WILLIAM POPE, L
DRAWING, DREAMING, DROWNING

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
11 OCTOBER 2007–21 JANUARY 2008
WILLIAM POPE.L
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WILLIAM POPE.L IS CHIEFLY KNOWN for provocative performances and urban interventions, which he has been staging since the late 1970s. Many of these have transpired unceremoniously in incidental public spaces such as parks, sidewalks, and gutters, with the artist donning variously symbolic attire and accoutrements (a skirt made of dollar bills and a sausage-link chain for *ATM Piece* [1997]; a capeless Superman costume for the ongoing *Great White Way*). Drawing attention to the artist’s presence, these guises also mark the acute social dynamics that organize urban space but typically remain unseen until an extraordinary event dramatizes them. Gathering a number of counterpoints to these more extroverted aspects of Pope.L’s art, *Drawing, Dreaming, Drowning* finds the artist in a contemplative mood.

The works in the exhibition represent a continuation of themes readily identified in his art: namely, the commitment to the persistent disruption of conventions of cultural identity; the paradoxical idea of lack as a source of value; and the explosion of traditional artistic categories. The exhibition comprises four distinct projects, each in its own way belonging to “an ex-
Pope.L applies the term “drawing” liberally, opening up its definition formally as well as figuratively. The stress falls on the impulses that make drawing necessary—why rather than what—and on the way in which any tactile engagement with a given surface, form, or space can be considered an act of drawing.

An ongoing series of intensely personal, often melancholic musings on paper, the *Failure Drawings* (numbering approximately 700 to date) originated in a convergence of transformative life experiences that Pope.L underwent in late 2003: a hospitalization due to a prolonged nosebleed; and the aftermath of a major touring retrospective. Having spent his three-decade career on the fringes of the art world, Pope.L was suddenly greeted with a flourishing of international interest in his work. These conflicting preoccupations, mortality and success (death and thriving), form the muddy conceptual basis of the series.

Pope.L produces the drawings exclusively when he is traveling and from found materials: a gum wrapper, a page torn from the newspaper, a sheet of hotel stationery, an airline motion-sickness bag, a note of foreign currency. His process of reflecting on our figurative and literal passage through life is evident in the strong horizon and other recognizable landscape elements that serve as baselines for nearly every drawing in the series; these pictorial tropes allow him to locate his strange cosmologies in the known world. Considerations of transience are also present in the drawings’ evolution over time. Few to none are the precious products of a singular creative occasion; rather, they are modified with new markings as the artist sees fit. As Pope.L has said, “There is no such thing as one drawing. No drawing is an island.” He is ruminating in a private language of recurring symbolic motifs, including landscapes, worms, penises and rockets, glasses, animals, cacti, and celestial bodies. Despite their prevalence, these subjects are in and of themselves unreliable bases for interpretation.

Repeated imagery and occasional bursts of text strongly suggest a narrative content that is never fully revealed or resolved. Any attempt to ascertain the meaning of the works in this series can be frustrating, and a given picture is unlikely to produce a reading that translates comfortably to the entire group. By keeping the desire for meaning in check and reckoning with each image on its own terms, Pope.L allows viewers to discover their own meaning in the works and to engage with them on a personal level.

*Great White Way* (detail), ongoing.
its own terms, we gain greater access to the very independent statement each drawing has to make. #739F Pink Rocket Fall (2004) is one of three like pictures that represent the Failure Drawings at their sparest. These uncomplicated compositions feature an isolated, barely perceptible event on a low horizon in a nearly barren landscape. The balance of the drawings in the set evolves from this most basic horizontal structure. In #129F Rockets Fall Divide City (2004–06), the support consists of two joined paper fragments on which Pope.L rendered a cityscape in ballpoint and felt-tip pen. The familiar pictorial theme is here interrupted by the collaged substrate fusing differently colored papers, the inexplicable splotchy red pigment, and the fact that this unidentified metropolis is being besieged by rockets that tumble tragically toward the ground below.

