

William Pope.L
eRacism
Artists Space

The ghosts of Adrian Piper and Paul McCarthy are conjured at what amounts to a tripartite William Pope.L retrospective at Artists Space, The Project, and Mason Gross Art Galleries at Rutgers University. On an arguably unparalleled level among contemporary American performance artists, seeing is believing with Pope.L, since describing his work in words can't convey the power of the performances, which use extreme absurdity, intentional confusion, provocation, and degradation to confront American racism, consumption, and the frightening threat of poverty.

Each show offers the chance to see videos of Pope.L in action during his street performances and performances commissioned by alternative art spaces. Compounding this several hour-long DVD loop of performances from 1990–2002 is a wildly variant array of material output—installations, mixed media paintings, lots of drawings on Pop Tarts, text-based drawings, and collages. “The Beginning of the World (with Inter-continental Missiles and Chipmunks)” (2004) is a highlight, in large part because to witness it is something of an endurance act. The wall-sized painting is a biomorphic mess of crudely rendered objects and absurdist text, possibly referring to a future beginning necessitated out of some awful nuclear disaster (toy ambulances make an appearance). And the thing is just slathered in Skippy peanut butter, shimmering proudly like a layer of creamily pungent shit. Yes it stinks, and yes, Artists Space will allow the filth to intensify as nature dictates. Pope.L has written on the symbolically frightening aspects of food in his childhood, specifically on the anxiety inspired by products spoiling before being eaten. So it's no surprise that milk factors as a primary signifier in *eRacism* as well. “Eating the Wall Street Journal” (2000) is an enormous wooden platform that serves as a throne for a toilet (surrounded by bottles of Heinz ketchup, a fishing rod, and gallons of very spoiled milk) with soiled copies of the *Wall Street Journal* scattered on the gallery floor below. This self-referential installation was the prop for Pope.L's performance of the same name. In 2000 he sat atop the throne and simultaneously ate and read the *Wall Street Journal*— a pathetic plea for financial osmosis and an obvious jab at a signifier of privilege, the daily bible of wealth-accumulation.

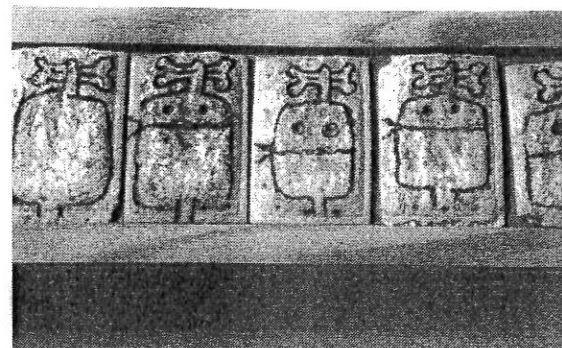
While the visual work in *eRacism* stands powerfully on its own, it is strengthened and clarified by the videos. Unfortunately, it might take repeat visits to Artists Space to actually get through them all. There are twenty performances on two DVDs, and while they're almost all uniformly riveting, it involves a lot of sitting on a small, uncomfortable bench, a persistent problem of viewing extended video pieces in a gallery setting. “White Baby” (1992) is

Pope.L in high absurdist mode, giving a motivational speech to a Cleveland audience where he describes himself as “more provocateur than activist...I think everybody should just take out their credit card and buy me something...I am the turd in the bowl of truth. Flush me down with your consciousness.” Pope.L constantly challenges to question his own sanity, never more forcefully or effectively than in “Tompkins Square Crawl,” (1991), where he crawled in a business suit along 7th Street in New York City's East Village followed by a cameraman documenting the performance, carrying a small flower pot with modestly budding flowers. He immerses himself in the gutter of the street—shit and bugs pervade his path, and the camera on top comes when the act of a white cameraman following the apparently homeless and pathetic Pope.L around incites the rage of a nearby black man, who approaches them screaming, “What is this? Tell me!” The cameraman mumbles a weak defense, and the spectator yells, “You're running around the street like this in a goddamn suit? I wear a suit like that to work!”

Pope.L is nothing without an audience, because he is confrontational. Even when it's clear he is performing under the guise of “art,” he refuses to let you forget what you and your audience are doing: consuming him, and consuming the grim spectacle of American race relations from a safe distance. “RACISM IS FUN” reads a text projection before Pope.L in the video of his “eRacism, Version 8b” performance (2000). No it's not, but this ridiculous proclamation coming from a black man— makes you think a little better than a “RACISM IS BAD” statement would. And that's why Pope.L's work succeeds along similar lines as Piper and McCarthy's. All three defamiliarize the familiar. The work in *eRacism* is stinky, greasy, soiled, dirty, and disgusting. Necessarily so, since overturning the values of aesthetic essentialism is essential to a project that aims for total desecration. As evidenced by the wide praise for the toy toilet Philip Guston retrospective, the grotesque is hip right now.

Pope.L's grotesque story of a white man walking toward a black man on the sidewalk and crossing the street before the black man gets too close is not hip. But it's real, unless black people escape their perception as “Sodom Disneyland” (Pope.L's words), he'll continue ramming our ugly status quo down our throats and call it art.

—Nick Stillin



William Pope.L, “Pop Tart Frieze” (1998), detail, installation view at Diverse/ Houston, TX. Work courtesy the artist and The Project, New York.