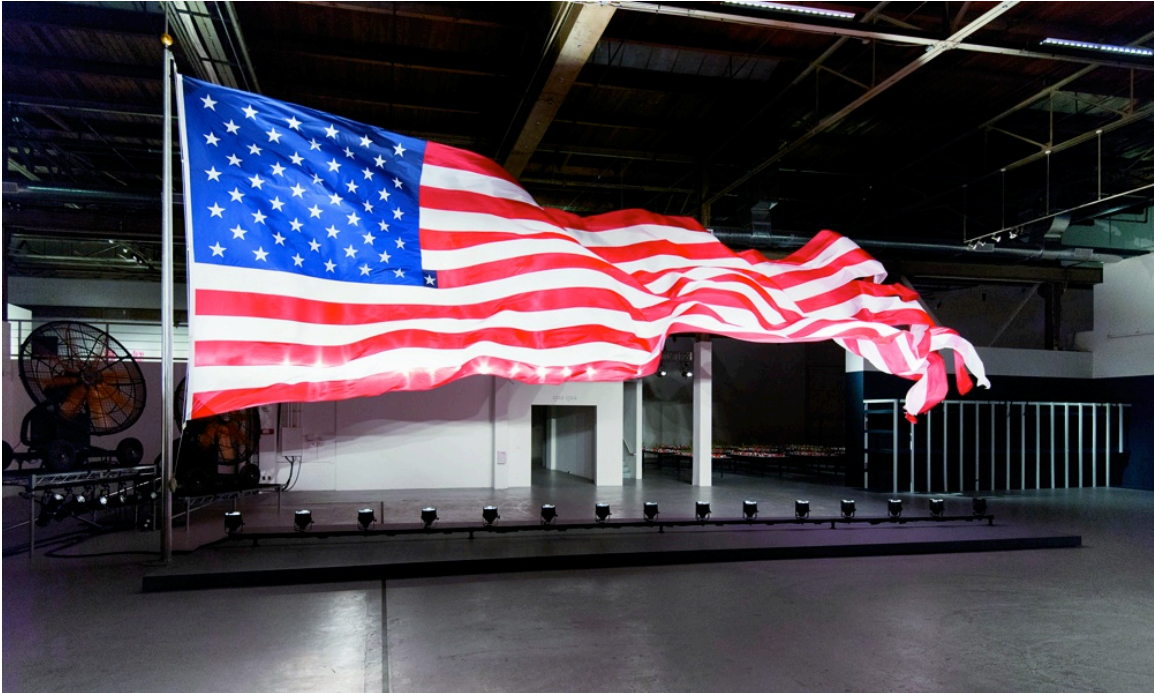


Art in America

William Pope.L: LOS ANGELES, at Museum of Contemporary Art

By Annie Buckley

June 02, 2015



View of William Pope.L's mixed-medium installation *Trinket*, 2008/2015, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. © Pope.L

William Pope.L's powerful exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary subtly replaces passive viewing with multisensory experience. The show teems with possibilities for heightened sensation—smell, touch, vision and hearing—and draws on Pope.L's decades of performance and video work to evoke the kinds of physical and psychical shifts a performer might experience. At the center of this selection of nine mixed-medium pieces dating from 1992 to the present is *Trinket* (2008/2015), a 16-by-45-foot American flag blown by four large industrial fans of the type used to simulate tornadoes on movie sets.

This is the second presentation of *Trinket*; it was first shown in 2008 at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City, where the massive fans blew 24/7 for one week. Once again, their whirl permeates a cavernous space while slowly fraying the extra-long flag (with one added star, presumably for the excluded), so that the red and white stripes begin to rip apart and wave like tattered ribbons or broken limbs. Standing near the flapping fabric, in the chaotic rush of air, one seems to teeter between anxiety and calm, a balancing act repeated throughout the show.

Works depicting the flag by artists from Jasper Johns to, more recently, David Hammons and Dread Scott tend to vacillate between representation and critique of the icon. Similarly, Pope.L's flag is, on the one hand, a safe and stable symbol of the U.S.—carefully taken down, folded and stored away each evening—but, on the other, is oversized, misshapen and in flux. In a country that tends to reserve flag-waving for self-styled patriots (i.e., conservatives), this altered banner raises an array of unanswered questions about the state of our democracy and who, exactly, the flag represents. No doubt, recent news from Ferguson, New York, Los Angeles, North Charleston and Baltimore will color most viewers' experience of *Trinket*. But Pope.L does not leave matters at that. The exhibition functions as a layered whole, accruing meaning over the course of one's visit, with each new area prompting additional considerations of freedom and nationalism, language and race, time and decay. The works ask not only what it means to be an American today, but also, more broadly, what it means to be human—to breathe and act, to live and die.

A new installation, *Migrant* (2015), structured as a two-tier, black-painted platform, winds around the outer perimeter of the flag area like low, forlorn scaffolding. It functions as the site for an eerie performance in which two blindfolded people, wearing long white wigs and puffy coats, variously climb, crawl, hang, slither, mumble and moan on the platform, their limbs extending over, around and through the latticework. Juxtaposed with the tattered Stars and Stripes, *Migrant's* anonymous figures, lacking conventional markers of identity, race, gender and culture, question what it means to define anyone as “other.”

This bid for inclusiveness is echoed in the strange and striking *Polis or the Garden or Human Nature in Action* (1998/2015), an installation of hundreds of onions, most half-dipped in red or blue paint but some in green or black, laid in rows on long tables and left, for the duration of the show, to sprout and rot like specimens in a lab. A new work, *Circa* (2015), conjoins Dada's critique of nationalist power via nonsensical wordplay with the muscular energy of Abstract Expressionism, all in a palette of sticky-sweet pinks and whites. The work consists of two dozen 27-by-18-inch, thickly impastoed paintings, each featuring two scrawled terms: “fuschia” plus a word randomly produced by a rap rhyme generator.

One of the most potent pieces in the exhibition is also the smallest and least visible. *Blind* (2015) comprises a book-size black rectangle set in the wall of a large white room. Curious viewers who step in close will encounter a recess stretching back into the wall and emitting a stream of air that faintly recalls the blast of the *Trinket* fans. The work's blackness is shockingly peaceful and vaguely surreal. Like the Hindu deity Shiva or a cosmic black hole, it suggests an all-encompassing darkness that paradoxically contains not only death and annihilation but also the seeds of creativity, new beginnings and progress.