



Extra Sensory Conceptions

William Pope. L's gallery show speaks to the brain through the belly with challenging ideas. And a whiff of peanut butter.

By Ariella Budick
STAFF WRITER

January 18, 2004

The first thing you notice is the smell. The odor of peanut butter pervades the gallery, the first sign that the artist is gunning for a visceral response. The funky perfume wafts off a mural dabbled with drips and arabesques of the gooey brown paste. Nearby, a framed row of Pop Tarts - not plastic effigies, but the real, edible snacks - lines the wall, the iced coating of each one incised with a crudely rendered human face.

The rest of William Pope.L's show at Artists Space represents a further assault on the senses, and through them on the assumptions of anyone who comes to see - and smell - it. Food isn't the only medium the multi-talented Pope.L. works in, but he makes the most of its subliminal associations. He speaks to the brain through the belly.

Pope.L has a point to make about lazy mental habits that surround issues of race, class and consumerism. His performances and installations take stereotypes as a point of departure, but a darkly humorous approach keeps him well clear of pedantry. Most of the time his work is subtle, allusive and unsettling, its meaning impossible to freeze into a bite-size message. A catalog essay tells us that the faces on the Pop Tarts are racist caricatures, but they look more like a cross between cave paintings and Saturday morning cartoons. Some resemble Pebbles Flintstone, their ponytails held in place by large bones.

The significance of peanut butter is even more opaque. It seems to have something to do with Pope.L.'s childhood experience of poverty and hunger. "I had to think about whether there was going to be enough [food to eat]," he says in the catalog. "The idea that food was some kind of warm, nourishing entity - that I understand. But I also see it as always possibly spoiling, disappearing or somehow going bad. My take on food involves those two things: nourishment and lack."

By transferring victuals off the plate and onto the walls, Pope.L comments indirectly on the way art is treated as a product in a sea of commodities. He makes art that could literally be consumed, but a "consumer" who buys a Pope.L sculpture as a prospective investment would soon find it starting to rot instead.

Consumption is also the theme of "Eating the Wall Street Journal," a performance piece that, at Artists Space, lives on through its props. In its live incarnation, Pope.L, wearing only underwear and a dusting of talcum powder, sat astride a toilet perched atop a wooden tower and indulged in a public meal. He munched newspaper and swigged milk, spitting out the silvery slush into a trough below.

All this spilling of milk and processing of words was meant to proclaim a link between the primitive and the capitalistic, but the artifacts are less than eloquent. Artists Space has the rickety scaffold, minus the powdered Pope.L, but embellished with surveillance cameras that record viewers' reactions as they wander around the gallery. Like so many relics of artist performances, this one seems like a mortuary, memorializing something once alive that has ceased to breathe.



Pope.L's videotaped performances, on the other hand, are still vital and form the real meat (so to speak) of the show. For his "ATM Piece," Pope.L, wearing nothing but a skirt sewn together from dollar bills, attached himself to the door of a New York City bank with an umbilical chain of sausages. Reversing the role of the typical panhandler, he invited passersby to peel the money from his clothing. Most refused, and eventually he was arrested.

Pope.L has made a pet project of crawling through New York City streets, decked out in various costumes and holding an assortment of props. In "Tompkins Square Crawl" (1991), he sports a business suit, carries a small flowering plant and wiggles along the pavement on his belly. Some bystanders ignore him, others offer assistance, and a few become extremely upset. One black onlooker harangues the white cameraman, denouncing him as racist. When he finds out that Pope.L is the one in charge, he turns on the artist, calling him "a disgrace to your race."

A performance called "Member" features Pope.L striding through Harlem with a six-foot pipe protruding from his groin and resting on a wheeled base. Sometimes the monstrous prosthetic sports a stuffed bunny dangling on the end. At other times the bunny comes off and eggs shoot out the tube. Through it all, the artist marches poker-faced through the crowd.

Pope.L is a man of the theater, but he is documenting the audience's reactions as much as his own exploits. This being New York, he can come across as just another wacko, and the people he passes ignore him, smile wanly or begin mugging for the camera.

What's funny about his work is not how weird it is, but how quickly it stops being weird. He takes his lonely obsessions - with milk, edible goop and lingering stereotypes - as raw material, then adds a dollop of outlandish humor and emerges with art that is communicative, political and even a little adorable.

WHERE&WHEN "William Pope.L eRacism" will be on view through Feb. 21

at Artists Space, 38 Greene St., third floor, Manhattan. Tuesdays-Saturdays,

11 a.m.-6 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, call 212-226-3970, or visit www.artistspace.org.

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