



William Pope.L

Forlesen

April 28–June 23, 2013

The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

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at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Friday: 10am - 5pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5pm
Closed Mondays
<http://www.renaissancesociety.org>

William Pope.L Forlesen

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Opening Reception: April 28, 4:00–7:00pm
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00pm

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Phone: (773) 702-8670

Double Consciousness, Squared

Modern art's most vaunted claim was to have arrived at universal legibility, to have uncovered an art that could transcend national, regional and biographical specificity. During the first half of the twentieth century, the discourse regarding this art of universal legibility developed around painting's abstract and figurative paradigms as they evolved out of cubism where abstraction and primitivism were celebrated in equal measure. On the one hand, the supposedly timeless formalist principles of pure shape and color, which served as the basis for abstraction, were a solvent to cultural differences. On the other, the rhetoric of primitivism advanced by several strands of the avant-garde (expressionism, surrealism, and later *l'art brut*) found inspiration in a category of cultural production (ethnographic objects, cave drawings, children's art) taken to represent nascent states of human development supposedly common to all individuals and societies.

Whereas the 'artifacts' of non-Western societies were a critical catalyst for this art of universal legibility, the subjects of colonial occupations, whose cultures produced these artifacts, were anything but partners in constructing this discourse. If anything, this art of universal legibility was predicated on their absence since the "other," under the rubric of modernism, had been spoken for. Although one might expect that anything bound up in the discourse of universality would hold the promise of inclusiveness, modernism remains a haunted affair with over- and undertones of exclusion echoing into the present.

On what terms have black artists been excluded from or included in a modernist canon? The reception of work by black artists—whether they hail from the Harlem Renaissance or Chicago's South Side—has been and continues to be underscored by this question, which has gone from being a subtext to a central text. Its emergence coincides with both the rise of the civil rights movement and the advent of postmodernism. In essence, the terms of this question are negotiated along lines belonging at one and the same time to the emergence of a black subject with a new found social, cultural, and political consciousness and a postmodern critique of subjectivity. Together, these form the rock and hard place from which William Pope.L forged an artistic practice that has nothing yet so much to do with race.

It is best to say that Pope.L's work has to do with figuration in an attempt to understand the self, a crucial part of which, for better or worse, is the concept of race. For over fifteen years, the artist has proclaimed to be "The Friendliest Black Artist in America," and has worked in all media, (performance, video, painting, sculpture, drawing, assemblage, installation). Despite what this title implies, Pope.L's work does anything but address audiences on comfortable or comforting terms. A quizzical mixture of anger, abjection, humor, and urgency, the work is by turns polemical and poetic, configured across a spectrum ranging from a performance-based mode of figuration to a remote (and therefore highly conspicuous) species of formalism.

Titled after a 1974 short story by the celebrated science fiction writer Gene Wolfe, Pope.L's *Forlesen* will feature new work—a 10-foot-high wooden sculpture called *Du Bois Machine*, a set of drawings, and a video work whose abstract imagery is derived from bargain bin VHS porn releases—set within an elaborate architectural configuration of the artist's design. Pope.L was intrigued by the structure of Wolfe's story, which resembles a parable whose message is encoded symbolically and is therefore wholly open to interpretation. Rather than being plot-driven, *Forlesen* is a string of bizarre episodes adding up to story only insofar as the reader has the desire to construct an overarching meaning from its chain of events involving an archetypal 1950s company man. Instead of a day in the life, it is a life (literally birth to death) as told in a day. Pope.L wanted to create an installation similar in spirit, one where the relationship between constituent parts, and any ultimate significance, is continually in question. In that regard, he likens this installation to a puzzle in which meaning is made around and between pieces. The exhibition's title, for example, recalls the German phrase *für lessen*, which translates as "for reading." Pope.L's new drawings consist of enlarging spaces between typeset lines of text. Together, exhibition title and text-based drawings form a "hinge," to use one of Pope.L's metaphors, for a relationship between the works on view.

Pope.L (b. 1955) received his MFA in Concept Art from the Mason Gross School of the Arts

at Rutgers University in 1982. By that time, conceptual art and post-minimalism had clearly secured a place in graduate visual arts curricula, ushering in video, performance, sound, new media, intermedia, and interdisciplinary practices. There is no mistaking Pope.L as anything other than the child of a robust pluralism, one that took root on what many considered painting's still-warm grave. Modernist painting's historical closure, however, ended on a high note of abstraction with the wholesale abandonment of figuration. The absence of the figure from the field of painting was inversely proportional to the radical presence of the subject in the fields of performance and video.

For black artists engaged with performance, this presence marked the appearance of a black subject with a sense of identity secured through black nationalism and an attendant sense of cultural self-determination. "Say it loud. I'm black and I'm proud!" But under postmodern auspices, the assertion of identity was to be met with a countervailing critique whose immediate goal was twofold: first, the deconstruction of stereotypes both old and new, which involved critiquing representations of blacks; and second, to resist the collapsing of history into biology or culture into nature, a collapse synonymous with constructing essentialist notions of self. For black artists already stricken with a Du Boisian double consciousness ("the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others"), the simultaneous assertion and critique of identity amounted to a double consciousness squared. If Pope.L's work is any indication, this space is far less rational than it sounds, one comprised of requisite negotiations and negation, reprisals and reappraisals, cancellations and collapse.