Such scenes of sublime terror, often more puzzling than chilling, coexist in the series in less legible works such as #95FAB Napkin Mountain (2004–06). Here, multiple horizons at once frame and compress the picture plane, suggesting that the drawing was executed by orienting the paper in different directions. In the tumultuous composition, cigarette burns, spent match heads, hairlike pen and ink markings, and an image of a small spacecraft combine with daubs of green, blue, magenta, yellow, white, and red pigment that add more to the drawing’s volume than to its design. This kind of expressionistic morass gives way to notable clarity in #126F Familiescape, Yellow Clouds (2004–06), a signal example of a Failure Drawing in which two incommensurable image systems inhabit the same fraught space. As he often does in his practice, Pope.L here submitted pre-existing pictorial elements (in this case, a photograph from the New York Times) to his own symbolic priorities, appropriating the framed picture on the wall into yet another falling rocket landscape.

In Relational Painting aka If Black is Beautiful... (2007), Pope.L employed one of art’s most vaunted mediums in order to extend the limits of what “a painting” can be and do. Every one of the 99 diverse components in this sprawling construction serves, for Pope.L., as part of the painting: “a painting composed of dabs, bits, parts, chunks, and layers composed of paint, objects, and sound.” As its name may suggest, Relational Painting encourages the viewer to enter into it, attempt to locate relationships among its seemingly disconnected aspects, and thereby also formalize a relationship with the work. Daunting as the arrangement may seem, there is a shape to its apparent boundlessness. A black vinyl tarpaulin
heavily worked with drawn, painted, and collaged elements serves both as a focal point and the most obvious demonstration of the medium of painting. In order to read the copious visual information covering and bleeding from the "canvas," viewers must visually and physically negotiate the array of electrical cords that hang from a 13-by-11-foot lighting grid overhead. Within its borders, a soundtrack of "white noise" and prerecorded jungle sounds (an ambiguous play on racial themes) is emitted from a group of speakers and homemade boom boxes arranged on the floor. This ambient sound enables the viewer to concentrate on the visual noise filling the stagelike surround. Detritus and other materials including cigarette butts, plastic bottles, emptied paint containers, and crumpled papers accumulated during the work’s construction are left as part of the composition; these traces of actions already completed now become fuel for one’s imagination of possible future actions.

Considerations of aesthetics have never been more foregrounded in Pope.L’s practice than in Relational Painting. Issues of representation and beauty, particularly “the nature of beauty as a general phenomenon and black beauty specifically,” are the central preoccupations of the texts that he excerpted, modified, and finally integrated among the pictorial elements. The resulting bricolage combines historical and contemporary reflections on the Western aesthetic tradition with sociological and journalistic treatments of disempowerment in American culture, such that W. E. B. DuBois’s Black Reconstruction (1934) meets Barbara Maria Stafford’s Body Criticism (1991) meets Featherstone and Hepworth’s The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory (1991) meets Darnell J. Hunt’s O. J. Simpson: Facts and Fictions (1999). A line of text reads: “If black is beautiful and beauty is only skin deep then blackness is not all that it seems.” The intentional misspelling of seems as seam befits the placement of this cryptic observation across a fold in the center of the vinyl surface. Pope.L’s manipulation of that seam also subtly expresses his longstanding commitment to eroding fixed signs and ideas of cultural identity by playing with the borders that separate them.

For Rebuilding the Monument (chicago version/ the vitrine problem) (2007), Pope.L plastered the face of Martin Luther King, Jr., onto six 40-pound bags of lawn fertilizer. Non-traditional materials, among them peanut
butter, chocolate, ketchup, mayonnaise, hot dogs, and pop-tarts, as well as dirt, abound in Pope.L's work. Favored for their rich associations with the body, sustenance, desire, and/or repulsion, these organic substances evolve over time. As the artist Martha Wilson observed in regards to Pope.L's attitude toward materials: "Everything is valid for use, with no hierarchical distinction between manure and bronze. Manure smells and bronze doesn't which makes manure more expressive." Referring to a previous incarnation of this piece, the artist said that he wanted to unmoor the conception of the late civil-rights leader's body—and by extension the bodies of others—from the assumption that certain public, historical personages are beyond reproach. With characteristic irreverence, Pope.L asked, "Can we accept the idea that the richest soil has been tainted—or maybe enriched—by the negative? We don't want to deal with that when we deal with MLK. His relationship to women, for example."

