

Carl Pope Jr.'s Poetics of Blackness: The Bad Air Smelled of Roses

By James Wehn

Carl Pope Jr. describes *The Bad Air Smelled of Roses* as a continuous writing exercise, a graphic essay, mapping the “ubiquitous presence and function of Blackness in society and Nature.”¹ Begun in 2004, the work presently consists of 108 letterpress posters, each printed with a text selected by the artist in reply to the question, “What do I think of when I think of Blackness?”² The answers spring from many sources, some predictable (Black literature, jazz and rap, Malcolm X), others less so (Descartes, Freud, *Casa-blanca*, a 1970s TV commercial for bubble bath).

Although the project draws deeply on African-American culture and a tradition of civil rights activism, the Blackness Pope cites is not, he explains, “only a hue associated with Africa, its population, and the African Diaspora,” but also “a narrative thread woven by those positioned outside the ‘natural order’ of things.”³ It is an alternative way of comprehending the world, an epistemological space of otherness encompassing what is commonly unseen, unknown, forgotten, repressed or rejected.⁴

Pope’s use of letterpress broadsides lends the visual language of printed adverts, handbills and picket signs to Pope’s found and often conflicting messages about Blackness. Unframed and stapled en masse to the gallery wall (the artist’s preferred installation method), the posters oscillate between fine art and public notices. As in concrete poetry, juxtaposed fonts and colors enliven the imagery and cadences of the texts. There are lyrical and melodic passages—as in the poster *Midnight Chords Darkly Swirl Midst Daylit Melody, Art. Improvised, Jazz*—while rhythmic patter inspired by Gil Scott Heron’s song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” and subtle rhymes by soul-jazz poet Wanda Robinson evoke poesy.

Pope agrees that the project is poetic but does not consider it a poem per se.⁵ “The poetics,” he explains, are

byproducts of the referential, intertextual nature in the subject of Blackness,

*which is almost always a figurative, symbolic, imaginative endeavor with an infinite number of correspondences . . . So the poetics of the text in this work result from seeing and mapping Blackness in action, in the play of its reflections within reflections as Blackness acts upon Nature and human culture, and through the reflective crystalline structures of the mind*⁶

“Intertextual” was defined by Julia Kristeva as “the passage from one sign system to another”—connecting works in order to transpose their meaning.⁷ Pope’s title *The Bad Air Smelled of Roses* alludes simultaneously to passages by novelists Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed.⁸ In the epilogue to *Invisible Man*, Ellison uses the “bad air” produced by Louis Armstrong’s good music as a metaphor for the inescapable chaos of living that, despite all attempts to tame it, succeeds in exciting human ingenuity:

*With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, “Open the window and let the foul air out,” while the other says, “It was good green corn before the harvest.” Of course Louis was kidding, he wouldn’t have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air’s horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and his diversity, and I’ll be up and around with mine.*⁹

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed contrasts “bad air” with the sweet smell of Jes Grew, a ragtime jazz movement that infected the nation like a “psychic epidemic”¹⁰:

*Other plagues were accompanied by bad air (malaria). Jes Grew victims said that the air was as clear as they had ever seen it and that there was the aroma of roses and perfumes, which had never before enticed the nostrils.*¹¹

Intertextuality does more than collect references, however; it re-enunciates original ideas in a different linguistic form, as when Pope transposes

his sources into letterpress broadsides.¹² Take the trio of posters that quote from “Work It” by hip-hop artist Missy Elliott. In *It’s Worth It Let Me Work It!*, the title is printed in bold red letters over gray ones that whisper, “SOUND MADE EVERYTHING POSSIBLE IN OUR DAYDREAM.” The underlying text of *I Put That Thang Down* is less legible, and viewers who decode the upside-down words find themselves interrogated: “IS IT TOO MUCH 4U2 MANAGE MISSY?” The third poster poses a still greater challenge, but it leads with a clue—FLIP IT AND REVERSE IT!—enabling the viewer to decipher the rapper’s chant.

Language in Pope’s hands is graphic, and it makes little difference whether we see his writing project as an essay, a map or poetry. His subject—Blackness—by nature will not be categorized. It is, as Gean Moreno observed, “exact in its inexactitude, in the multiplicity that it alludes to, in the definitions it refuses to deliver.”¹³ Tracing and embracing its poetics, Pope may well lead us to an EPIPHANY. ■

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Opposite Page: Carl Pope, Jr, selections from *The Bad Air Smelled of Roses*, (2004–), letterpress posters, various dimensions. Cleveland Museum of Art; Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Whitehill Art Purchase Endowment Fund and gift of David Lusenhop in honor of the artist 2018.33.

A Lie is Only a Lie and *People Will Believe Anything* designed and printed for Carl Pope by Hatch Show Print.



Notes:

1. Carl Pope, “Unpacking and Repacking Blackness and ‘The Bad Air Smelled of Roses,’” in *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter* by Nicholas Mirzoeff (Miami: [NAME] Publications, 2018), 215. An earlier version of this essay appears in *Drama Queer: Exhibition Catalogue (Vancouver: Pride in Art Society, 2017)*.
2. Jose Roca and Carl Pope, “Interview: Carl

3. Pope, “Unpacking,” 213.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Carl Pope, e-mail to author, 6 Jul 2018.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, tr. Margaret Walker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 59.

8. Pope, “Unpacking,” 218.
9. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 571–572.
10. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 5.
11. *Ibid.*, 6.
12. Kristeva, 59–60.
13. Gean Moreno, “Taking Down Minutes: On Carl Pope’s *The Bad Air Smelled of Roses*,” *Art Papers* 33, no 3 (May/June 2009): 18.