



Loaded with Symbolism, a Fountain Sculpture by Pope.L is Among New Acquisitions at Carnegie Museum of Art

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Jul 29, 2018



“Fountain (reparations version)” (2016-17) by Pope.L

EARLIER THIS MONTH, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh announced several new acquisitions, including “Fountain (reparations version)” (2016-17) by Chicago-based Pope.L. The sculpture is on view in the modern and contemporary galleries which have been re-hung to reflect the “depth, diversity, and eccentricities” of the Carnegie Museum’s collection.

Pope.L’s work fits the bill. It features all the components of a drinking fountain, including the spout, plumbing, and porcelain bowl which serves as a canvas for an abstract swirl of acrylics in multiple colors. “Fountain (reparations version)” resembles an un-rinsed sink in an artist’s studio, turned on its head. The concept has a much deeper

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meaning though, one rooted in civil rights history and a more recent violation of basic human rights in the Midwest.

According to the museum, the work “unites many of the artist’s recurring interests such as artist Marcel Duchamp’s ‘readymades,’ the history of Jim Crow laws in America, and the Flint water crisis in Michigan.”

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SINCE THE 1970s, Chicago-based Pope.L has worked in a range of mediums from installation, painting, and sculpture, to performance and video. His practice confronts issues of race and class and the accompanying assumptions about the divisive social constructs. He examines society’s ills, absurdities, and serious social justice issues in manner that suggests the obvious immorality and disgrace of everyday norms.

A wry sense of humor is embedded in his work. His bio states that the goals for his work are “joy, money and uncertainty—not necessarily in that order.”

He is particularly known for his groundbreaking, interventionist public performances. He has undertaken more than 30 “crawls”—projects which generally involve lying on his stomach, using his elbows and legs to propel himself down through streets. “Times Square Crawl” (1978) referenced homelessness. “Tompkins Square Crawl” (1991) involved wearing a black suit and a white button down shirt while holding a yellow flower in a small pot. For “The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street” (2001–2009), the artist rolled down Broadway dressed in a superman suit, sans cape, with a skateboard strapped to his back.

All of these performances were in New York City. The Tompkins Square action took place in the street alongside Tompkins Square Park, but was cut short after only one block when a black spectator, confused by what he saw, called the police out of chagrin.

“This encounter points to the uncanny dimension of abjection, which resides in the fact that it occurs only insofar as there is a prick of recognition on the part of the person experiencing it. And it also, and especially, relates to the long and troubled history of the representation of blackness in visual culture, marking how the racially black body is deprived of agency by always being perceived as a stand-in for all black beings,” curator Adrienne Edwards wrote in 2015.

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historical and economic system of modernity in which both the United States and its concept of race have their origins.”

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On view through March 2019, Pope.L's installation on the High Line in New York, alternately lights up in red and green. According to the exhibition curators, "the apparent typo and backwards letters are intended to make viewers read life differently. The red and green in his apparatus suggest the jolting stop-and-go vicissitudes of progress, love, and money, either apparent or impossible." The colors may also symbolize money and the blood shed by generations of African Americans who have yet to gain any reparations for slavery and government policies thereafter that discriminated socially and economically against African Americans. Shown, POPE.L, "chmera," 2018 (neon). | Timothy Schenck, Courtesy High Line Art

IN 2000, POPE.L PERFORMED "Eating the Wall Street Journal" at the Sculpture Center in New York. Covered in white flour, he sat on a toilet, donning a jock strap, gold watch and a silk tie and ate his way through a pile of Wall Street Journals. The work was meant to challenge notions of power, wealth, and American society's consumer mindset.

More recently, in 2016, he addressed similar issues at Art Basel in Switzerland. In a performance titled "The Problem," he arrived at the blue-chip art fair dressed in a white gorilla suit. After tossing white plantains from a white limo, he wandered around the Unlimited section carrying a clear umbrella and a white shopping bag.

Pope.L participated in the 2017 Whitney Biennial and won the exhibition's 2017 Bucksbaum Award, recognizing the imagination and lasting impact of his work.

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Also in 2017, Pope.L's Flint Water Project focused on the city's water crisis. The artist filled 16-ounce plastic bottles with water sourced from the taps of local residents. He produced the bottles of non-potable water as art objects, each wrapped in the artist's custom-designed label featuring an image of the Flint Water Plant and a warning that the water may contain E. coli, lead, and Legionella. Pope.L worked with What Pipeline, a Detroit art gallery, to sell the limited-edition works with the proceeds benefitting charitable organizations in Flint and Detroit.

Currently, his work is featured in "Agora," a group exhibition on the High Line in New York. His contribution is a large neon installation that reads "RiGT TURN for REPARATIONS," which echoes the theme of his sculpture at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

"Fountain (reparations version)" debuted in "Crossroads: Carnegie Museum of Art's Collection, 1945 to Now," which opened July 20 at the Pittsburgh institution. The exhibition presents rarely seen and never-before shown works from the museum's holdings and showcases new acquisitions, such as Pope.L's work. Loraine O'Grady, Kerry James Marshall, Torey Thornton, and Pittsburgh-born Raymond Saunders, are also among the artists included in the show. More than 150 works have been selected, "highlighting the critical role of the artist in everyday life" and placing the work of the artists "at the intersection of history and society." CT