The physical construction of *Rebuilding the Monument*—a serial arrangement of wall-mounted Plexiglas vitrines that snugly house one, two, and three bags, respectively—is unique to the Art Institute version. The coolly packaged, apparently self-multiplying aspect of this anti-monument highlights the sheer ordinariness shared by entities as dissimilar as a bag of soil and a representation of King. The image, further destabilized by photoreproduction, oil and acrylic pigments, and copious amounts of a gluey fixative, questions the martyr's singularity, much as the slick vitrines reference minimalist sculpture, which sought to undermine the preciousness of artworks.

*Void for the Undocumented from Venus, Nicaragua (2007)* has been reconfigured from an earlier incarnation in which a white wood picture frame surrounded a deep black hole Pope.L created in the white gallery wall. Peering inside, viewers were met with a gust of air blowing in their faces, simultaneously pushing them away and suggesting the potential of mysterious happenings beyond. For the Art Institute, Pope.L replaced the disconcerting breeze with an ineffable green light, which emanates from a square window cut into the wall above a door to a locked storage closet. Situated above eye level at the very top of the door, the cavity appears as a glowing green square, just out of reach, and faintly echoed on the facing wall. The work's suggestion that something or someone lurks behind the barrier is
made more plausible still by a slight yet insistent vibration detectable through the door. The "void" is another longstanding preoccupation of the artist’s; at the crux of his art is an investigation of loss and lack—affective states given physical form in the Void pieces, which are the most literal expressions of how Pope.L’s work militates against meaning. The artist embraces life’s inherent inconsistencies: “I am suspicious of things that make sense,” he recalled. “When I was able to accept that something could be true and not true, I felt at home.” Part philosophy, part absurdist poetry, and part autobiographical psychodrama, his 2001-02 text “Hole Theory” provides a conceptual foundation for a wide swath of his practice:  

1. I don’t picture the hole. (I inhabit it). 9–4.  

Hole Theory engages lack across economic and cultural and political boundaries. Lack is where [it’s] at. 13.1. Hole Theory is guided by a lack to be with the world and in so being—be right with the world. 10 The idea Pope.L advocated here—that lack is a source of value—is as abstract as it is unconventional. In a time of exponential increases in the range of knowledge about ourselves and the world, Pope.L’s work offers a kind of resistance that compels us to reflect on the necessity of always having more, making more, and doing more. It stimulates the philosophically indispensable imagination of what a steadfast refusal to conform might look like. In his hands, the prevalence of lack (conceptual and material) serves as a very real caution. But it is also an enthusiastic affirmation of opportunity itself: “The successful negotiation of holes is dependent on maintaining a healthy respect for what cannot be seen.” 11

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NOTES
2. Ibid., July 2007.  
3. Ibid.  
4. Relational Painting conjures historical and contemporary attitudes toward art by bridging lapsed notions of expressionism with recent discussions around "relational aesthetics," the philosophy of a participatory art that connects people by creating, rather than passively inhabiting, its social context. Pope.L here took the expressionist notion of a fully self-contained artwork (where the only relations that matter are those within the work) and exploded it, both interrogating the exclusion from theories of relational aesthetics of traditional mediums like painting and sculpture, and bespeaking his conviction about the value of holding contraries together: “For me, a relational work should engage the viewer to think and act with a sense of the in between. Meaning crudely, that all things exist with other things in the universe.” For more on these themes, see Nicole Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, (Editions de Presse, 1999) and Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” October 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 51–79.  
7. Rebuilding the Monument (chicago version/vitrine problem), as well as Void for the Undocumented from Venus, Nicaragua, both reprints of earlier works, were made exclusively for this focus exhibition.  
11. Ibid.
WILLIAM POPE.L

Born Newark, New Jersey 1955


Lives and works in Lewiston, Maine

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORMANCES

2007

Art after White People: Time, Trees, & Celluloid…, Santa Monica Museum of Art, California (cat.)

snow, spraypaint, hair, sperm & baloney, Kenny Schachter ROVE, London (cat. edited by Mark H. C. Bessire)

The Black Factory and Other Good Works, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (cat.)

