

ArtReview

Pope. L: Afterlife

J.J. Charlesworth | Reviews | 01 February 2024



Eating The Wall Street Journal (Mother Version), 2000–23, installation. Photo: Andy Stagg. © and courtesy the artist

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Abjection and disaster become a bleak sort of comedy in the hands of Pope. L. *Hospital*, the American artist's first solo institutional show in the UK, should have been a (long overdue) celebration of this maverick figure. But the artist's sudden death in late December now makes his work's sculptural emphasis on human presence all the more charged, its humour another shade darker.

Here, people are absent, and the monuments they have built are always teetering on the verge of collapse. At the South London Gallery's second space (a converted fire station) *Hospital's* apocalyptic tone starts in the wintry postindustrial gloom of the video *Small Cup* (2008). In some shadowy corner of an empty warehouse, lit by worksite lamps, we see a crudely rendered version of the UK Capitol's dome, jerry-built in wood and plaster and (but for a few brief shots where we see it upright) toppled over. This symbol of American democracy seems to have been brought down by the chickens and goats that peck and chew at the dry feed with which the model has been coated. It's a work that evades glib interpretations, even as it sets up the motifs of political, social and (here, more elliptically) racial inequalities, and of decay and entropy, that have coursed through Pope. L's work for over four decades.

They're themes that continue in the huge sculptural work that occupies the South London Gallery's main gallery, across the road. Against stuffy, hospital-pink walls looms *Eating The Wall Street Journal (Mother Version)* (2000–

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23), a chaotic scaffold of timber like some disintegrating helter-skelter, painted white and caked in white dust. As though a bizarre freeze-frame animation in real life, the jumble appears to describe the collapse of a tower: erect at the far end and crowned with a white toilet, then in two consecutive stages of its collapse, pitching headlong towards the gallery entrance among the debris.

Draped all over this wreckage are copies of the titular mouthpiece of American capitalism, along with (perhaps to add a local reference) copies of the *Financial Times*. The work, remade various times over two decades (with or without Pope. L's performance, in which he would sit on the toilet eating the *WSJ*), is a visual poem about capitalism, venality and hubris: fishing rods are affixed to it here and there at jaunty angles, as if leisured types happened to be holidaying amid the ruins. It embodies the artist's razor-sharp attention to finding an iconography that might capture our era's anxieties, without lecturing or didacticising. Race politics are regularly the subject of Pope. L's works, but while the whiteness of white powder is a reference bound into this scatological takedown of capitalism, Pope. L's visual absurdism allows his materials to multiply with their own allusions; the white powder of cocaine, drug of choice of the wealthy; of ash and death; even (horrifically) the powdered remains of collapsed buildings and obliterated bodies. Bowls of powder set on shelves around the gallery are labelled 'Dust, sprinkle at will'. It's a weird little ritual that resolves nothing, except implicating you, by dirtied fingers, in the calamity staged in the gallery.

Positioned along the surrounding walls are sculptures consisting of low benches and long narrow shelves. On two shelves are rows of squarish Cactus Jack bottles, the majority of each row filled either with red or blue liquid, the occasional bottle empty and lying, anthropomorphically, on its side (*Shelf With Cactus Jack Bottles, Shoulder Position [Champ Version]*, and *Shelf With Cactus Jack Bottles, Stomach Position [Killer Version]*, both 2023). Down the wall are dried stains of the emptied liquid, some pooling in saucers on the floor. Another shelf is pierced through by upturned Buckfast wine bottles, though these appear to emerge from the underside at a different angle to how they entered, as if they were passing through a prism (*Shelf With Buckfast Bottles And Saucers [Bit Version]*, 2023). Gravity, and giving up to it, lying down, giving in, cheap alcohol, all are riddled with connotations of class and austerity. (Buckfast being the British booze of choice for working-class teenagers and broke alcoholics). These piled-up, crisscrossing visual metaphors produce something – through their comic nihilism – equivalent to the state of things today.

'Hospital', Pope. L suggests in the exhibition notes, has its root in the Latin for 'stranger, foreigner, guest'. There is a lot of physical debility on show here – leaky fluids, bowels, intoxication – but the theme seems to expand here into something bigger, about the disempowering effect of institutions, or of being institutionalised. This art is awkwardly at home here, the aesthetic that of the grimy everyday bursting in. In another unlit gallery at the Fire Station, the 'white cube' gives up. You're handed a torch to go examine, as best you can, 26 framed pieces of what might be a bigger but indecipherable drawing (*Space Between The Letter Drawings [SLG Version]*, 2013), hung on a reflective metallic wall. Some are hung face-to; three have wooden stakes protruding from their taped-over fronts. Everything about the work obfuscates, obscures and rebuffs, pointing us outwards to the gallery's context, to the 'artworld' and its etiquettes and protocols, its power in managing the patient known as 'the artist'; who, in this case, has nevertheless checked out too early.

Hospital at South London Gallery, through 11 February