

Griffith, Phillip, "Pope.L Will Boone," *TheBrooklynRail.com*, March 4, 2016

BROOKLYN RAIL

POPE.L WILL BOONE

by Phillip Griffith

An imaginary fence runs between the new work of William Pope.L and Will Boone on view at Andrea Rosen Gallery. It fences in and fences out, work and viewer. In so doing, it connects the work of these two artists between whom, the gallery's press release acknowledges, differences otherwise predominate. The idea of the fence, perceived here and there in form, and cropping up in images in a booklet published with the exhibit, connects material and content, revealing unexpected affinities.

This fence erupts into material form at crucial moments: Pope.L's free-standing, hollow sculpture of cut-out words, *Cone in a Forest and Cone for My Sister (Private Language Problem)* (2015), has the tensile self-possession of chain link; Boone's larger-than-life paintings of metal gates, each *Untitled*, tease with the possibility of an opening in the fence. The fence also evokes another possible point of connection between the artists. For Pope.L, the chain link fence runs through Newark, New Jersey, his hometown. For Boone, a New York transplant from Texas, it might be a metal fence in Brooklyn, with Texan accents. Both bodies of work, then, deal—however elliptically—with origins.

Boone deals with origins in several makeshift shrines, cobbled together out of odd pieces of plywood, Plexiglas, and wire. The structures are titled *Born to Sleep in the Sun I, II, and III*; one is crowned by a small doghouse (although the similarity in title suggests they might all be doghouses.) The interior of *Born II*, which stands in the gallery lobby, is plastered with stills and head shots of the actor Charles Bronson, known for his roles in Westerns, crime thrillers, and war flicks. Broken pieces of a novelty mirror from the metal band Slayer form a reflective mosaic in the interior of *Born I*. Bronson, Slayer, and the doghouse each evoke male adolescence in America, but the work leaves the mystery of the shrines just beyond the reach of clear explanation or narrative.

Pope.L's work evokes Newark and his own origins not just for the imaginary scene of a chain-link fence but for the concatenation of words, race, and personal history in his works. Pope.L's Cone sculpture of wooden hot-glued letters, mentioned above, is, after all, dedicated to his sister. He has truck with the family, but this is an intra-generational affair, a question of a "private language" shared by siblings, as his sculpture's title tells us, and not an inter-generational drama à la Oedipus.

Expanding the resonance of Newark-as-place to the social sphere, Pope.L references the poet Amiri Baraka, a founder of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, and a fellow son of Newark. (Baraka's son, Ras, currently serves as mayor.) The booklet published by the Gallery to accompany the exhibit includes two of Baraka's essays, including the 1963 "Expressive Language."

Baraka's essay, which he published as LeRoi Jones before changing his name in the late '60s, emphasizes that language only ever operates in a specific moment and time. As he writes, "[Language's] uses, however, are specific, as are all uses [...] of ideas, inventions, products of nature. And specificity, as a right and passion of human life, breeds what it breeds as a result of context." Pope.L's works explore this stance, putting pressure on language at the points where context and specificity yield the dangerous or the absurd, or the personal—until the letters (literally, figuratively) pop out of context.

Pope.L's further contributions to the booklet, including two of his own poetic texts, and collages, hold clues to much of the subtext in the works on view. Images of Pink Pearl erasers reference a pink sculpture entitled *Eraser (prologue before luke)* (2015) that rests on the main floor of the gallery beside its pedestal. And the word "erasure" notates a mournful image of Sandra Bland in the booklet, her mouth blotted out with black ink. If Pope.L is interested in the origins and contexts of language, he is equally invested in the ways that specific, contextual uses of language can oppress and cause harm. The gigantic Eraser has fallen off its makeshift wooden pedestal as if daunted, though not necessarily defeated, by the task of erasing Bland's erasure.

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Will Boone, *Born to Sleep in the Sun II*, 2015. Acrylic, magazine clippings, photos, bar top resin on wood, 69 × 36 3/4 × 33 1/2 inches. © Will Boone.



Will Boone, *Untitled*, 2015. Enamel, acrylic on canvas, 130 × 96 inches. © Will Boone. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery. Photo: Pierre Le Hors.

A small painting by Pope.L in the gallery lobby, paired with Boone's shrine to Bronson, reads, in black charcoal on a white gridded canvas ground, "*White cop whiter donut.*" The description of the cop's race has been marked out with a swath of orange-tinted beige paint. The phrase recurs later in the exhibit, in the last gallery, but this time with all the words obscured, and with a smear of bold, red-purple Flashe mixed into the paint. These paintings belong to the world of Pope.L's "*Skin Set*" works (2001 – 2005), in which he explores the intersection of race and color in language. Some of those older drawings, not on view, offer the slogans, "White people are the rind," and "Green people are hope without reason," or "Black people are the window and the breaking of the window."

In this exhibit, a series of three wall sculptures with cut out words remix this kind of language into long syntactically ambiguous lists, for example, "GOLD PEOPLE DANCE CONTEST 1957 GOLD PEOPLE HANG THEIR CHILDREN FROM THEIR SERVANTS." The three works hang on the walls in various stages of completion. Pope.L has cut the outlines of the words in *Latter* (2015), but the words remain as a solid surface in their frame. *Lace* (2015) is missing most of its letters, but not all; the centers of some of the missing Os have fallen down and are resting on the lip made by the excised shapes. *List* (2015), the most self-referential of the works in terms of title, has turned its back to the room, defiantly revealing the plywood trusses of the back of the frame. The alliteration of these titles, as well as their consonance and assonance, List, Lace, Latter, makes a poem of their own, evoking the sounds of "lattice," and so another kind of fence. Across from them, the Cone sculpture sits in two pieces in a corner of the room, collecting letters.

In a hallway space leading to the back of the gallery, a raucous diptych by Pope.L, also a language-based work, hangs alone. The two canvases are crooked on the wall, touching top corners, and a desultory strip of blue painter's tape dangles from the far left corner of one of them. Their surfaces, though, are alive with color, and language, and expressivity. Yet, the two paintings are content to commune with each other, ignoring onlookers. The title takes on a redemptive tone from the ability of these paintings to be and to speak alone together, even in the menace of its content: Gold people are birds breaking their beaks on the ice.

Like Pope.L's diptych or cut out works, Boone's untitled canvas surfaces are self-conscious. They have been stretched, but not enough to hide soft creases in their surfaces. The uneven application of the colored paint on a black background gives the paintings the feel of a game of perception—as if we were to focus on the image of the gate long enough, we might dissolve the image entirely. But, then the gate would be open, and these gates each seem decidedly closed. The canvases are frontal barriers, larger than human size, if not quite monumental. Like a security fence we can see through, but can't manage to hop.