

Pope.L, renowned interdisciplinary artist and UChicago scholar, 1955–2023

Professor remembered for creating ‘humane, generous, combative’ art that is ‘among the most important bodies of work in the 21st century’

By Sara Patterson | Jan 4, 2024



Photo by Peyton Fulford/©Pope.L/Courtesy the Artist

William Pope.L, an acclaimed interdisciplinary artist and professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, died on Dec. 23 at his home in Chicago. He was 68.

In the international art world, Pope.L was best known for his provocative performance art, which included crawling through the streets of New York City and Lewiston, Maine in a business suit or Superman costume and eating columns of financial news from the Wall Street Journal while smearing mayonnaise all over his torso to achieve an artificial whiteness. In addition to performance, his art also encompassed writing, photography, painting, sculpture and theater.

“Pope.L was a dedicated student of the human condition, a marvelous interlocutor and a kind soul,” said Matthew Jesse Jackson, professor in the Departments of Art History, Theater and Performance Studies, Visual Arts, and the College and chair of Visual Arts at UChicago. “He ceaselessly challenged us to think. His art is humane, generous, combative and among the most important bodies of work in the 21st century.”

Although humorously referring to himself as a “fisherman of social absurdity,” Pope.L fashioned an oeuvre of searing topicality that touched a wide range of complex socio-political issues such as access, belonging, identity, nationhood, public health and race.

For “Flint Water Project,” originally exhibited in 2017 at the artist-run space What Pipeline in Detroit, Pope.L filled plastic bottles with contaminated water from Flint, Mich. The bottles were available for purchase.

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In his performance piece "Conquest" (2019), Pope.L recruited 140 volunteers to crawl through New York City while blindfolded. Photo by Amy Elliott, copyright Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York

"With stuff like 'significance' in mind, Pope.L thought a lot about 'a lack worth having,' and then created unceasingly out of that thinking," said Darby English, the Carl Darling Buck Professor in the Department of Art History and the College at UChicago. "So, when someone asks you for 'sentences about the significance of his work,' you want sentences that adore how insightfully, how often and by how many means Pope.L made supposedly insignificant matter personally indelible for an available observer. Such goes far beyond putting the given in a new light—it changes your relationship to the given, then it changes it again."

In the February 2013 issue of Interview magazine, Pope.L acknowledged that community was one of the most significant aspects of his work. In response to whether he enjoyed making his work, Pope.L said, "I did not enjoy crawling." To which he added, "Overall, I enjoy making work with others. I enjoy the small moments of revelation that are only possible in the company of others. I enjoy making a clear puzzle. To make something is to undo it ... and to make it less mysterious."

In the solo exhibition "My Kingdom for a Title," at UChicago's Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, Pope.L created an installation composed of hundreds of face masks swaying in the wind produced by four electric fans. Underneath this canopy, a selection of drawings from his ongoing "Skin Set Project" were shown inside medicine cabinets.

"Pope.L is something of an escape artist for those of us who compulsively want to know what a given artwork is about," said Neubauer Collegium curator Dieter Roelstraete, who organized "My Kingdom for a Title." "Perhaps the nature of the current moment [that of the COVID-19 pandemic] forces us to opt for such a direct mode of address. How enigmatic can art really afford to be right now? Or should it, rather, double down on the 'enigmaticalness' that is the fount of so much great art?"

Creating recognition through provocation

Pope.L was born William Pope on June 28, 1955, in Newark, N.J., to Lucille Lancaster and William Pope. He was raised by his mother, a nurse whose own traumatic childhood led to recurring substance abuse issues.

As a child, Pope.L spent part of his time in the East Village with his grandmother Desma Lancaster, who cleaned houses for a living and worked as an artist, showing quilts at the Studio Museum in Harlem in the 1960s. She

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sparked Pope.L's interest in art and introduced him to a portrait painter that was among her clients. He also lived in Keyport, N.J., with his mother. Throughout his childhood, he moved frequently and lived in circumstances he described as unstable.