Pope.L took up performance as an undergraduate. Part of the reason was simple: "I wanted to extend my practice into arenas where I would have more contact with people." Dating between 1978 and 1980, his earliest performances took place on New York City streets. These include the now iconic *Crawl* works, for which the artist drags himself belly-down up the Bowery and across the city, and *Thunderbird Immolation*, in which Pope.L, after dousing himself with a pint of Thunderbird wine, sits in lotus position on a yellow blanket surrounded by a circle of stick matches. The latter act would have looked to passersby like a protest modeled on that of Thich Quang Duc, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who, in 1963, set himself aflame in protest of religious persecution at the hands of the U.S.-backed Diem regime. But the Vietnam War having come to a close, what and on whose behalf was Pope.L protesting? A show of solidarity with winos perhaps? In any case, *Thunderbird Immolation* exemplifies Pope.L's logic, which relates less to reason and much more to the riddle, making it a sensibility perfectly suited to take up that most challenging of topics: race.

According to Pope.L, "Race is a puzzle. And this puzzle is dependent upon a figuration that cannot be 'seen' but only responded to and instrumentalized against for it is felt more than understood." Indeed, psychologically speaking, race is a colored affair. But insofar as race may be reduced to a visual phenomenon, the body signifies through its mere appearance. It is always already spoken for, which should sound familiar insofar as "being spoken for" is one of modernism's key refrains. But the notes of exclusion sounded by Pope.L are an interpolation of a modernist formal logic, which in terms of painting (the modernist medium par excellence according to Clement Greenberg) did not simply exclude black figures from the picture, but all figures. By Pope.L's logic, the body does not merely speak, it speaks formally such that you have: Black People, White People, Red People, Yellow People, Blue People, Green People, Purple People, and Orange People. It does not matter that some are non-sensical racial designations, all have been eliminated from the picture. But since people have been eliminated from the picture, we could just as soon be speaking of colors in a strictly formal sense, which is to say colors without meaning, or conversely colors with wholly arbitrary meaning.

This reasoning is the basis for the *Skin Set Drawings*, which beginning in 2001 and continuing into the present now number over a thousand. The drawings are exclusively language-based. Since the body operates formally, Pope.L literally reduces it to a piece of declarative speech. The subject of the sentence (Orange People, Green People, Black People etc.) determines the color in which the sentence

(always rendered in capitals) is executed. The sentences are rational in that they are sentences, but irrational in their content. To quote a few: WHITE PEOPLE ARE A DESALINATION PLANT IN PUERTO RICO

ORANGE PEOPLE ARE MY BALLS IN SUMMER
RED PEOPLE ARE A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

The *Skin Set Drawings* propose that the modernist construct of universality is a logic of exclusion applying to everyone, i.e. it is an empty set. Race becomes an abstraction that, reified from the body, is subject to absurdity, which in turn exposes an absurdity already inherent to the social construction of race from its outset. Even so, every once in a while, there will appear a statement whose truth may beg questioning:

BLACK PEOPLE ARE CROPPED
YELLOW PEOPLE ARE STERILE

But whatever truths we think there are in such statements can only correlate to stereotypes we carry in our heads, which is where race resides before its application to the body where it becomes inseparable from the particulars of class, gender, history, and the other coordinates by which we map biography.

Based on that list of particulars, clearly, by the time Pope.L finished graduate school, all that minimalism disavowed had re-emerged. Yet performance, because of its literal nature, was at the same time regarded as heir to minimalism's transparency and rigor, with the body reformulated as a site irreducible to a singular essentialist attribute. The raced body could only be submitted to dialectics taking into account the aggregate strands of an "I."

"The black body is a lack worth having." This is not a *Skin Set Drawing*, but a quote from Pope.L in which he describes the social position of black men as they "attempt to preserve and promote [their bodies'] presence at the cost of [their bodies'] lack." According to the artist, the measure of masculinity is presence. Regardless of how much presence the black male body assumes, it will "still be marked as lack." An attempt to increase presence only exposes lack all the more, manifesting itself in innumerable statistics on "violence, drugs, alcohol, and crime." Pope.L goes on:

As heir to this legacy, I would be remiss and arrogant to dismiss the shameful aspects and celebrate only the so-called good. It was the two in the tango that made these men. If I celebrate poetry and carpentry, I must also celebrate rape and alcohol. If I denigrate domestic violence, I must denigrate the ethos of hard work and Christian character.

The dialectic between presence and lack, celebration and denigration explains Pope.L's predilection for the abject in his performances, drawings, and installations where food in varying states of decay is a staple of his work. *Forlesen* features a short wall roughly forty-feet in length whose surface consists of a mixture of joint compound and ketchup, the latter having just enough acid and oils to disrupt the former's ability to dry smoothly and seamlessly. As it relates to lack, curator Mark Bassire, in conversation with the artist, noted, Pope.L "considers the condiments as adhesives that make up the sandwich, a collage where you can resolve scarcity with a little imagination." No stranger to poverty, Pope.L uses the condiments as a biographical signifier of class.

