

## HYDE PARK HERALD

### **Pope.L, renowned performance artist, investigator of social issues and U. of C. professor, dies at 68**

The daredevil artist's work aimed to wake observers up from their social complacency

Emma Janssen | Jan 8, 2024



Pope.L crawls along Broadway in Manhattan as part of "The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street," 1990. Pope.L via Wikimedia Commons

Pope.L, an interdisciplinary artist and University of Chicago professor known for his dense and provocative performance art that investigated socio-political issues, died on Dec. 23 at his home in Hyde Park. He was 68.

Pope.L was born William Pope on June 28, 1955, in Newark, New Jersey, to Lucille Lancaster and William Pope. He was raised by his mother, a nurse.

He was introduced to art at an early age; he spent part of his childhood living in the East Village with his grandmother Desma Lancaster, a house cleaner and artist. During the 1960s, she exhibited quilts at the Studio Museum in Harlem, introducing Pope.L to the art world and local artists.

In interviews, Pope.L described growing up in often unstable environments and moving frequently. His mother lived in Keyport, New Jersey. (The name "Pope.L" is a combination of the artist's surname with the first letter of his mother's surname.)

He attended Brooklyn's Pratt Institute and earned his bachelor's degree from Montclair State College (now known as Montclair State University) in 1978. He also was a student at the Whitney Independent Study Program and received his MFA from Rutgers University in 1981.

In a 2013 interview with Interview Magazine, Pope.L recounted his introduction to performance art as an undergraduate at Montclair State.

"My earliest performances were in undergraduate school. They came out of making a set of works called communication devices," said Pope.L. "I was attending Montclair State College (in New Jersey), but back then, I

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believed that the work had to have an answer, had to possess an answer, had to have it in its grasp, like a real object. And I thought all I had to do was make enough of these things, these performances, and I'd find the answer. Of course, I was wrong."

## Using art to address inequity

Pope.L's work staged American social and political dynamics, often satirizing and drawing attention to the absurdity of the country's politics, racism and consumerism.

He is perhaps best known for his "crawl" performances, in which he completed journeys on his hands and knees, either alone or with a group of volunteers.

His most famous of these performances, "The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street," featured Pope.L crawling along Broadway, Manhattan's longest street. The journey, which he began in 2001, took nine years, as he could only endure roughly six blocks of crawling at any given time. As he crawled, Pope.L wore a Superman costume with a skateboard strapped to his back in place of a cape.

"From its very earliest beginnings, the crawl project was conceived as a group performance. Unfortunately for me, at that time, I was the only volunteer," Pope.L told Interview Magazine. Many of his "crawl" pieces went on to feature large groups of crawling accomplices.

Seeing a man crawling along the (often) dirty streets of Manhattan provoked visceral reactions from bystanders, and it was exactly this viscerality and attention that Pope.L sought to produce and nourish. His first Times Square crawl, just after he graduated from Rutgers, was meant to honor his aunt and uncle, who were homeless.

"We'd gotten used to people begging, and I was wondering, how can I renew this conflict? I don't want to get used to seeing this. I wanted people to have this reminder," Pope.L told Martha Wilson in 1996.

He also tackled, at multiple points, the issue of water inequity in the United States. In 2017, Pope.L presented "Flint Water Project" at the Detroit-based gallery What Pipeline. The exhibition sold bottles of contaminated water from Flint, Michigan, and served as an information center about the crisis.

In all, the exhibition raised more than \$30,000 for the United Way of Genesee County, which assists Flint-based organizations to alleviate the crisis and Hydrate Detroit, a volunteer-led nonprofit advocating for affordable water in Detroit.

In addition to his crawling projects, Pope.L is also well-known for his performance "Eating the Wall Street Journal," which he presented over the course of five days in 2000.

The project emerged from Pope.L's encounter with a Wall Street Journal advertisement that promised that a subscription to the newspaper would multiply one's wealth. Pope.L took this idea to its extreme, sitting atop a toilet throne reading the paper and then chewing strips of it which he soaked in milk and ketchup. After chewing, he spit the shreds of paper out.

As he read and chewed, Pope.L doused himself in flour, whitening his skin in a nod to capitalism's association with whiteness and disenfranchisement of people of color. The absurdity of the performance mimicked and drew attention to the absurdity of the advertisement's premise itself. Explaining his work, Pope.L asked: "shouldn't ingesting (the paper) increase your wealth tenfold?"

Pope.L was represented by three galleries: Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City, Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles and Modern Art in London. His work was recognized numerous times by grants and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and Bucksbaum Award.

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## Teacher and artist at U. of C.

Pope.L came to U. of C. in 2010, joining its Department of Visual Arts. At the university, he taught and mentored young artists and students, and also contributed to the artistic community of Hyde Park.

His artistic work at U. of C. included a solo exhibition at the Renaissance Society in 2013, titled “Forlesen,” and another solo exhibition at the Logan Center for the Arts in 2017, titled “Brown People Are The Wrens in the Parking Lot.” In 2012, Pope.L’s permanent mural, “Cliff,” was installed on the eighth floor of the Logan Center, 915 E. 60th St.

“Pope.L was one of the most important artists of this or any century,” Zachary Cahill, director of Fellowship and Programs at U. of C.’s Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, told UChicago News. “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 2021, Pope.L presented “My Kingdom for a Title,” a solo exhibition at U. of C.’s Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, 5701 S. Woodlawn Ave. The exhibition, the gallery’s first since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, invoked illness and hospitalization. Hundreds of blue surgical masks swung from the ceiling, and paintings were mounted in fluorescent medicine cabinets.

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

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