The Void Show, MC, Los Angeles

2006

Trophy Room, Kunsthalle Wien project space, Vienna, Austria (cat.)

Under All, Above Most, Tangeman University Center, University of Cincinnati, Ohio

The Black Factory, various venues, United States

2005

Props and Propositions, Cleveland Institute of Art, Ohio

'some things you can do with blackness…' Kenny Schachter ROVE (cat. with essays by Nato Thompson and Elizabeth Bard)

The Black Factory, various venues, United States

2004

Five Ways to Say the Same Sadness: New York, University Art Museum, University at Albany, New York

cRacism: electronica, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis

cRacism, Artists Space, New York; Mason Gross Art Galleries, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey; DiverseWorks Artspace, Houston; Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, Portland (cat. with essays by Mark H. C. Bessire, Geoffrey Hendricks, Martha Wilson, et al.)

reFunk, The Project, New York

The Black Factory, various venues, United States

2003

Foddah, The Korn Gallery, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey

Some: Of Place and Desire, Anthouse, Austin

The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2007

New York—States of Mind, Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin (cat.)

Situation Comedy, Humor in Recent Art, Salina Art Center, Kansas; MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Canada; Winnipeg Art Gallery, Canada; Chicago Cultural Center; The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu (cat.)

Conceptual Paper, Arndt & Partner, Zurich

Plug, Sister, Los Angeles

2006

Civil Restitutions, Thomas Dane Gallery, London

SKOWHEGAN AT 60: The Maine Participants 1906–2005, Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport, Maine

7me Biennale de l’Art Africain contemporain, Dakar, Senegal

Humor Me, H&R Block Artspace, Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri

Relics and Remnants, The Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning, New York

2005

Dreaming of a More Better Future, Cleveland Institute of Art

Hero, Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico

RAPSIDA, Gallery 138, New York

Landmark, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Oregon

DEFENSE: Body and Nobody in Self-Protection, Sweeney Art Gallery, University of California–Riverside

Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art Since 1970, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (cat.)

2004

Watch What We Say, Schroeder Romero, New York

The Big Nothing, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania


Reverse Engineers, Herndon Gallery, Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio

The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts (cat. with essays by Nato Thompson and Gregory G. Sholette and an interview by C. Ondine Chavoya)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are mixed media and courtesy of the artist, The Project, and Kenny Schachter ROVE.

Relational Painting aka If Black Is Beautiful…. 2007

#2OF 7.23.04, 8.4.04, 9.14.06 Sailboat White Mountain Postcard

20.3 x 20.3 cm (8 x 8 in.)

Hairy Envelope

20.3 x 10.7 cm (11 ¾ x 7 ¾ in.)

#4OF 7.4.04, 4.22.05, 7.8.05, 7.27.06 Landscape Table

20.3 x 20.3 cm (8 x 8 in.)

#5OF 7.4.04, 4.22.05, 7.27.06 The Phallic Bundle of Avalon

27.9 x 22.2 cm (11 x 8 ¾ in.)

#6OF 6.27.04, 7.4.04 “What Do You Think You Can Learn From Throwing Yourself Off A Cliff?”

Albany Hotel Room

49.5 x 53.3 cm (19 ½ x 21 in.)

Rebuilding the Monument (Chicago version/the virrine problem), 2007

62.2 x 36.8 x 19.1 cm (24 ½ x 14 ½ x 7 ½ in.); 62.2 x 73.3 x 19.1 cm (24 ½ x 28 ¾ x 7 ½ in.); 62.2 x 109.9 x 19.1 cm (24 ½ x 43 3/4 x 7 ½ in.)

Void for the Undocumented from Venus, Nicaragua, 2007

Dimensions variable

The following works are from the series Failure Drawings:

#1OF 3.30.04, 5.28.04, 3.21.05, 7.16.05, 3.31.06 “What Do You Think You Can Learn From Throwing Yourself Off A Cliff?”

Albany Hotel Room

49.5 x 53.3 cm (19 ½ x 21 in.)

