.L photographed by Stuart Nimmo

Pope.L’s new exhibition, ‘Hospital’ at South London Gallery is imbued with a sense of aftermath and desolation. Blending the absurd, political and social via sound, film, performance, installation and sculpture, ‘Hospital’ takes us through the breadth of the American artist’s practice. There is a lilting sense of passing time and gradual dilapidation as; elements of the show will leak, drip and decay throughout its duration.

“I found myself thinking about landscape, a single, lone figure in that landscape. But the figure is not vertical,” Pope.L told Plaster. “I found myself thinking about horizontal things, gravity, the supine, collapse and of course their opposites or almost opposites as well as the human feelings associated with these binaries. In addition, I have had to, for various reasons, visit hospitals more frequently lately. All of this has combined to get me thinking in a hospital-like direction. People used to go to hospitals to die. Now we go to be what they now call cared for, which is really just a form of repair, redemption, recusing but hospitals, try as they might, try as they might, care as they might, are still places of depression, super-germs and woe.”

Eating The Wall Street Journal (Mother Version), 2000–2023, one of Pope.L’s most famous works is installed in the main gallery at SLG; when fully realised, the work is a performance for which the artist sits on one of the three toilets installed on platforms in advancing states of collapse. “It’s like returning to a favourite math problem with which one has made some headway but not to complete satisfaction,” the artist explains. “The problem still itches. The wound will not close.”

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Visitors are invited to sprinkle dust over the structures which are flanked by shelves of dripping bottles of Buckfast and Cactus Jack, recurring motifs in the artists' work. "I have used alcoholic beverages in my work for a while now," he says. "I am attracted to them because they have been a family thing but also because their purpose is to alter our consciousness in a cheap, sugary, colourful, child-like instant way. The use of Buckfast, as well as Cactus Jack, is my attempt to speak generationally across this activity. The desire to change one's head in a child-like, wish fulfilment instant is beyond generation."



Photography: Stuart Nimmo

Pope.L's work is often termed 'absurdist' in his warping of the ordinary. In *Crawl*, 1974 he crawled the length of 42nd Street in New York – from the financial district to more industrial neighbourhoods – in a pinstripe suit with a yellow square stitched on the back, a motif used in Pope.L's performance work to draw the viewer's eye downwards. In forcing passers-by to look down on him or crouch to interact with him, Pope.L emphasised racial and financial disparities.

"What I found unacceptable, at first, about absurdism, say in Camus or Beckett, was that the authors seemed to accept woe as it was, they didn't do it bravely, fight it, get pissed off like heroes are supposed to or pretty it up with Hollywood endings. Later, I realised this resistance was its strength. Plus sometimes it was actually funny," Pope.L explains.

This humour is ripe in 'Hospital'. It's also an allegory for recovery and healing; the breakages, degradation and bleeding bottles mixed with obscenely pink plastic beakers strongly evoke the eerie fabric of healthcare settings.

"Artworks fall apart. No matter what they are, what they are made of. Maybe like the absurdists, I want this aspect, the woe side, if you will, of artworks to play a bigger part in what it means to be an artwork. That things in being things are with us and not with us simultaneously. That loss is a part of their very nature."

The different elements of 'Hospital' – from the whitewashed and monumental *Eating The Wall Street Journal* (Mother Version) to *Space Between The Letter Drawings* (SLG Version), 2013 which is viewed in a dark room with a torch – are tied together with sound pieces which play throughout the galleries, including the soundtrack for the film *Small Cup*, 2008.

"The sound material is not separate stuff in and of itself," Pope.L explains. "Sound is key in my practice in terms of the sensorium available to work with an audience. To get folks into the space of the work but with less obvious material manipulation."

This speaks to the deep complexity of Pope.L's work. In the wake of a global pandemic, we are all too familiar with the dark nuances of healing, hospitalisation and long-term illness. It's hard to imagine that this is the artists' first

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institutional show in the UK; it's also hard to imagine the exhibition in any other setting. As Pope.L himself says, "SLG is the space for me."



Photography: Stuart Nimmo

Pope.L, 'Hospital', in on view at South London Gallery until 11th February 2024. southlondongallery.org