Pope.L attended Brooklyn's Pratt Institute and earned a bachelor's degree at Montclair State College (now Montclair State University) in 1978. He also attended the Whitney Independent Study Program and then received an M.F.A. from Rutgers University in 1981.

The moniker "Pope.L" combines the artist's original surname with the first letter of his mother's surname—a name his students at Bates College came up with in the mid-1980s. Soon afterwards, he formally adopted it.

His earliest works took place in the street, starting with his "Crawl" series in 1978, in which Pope.L moved on his hands and feet through the streets of New York City. For "Eating the Wall Street Journal" in 1991, he ate pages of the Wall Street Journal, washing them down with milk and ketchup. For another performance piece, Pope.L sat in the window of Franklin Furnace, an arts organization in New York City, offering himself as a commodity.

"Pope.L was the kindest person I have ever met," said Veronica Vegna, senior instructional professor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures and the College at UChicago. "He was critical of many things through his artwork, and yet I have never heard him make a single negative remark about anybody. He would listen without being judgmental. He would talk without any presumption. Among other things, I have always admired his curiosity and desire to critically understand. With his remarkable determination came great patience. He was and will always be Pope.L."

Among his many grants and awards, he received the VIA Art Fund Grant, Guggenheim fellowship, and National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. Pope.L was represented by the galleries of Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City and Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles, as well as Modern Art in London. His work was included in the 2002 and 2017 Whitney Biennials; during the latter he received the Whitney's coveted Bucksbaum Award. Pope.L's work also appeared in 2017 as part of "Documenta 14" in Athens and Kassel, Germany.

A deeply committed teacher

Over the past decade, Pope.L's art was frequently visible across UChicago's campus, including solo exhibitions at the Renaissance Society in 2013 (Forlesen) and the Logan Center for the Arts in 2017 (Brown People Are The Wrens in the Parking Lot). A major permanent mural entitled Cliff was installed on the eighth floor of the Logan Center in 2012.

During 2024, UChicago's Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry will dedicate a special issue of its journal Portable Gray—the name coined by Pope.L himself—to the artist's life and work.

"Pope.L was one of the most important artists of this or any century," said Zachary Cahill, director of Fellowship and Programs at the Gray Center and editor of Portable Gray. "It will take scholars decades to truly unpack the depth and complexity of his work. He was also, without a doubt, one of the greatest teachers I have ever known. Fiercely dedicated to his students, he cared about them in a way that is hard for me to explain. My impression was always that he wasn't just teaching them for a class or a degree but for their entire life. It was a marvel to behold."

In a 2021 interview for UChicago Arts, Pope.L discussed why he decided to enter the teaching profession. "Over time, I've simplified my teaching philosophy: work, work harder and then work harder still," he said. "Typically, I create a prompt or a situation within which the student operates. The student makes a proposal for that context, we discuss any obvious issues, then the student responds with their work and the critique become an exploration/discussion of how the student wrestled within that situation and how they can better their approach."

Before coming to UChicago in 2010, Pope.L was a lecturer in Theater and Rhetoric at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine.

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Beloved by many students at UChicago, Pope.L was described as a “deeply committed teacher and mentor,” by his friend Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford, associate professor of sculpture at Indiana University Northwest.

“The impact of Pope.L’s creativity, perspective and approach to engaging with the world resonates deeply in my life as an artist and a human being,” said Danny Volk, MFA’14, now assistant curator at the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. “These lessons, sometimes hard-earned, have proven to be important and long-lasting gifts.”

Another of Pope.L’s former students, Nisi Daly, MFA’13, said Pope.L changed her life. “Some people are just special,” she said. “So special that they impact lives in a web in every direction. So special that their teachings change worlds. That’s what happened to me through Pope.L’s teaching.”

He is survived by his partner, Mami Takahashi; an older brother, Eugene Pope; and a son, Desmond.