

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Pope.L

Independent Art Fair 2025
Spring Studios | Booth 620
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"My aim is to be out. An out-bitch. Outside. The inside of the inside. And engage the challenge; the melodrama of life with its soap opera, stupidities, concavities, quagmires multi-tiered, and porous. Life is a mess. Drink it up. Mess deserves mess. We deserve life. It's the best of our inventions. Convoluted and mutating. Always changing and insulting us with incalculable difference. No dichotomy can shake it. I say: I am an African-American male artist because I know it's as much true as not true. Ask the white man that once owned my great-great grandfather."

— Pope.L in "The Hole Inside The Space Inside Yves Klein's Asshole," February 11, 2000 at Concordia University, Montreal



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Mitchell-Innes & Nash is pleased to present a solo presentation of work by acclaimed American performance artist Pope.L (1955-2023), offering a survey of his provocative, humorous practice. With a focus on performance, installation, sound, writing, drawing, and painting, Pope.L's diverse practice continuously challenges his audience to question deep-seated beliefs surrounding class, race, language, and identity. Known for his ability to expose the contradictions embedded in contemporary culture, he uses humor as both a weapon and a lens to confront uncomfortable truths about our social structures. His works highlight the paradoxes of identity and power, often exploring the liminal space where differences—be they racial, linguistic, or gendered—collide, creating tensions that upend conventional thought. He enticed the viewer into dialogue by harnessing the absurd and familiar public figures, often reassigning roles to challenge and dismantle preconceived notions of history. The presentation will include never before seen or exhibited pieces from the 1990s and early 2000s alongside more recent work.

In Mark HC Bessire's essay, "The Friendliest Black Artist in America," Pope.L reflected: "I like to sell things at astronomical prices while fishing for humanity with the worm of the social unconscious. I am a fisherman of social absurdity, if you will. I am more provocateur than activist. My focus is to politicize disenfranchisement, to make it neut, to reinvent what's beneath us, to remind us where we all come from." Through such statements and performances, Pope.L engages directly with societal norms, creating provocative works that both expose and challenge the hierarchies embedded in our social fabric.

The presentation will include a selection of what Pope.L referred to as Proto-Skin Sets—language-based works that anticipate his well-known Skin Sets. Created from discarded materials such as advertisements, tabloid magazines, and even apparently soiled undergarments, these pieces began in the late 1970s and 1980s during his time at Montclair State University. They use language as both a means of communication and a formal exploration of the written word, with writing serving as both a vessel for meaning and an artistic medium.

A centerpiece is *White Baby*, a video performance piece that debuted at the Cleveland Performing Arts Festival in 1992. The video is a montage of a lecture intercut with various street performances, including one in which the artist drags a white baby doll behind him as onlookers exchange unsettled glances. During the lecture, Pope.L spins the doll and white flour through the air, a gesture that is present in his work *Harriet Tubman Spins The Universe*—a motif he explored extensively in the late 1990s. The piece references a performance from 1992 in which Pope.L created a ten-foot "fresco" of the same name at the Horodner Romley Gallery in New York.

Pope.L's work often subverts iconic historical and pop culture figures, challenging our preconceived notions and questioning the way society memorializes these figures. One such work on view titled *Rebuilding the Monument*, projects a sad, humorous and highly irreverent sense of derogation in its presentation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s image. Many of Pope.L's works function as "anti-monuments," destabilizing traditional representations

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and urging viewers to reconsider the way historical figures are remembered. Other works in this vein engage with figures such as O.J. Simpson, Harriet Tubman, Hillary Clinton, and Maya Angelou further complicating the narrative of heroism, race, and cultural memory. Pope.L's *Bronco Pops*, for example consist of several rubber plaster casts of a white Ford Bronco with a popsicle stick stuck out of one end. His exploration of O.J. Simpson and his infamous white getaway car highlights the complex



and nuanced cultural and racial associations tied to the sensational car chase and trial. In an interview for his exhibition, “Five Ways to Say the Same Sadness,” at the University at Albany Art Museum in 2004, Pope.L calls O.J. Simpson a “disappointment,” further asserting that the white Ford Bronco is a “clown car not an SUV,” implying that the trial was a circus.

Masks are a recurring visual device throughout Pope.L's extensive body of work, appearing in various forms over his five-decade-long career. These plastic masks—featuring figures such as Condoleezza Rice, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Donald Rumsfeld, and Le Corbusier—are often not simply about the individuals they represent. Instead, Pope.L's use of these masks is deeply concerned with the symbolic implications they carry. For him, the mask is not merely a likeness of a person, but a representation of the social, political, and historical contexts tied to that figure. As he puts it, his work often engages with “the journey the individual and the mask represent,” a phrase that points to the layers of meaning and the fragmented nature of identity within these cultural icons.

Pope.L has long been fascinated by the concept of absence and lack—the spaces between what is and what isn't. His masks are tools that expose this tension, highlighting the uncertainty that surrounds representation. Through this lens, his work speaks to the complexities of identity, power, and perception, capturing not only the likeness of these figures but also the larger societal narratives they evoke. This element of ambiguity is integral to Pope.L's approach, as it underscores his interest in what remains invisible or elusive, drawing attention to the layers of meaning that can never be fully grasped, but are constantly being negotiated and redefined.

Images:

POPE.L, *In the Midst of Winter*, 1993, acrylic, ballpoint pen and cat toy on underwear, 19 3/4 by 25 3/8 in. 50.2 by 64.5 cm.

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POPE.L, *Bronco Pops*, 2003-04, cast plaster, painted red and wood stick, 4 3/4 by 20 by 5 1/2 in. 12.1 by 50.8 by 14 cm. © The Estate of Pope.L / Courtesy of The Estate and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo: Kunning Huang.