In *Forlesen*, however, the signifier, which is the substance of ketchup removed from its source in a labeled container, has become an abstraction void of any socio-biographical reference. The ketchup and joint compound, both "adhesives," cancel each other out to become a crackling wall of brownish pink stuff. Pope.L has instead chosen to "hinge" the exhibition's biographical content around a photograph of his son taken from behind, a reproduction of which is featured on the other side of this poster.

Pope.L's title as "The Friendliest Black Artist in America" may very well be up for grabs. The competition coming from "social practice" and "post-black" quarters is thick. This includes those artists earnestly playing a trade in "blackness" such that the irony surrounding Pope.L's title could be called into question, irony being a by-product of resisting an essentialist position. But even if forced to cede his copyrighted claim, this author for one hopes that he would stay friendly just as he has chosen to stay black.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION
Sunday, April 28, 4:00pm to 7:00pm
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 to 6:00pm in Kent Hall Room 107.

POETRY READING
Ariana Reines
Thursday, May 30, 6:00pm

Reines' books of poetry include *The Cow* (2006), which won the Alberta Prize from Fence Books; *Coeur de Lion* (2007); and *Mercury* (2011). Her poems have been anthologized in *Against Expression* (2011) and *Gurlesque* (2010). Known for her interest in bodily experience, the occult, new media, and the possibilities of the long or book-length form, Reines has been described as "one of the crucial voices of her generation" by Michael Silverblatt on NPR's *Bookworm*. At once personal, Romantic, slippery, and extreme, Reines's poetry investigates and overturns lyric conventions. Of her own work, she admitted in an interview with HTML Giant: "My best writing seems to have to be forced from me by some other force but that force has to be one whose power I agree to serve."

Reines's first play *Telephone* (2009) was performed at the Cherry Lane Theater and received two Obie Awards. A re-imagining of its second act was featured as part of the Guggenheim's Works-in-Process series in 2009, and the script was published in *Play: A Journal of Plays* in 2010. Reines's translations include a version of Baudelaire's *My Heart Laid Bare* (2009); Jean-Luc Hennig's *The Little Black Book of Grisélidis Real: Days and Nights of an Anarchist Whore* (2009); and Tiquin's *Preliminary Materials Toward a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2012).

Reines has taught at Columbia University and the European Graduate School, and was the Roberta C. Holloway Lecturer in Poetry at the University of California-Berkeley in 2009, the youngest poet to ever hold that position. She has traveled to Haiti multiple times as part of the on-going relief efforts there.

This reading is presented in cooperation with the Poet Present Reading and Lecture Series at The University of Chicago. The reading will be at Midway 108, 929 E. 60th St. FREE

CONCERT
Jason Lescalleet
Saturday, June 8, 8:00pm

Jason Lescalleet makes his music using a collection of vintage reel-to-reel tape recorders and simple electronics, running loops of crumpled tape between machines. He blends layers of found sound, amplified silences, and artifacts of everyday noise, all transformed through various microphones and speakers. In his much anticipated return to Chicago, he'll play with the resonance of Bond Chapel's neo-Gothic space.

Jason Lescalleet explores a sound world that occupies a space between noise, contemporary composition, and minimal electronics. Using decidedly primitive tactics and equipment, his work focuses on microscopic audio detail set awash in exaggerated and exploited site-specific acoustics. He has collaborated with Graham Lambkin, Aaron Dilloway, Phil Niblock, Joe Colley, John Hudak, Greg Kelley, Rafael Toral, Thomas Ankersmit, Ron Lessard (as Due Process), and nmperign. He has released recordings on such labels as Erstwhile, RRR, Intransitive Recordings, Kye, Celebrate Psi-Phenomenon, Hanson Records, Chondritic Sound and his own label, Glistening Examples.

The concert is presented in partnership with Lampo. Jason Lescalleet will perform at Bond Chapel, 1050 E. 59th Street. FREE

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William Pope.L: Forlesen, is generously funded by the Harper Court Arts Council and the Chicago Arts Council.

Ongoing support for programs at The Renaissance Society is provided by Alphawood Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; a municipal agency; Christie's; the Efromson Family Fund; The Golden Pearl Foundation; John R. Halligan Charitable Fund; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; Robert Lehman Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; Chauncey and Marion D. McCormick Family Foundation; Nuveen Investments; the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; and our membership.

Jason Lescalleet's concert is generously sponsored by Leslie Bodenstein and Jason Pickleman.

KILLIAN & ELLIS LLP, Linda Warren and Jeffrey C. Hammes is the lead corporate sponsor of the 2012-13 Exhibition Season

[that side]
Sun, 2013, 5 x 7 inches
[this side]
Sketch for *Forlesen* installation, 2013, 6 x 8 inches
Essay by Hanna Waller, Layout by the JNE Graphic Design, Chicago.

