

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## WILLIAM POPE.L *Trinket*

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“Twenty years ago all the ambitious young painters I knew in New York saw abstract art as the only way out.” This sentence, the start of Clement Greenberg’s 1962 essay “After Abstract Expressionism,” provides a particular way into William Pope.L’s determined exhibition at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA. Those painters of the 1940s, to Greenberg at least, were trying to leave behind not so much representational art, given their relative commitment to the progressive aims of modernism, but more the visuality of illusion itself. Pope.L, like most of the critical artists of his generation, understood that those aims were just as oppressive of the potent interplay of abstraction, representation, and illusion that remains with us today, as they were of artists themselves. This exhibition presents a focused selection of key works of Pope.L’s that reinforce and reconfigure categories like painting, sculpture, performance, photography, and video in order, it seems, to maintain any way out of a category or situation as another way in, even if the entire show happens to be dominated by a work made with an enormous flag of the United States of America.



William Pope.L, *Trinket* (2015).

Installation.

Courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Photo: Brian Forrest.

“Trinket” (2008/2015) may share its name with this exhibition but it hardly needs that double billing to run the show. Comprised of 720 square feet of stars-and-stripes (elongated almost as if its

aspect ratio has been extended) that whip in a wind produced by four substantial fans suitable for film and television production, it is also a flag that has been sewn to come apart at the seams over time. It will, then, turn to shreds, resulting in an orchestrated distressing that reinforces the complexities of its circumstances. In relation to the underlying question of Jasper Johns’s “Flag” paintings (is it a painting or is it a flag?), Pope.L has reworked this conundrum by making his sly work behave as if it were both a kinetic, unraveling art work and a living, decomposing thing, as well as a Hollywood-

worthy spectacle bordering on—yes—illusion. It is, in all senses of the word, moving. Judging from his work, this must be a word that means everything to Pope.L.

Greenberg did turn his attention (begrudgingly, I imagine) to Jasper Johns in his text, inventing the term “homeless representation,” first to articulate a point about Willem de Kooning’s Woman paintings and then to bring it to bear upon Johns’s flags: “Everything that usually serves representation and illusion is left to serve nothing but itself, that is, abstraction; while everything that usually serves the abstract or decorative—flatness, bare outlines, all-over or symmetrical design—is put to the service of representation,” he writes. I’ve enlisted Greenberg’s words to assist in making a connection between the relatively tailor-made target of “Trinket” to several of the other works in Pope.L’s exhibition, works that put the type of “service” described by Greenberg into potent perpetual motion.

“Trinket” may be the star, but other works exceeded their supporting roles. The moments of the videos I caught were crucial, especially “Snow Crawl” (1992 – 2001/2015), represented here in a sort of bridge/periscope configuration for one viewer at a time. In it, Pope.L wears a Superman costume, crawling through the snow in Maine. The same is true of “Migrant” (2015), an intermittent performance that took place on an extended wooden framework reminiscent of a tunnel. The video captivates while also reinforcing Samuel Beckett’s productive influence on Pope.L, an impact also present in “Blind” (2015), an installation that, from the entryway, looks like a small monochromatic painting hanging on a wall in a large empty room. What is thought to be a painting is actually an opening into a dark space behind the wall, an illusion made even more moving here because of the residual breeze from the fans for “Trinket,” creating yet another way in combined with a way out.

“Circa” (2015) is made of actual paintings, 24 of them, all oil on linen. Installed on the upper “balcony” space, each are based upon two words, the first being “fuchsia,” and the second from a list generated by a rhyme generator: “Ebola,” “infra,” “larva,” etc. Painted with a certain gusto in a color that could be identified as fuchsia, they are knowing nods to the complexities of gesture that remain in painting even today, as well as comebacks to the type of dialectical Greenbergian “service” described above.

One remaining work stuck with me the longest: “Polis or the Garden or Human Nature in Action” (1998/2005). It is as visually seductive as “Trinket” and just as moving in its own slow way. Thousands of onions, painted by hand in bright colors which, in a gesture towards “Trinket,” take on the pageantry of the flags of the world, will, over time, sprout and decay, inevitably falling through circular holes cut into the tables that support them onto the floor. The gesture is ludicrous, profound, obnoxious, and beautiful, a garden full of growing and decomposing things that have had their outer skins painted like the paintings of “Circa.” It is an organic plot that is both abstract and representational, and it provides, just like everything else Pope.L does, many poignant ways in and out of its teeming field of vision.