#2OF 5.2.04, 7.23.04, 8.4.04, 4.22.05, 9.13.06, 9.12.06 Sailboat White Mountain Postcard

20.3 x 25.4 cm (8 x 10 in.)

#3OF 8.4.04, 7.22.05, 5.20.06, 3.21.06, 3.27.06 Landscape Table

20.3 x 20.3 cm (8 x 8 in.)

#4OF 8.6.04, 4.22.05, 7.8.04, 9.9.06 Hairy Envelope

20.3 x 10.7 cm (11 ¾ x 7 ¾ in.)

#5OF 6.10.04, 7.28.04, 2.16.05, 3.16.06, 5.17.06, 3.20.06, 4.14.06 The Phallic Bundle of Avalon

27.9 x 22.2 cm (11 x 8 ¾ in.)

#6OF 7.4.04, 4.22.05, 5.27.06, 3.28.06, 3.29.06 Drip Glasses

6.4 x 12.4 cm (2 ½ x 4 ¾ in.)

#7OF 6.27.04, 7.4.04 “What Do You Think You Can Learn From Throwing Yourself Off A Cliff?”

Albany Hotel Room

49.5 x 53.3 cm (19 ½ x 21 in.)


2004

Motion Studies, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York

White: A Group Show, Bill Maynes Gallery, New York

American Dream: A Survey, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery, New York (cat.)

2003


2002


SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are mixed media and courtesy of the artist, The Project, and Kenny Schachter ROVE.

Relational Painting aka If Black Is Beautiful…. 2007

#1OF 3.30.04, 5.28.04, 3.21.05, 7.16.05, 3.31.06 “What Do You Think You Can Learn From Throwing Yourself Off A Cliff?”

Albany Hotel Room

49.5 x 53.3 cm (19 ½ x 21 in.)
#785F 2.4.04, 2.4.04 Worm Notices Waterfall
20.3 x 25.4 cm (8 x 10 in.)

#785F 2.25.04 Worm Zigzag on Napkin
14 x 14 cm (5 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.)

#785F 2.26.04 Worms, See Fish Above Starbucks
43.2 x 16.5 cm (17 x 6 1/2 in.)

#815F 3.04 Wormholes and Creation
15.2 x 15.2 cm (6 x 6 in.)

#822F 4.2.04 Rocket Re-thinking Its Mission, Falling in Amtrak Napkin
41.3 x 42.6 cm (16 1/4 x 16 3/4 in.)

#271F 4.16.04 Crash in Amtrak Napkin
21 x 41.3 cm (8 1/4 x 16 3/4 in.)

#827F 4.19.04 Penis with Glasses and Friends
20.3 x 25.4 cm (8 x 10 in.)

#944F 4.20.04 Rockets Refuse to Watch the Sky
27.9 x 21.6 cm (11 x 8 1/2 in.)

#1005F 4.21.04 Worm, Whites, Rocket, St. Louis
20.3 x 25.4 cm (8 x 10 in.)

#1016F 4.21.04, 4.22.04 Worm Calling Rocket Out to Play
20.3 x 20.3 cm (8 x 8 in.)

#1065F 5.3.04, 5.17.04 Small Failure Wrist Large
15.2 x 20.3 cm (6 x 8 in.)

THANKS

OPENING EVENTS
THURSDAY 11 OCTOBER
EXHIBITION PREVIEW
5:30–8:00 p.m.
Gallery 139
ARTIST TALK
6:00 p.m.
Price Auditorium
OPENING RECEPTION
7:00 p.m.
Jean and Steven Goldman
Study Center
Department of Prints and Drawings

GALLERY TALKS
TUESDAY 30 OCTOBER
12:00 p.m.
Exhibition curator Lisa Dorin
Gallery 100
FRIDAY 7 DECEMBER
12:00 p.m.
Exhibition coordinator Jenny Gheith
Gallery 100
TUESDAY 15 JANUARY
12:00 p.m.
Exhibition curator Darby English
Gallery 100

COVER: #95FAB Napkin Mountain
(detail), 2004–06
BACK COVER: #126F Familyscape,
Yellow Clouds, 2004–06

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