

Hiroshi Jager, David. "Performance Artist EJ Hill, in a Spellbinding and Eerie Feat of Endurance, Melds Prayer With Contemporary Art." *The New York Sun* (August 21, 2025) [ill.] [online]



Performance Artist EJ Hill, in a Spellbinding and Eerie Feat of Endurance, Melds Prayer With Contemporary Art

The piece requires him to keep perfectly still for eight hours a day while kneeling on a prayer bench, with no allowance for breaks of any kind.



Artist EJ Hill in 'Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout.' David Hiroshi Jager

EJ Hill: 'Low-Slung Promises On the Tongues of the Devout'

52 Walker Gallery, 52 Walker St., New York, New York

Through September 13

The New York art world is no stranger to extreme acts of endurance. In 1972, Vito Acconci hid under a wooden ramp at the Sonnabend gallery for three straight days, rolling about and vocalizing his darkest fantasies. In 1974, Joseph Beuys spent three days with a coyote in a gallery's display window.

Tehching Hsieh in 1978 spent the entire year locked in a simulated prison cell in complete isolation. Most recently, Marina Abramovich sat still in a chair for eight hours a day, seven days a week over a period of three months, inviting viewers at the Museum of Modern Art to sit across from her and maintain eye contact. She did so with 15,000 visitors.

Now a much quieter performance is under way at 52 Walker, a branch of the David Zwirner gallery at Chelsea. A young performance artist from the West Coast, EJ Hill, is now performing “Low-Slung Promises On The Tongues of the Devout,” an endurance piece that requires him to remain perfectly still for eight hours a day while kneeling on a prayer bench, with no allowance for breaks of any kind. That is eight straight hours during which he does not go to the bathroom or eat or drink anything. He retreats to living quarters every evening and returns every morning.

Happening across Mr. Hill’s remarkable performance, my first thought is that he must be a statue. So perfect and unmoving is his meditative trance I suspect he might be a cheeky and hyperreal creation by Maurizio Catelan. A few moments later, however, there is the detection of the slightest movement, though it is barely enough to remove doubt. A minute later, having gone around to the back of the curtained enclosure to further scrutinize him, I can see him sway, ever so slightly, accompanied by the faintest breathing. The effect is spellbinding and eerie.

Mr. Hill is known for pieces that test physical and mental endurance — he once jumped rope to the point of collapse, re-enacting a difficult time in early adolescence. In this exercise, however, he is unshakeable. Even with my exclamation of surprise, whispered but audible nonetheless, I cause no ripple across his features. He is immersed in a state as mysterious as it is serene. As his gallery text attests: “In this particular moment, when many are experiencing times of unrest and strife, Hill proffers his performance as an act of healing.”

It is not often that one finds artists praying in a contemporary art gallery. With the rich red velvet of the curtains framing him, the padded prayer kneelers before him, and paintings that are composed from leather and vinyl kneeler pads, the effect is markedly ecumenical. Not since Andres Serrano has a contemporary artist engaged so deeply in Catholic iconography, to completely opposite effect. In other parts of the gallery, Mr. Hill’s signature paintings brightly depict clouds and flowers, rendered in the translucent hues of stained-glass windows. He appears to have constructed a strange church of his own.

Mr. Hill, raised at Los Angeles, has long engaged in shinier aspects of contemporary culture, from pop soul divas to roller coasters. He does so, however, with a naïve positivity and optimism that often belies contemporary art's distinctly nihilistic character. The ecumenical trappings of his current show signals a further shift: Contemporary artists aren't known for their organized religion (despite the devout Catholicism of Andy Warhol). Nor are they known for willfully undergoing the agonies of the physical to reach the transcendent. You can only imagine Mr. Hill's poor knees.

Seen from a religious perspective, however, what Mr. Hill is doing is perennial. Intense acts of devotion involving pain and endurance appear in every religious culture. Witness the pilgrims of Guadalupe making their way to the Virgin's basilica on their knees, or the pain rituals in Phuket's Vegetarian festival. As for a spiritual goal, Mr. Hill merely states that he is meditating to examine his own endurance against the promises and trappings of his childhood religion. No further context is given. Even so, his performance is unusually brave.

It is also participatory. Though it is not actively encouraged, there is no rule against kneeling along with Mr. Hill, should you feel so inclined. One gallery goer went so far as to kneel directly next to him for a time, a shared moment of unusual spiritual communion. Mr. Hill will be there until September 13.

Zambreno, Kate. "EJ Hill's First Endurance Performance in 7 Years Brings Him to His Knees." *Cultured* (August 13, 2025) [ill.] [online]

CULTURED

THE CRITICS' TABLE ART CLOSE LOOKS

EJ Hill's First Endurance Performance in 7 Years Brings Him to His Knees

Writer and critic Kate Zambreno reflects on the history of performance art, the mortification of the flesh, the language of protest, and the selling of the ephemeral in EJ Hill's new commission at 52 Walker.

WORDS

Kate Zambreno

August 13, 2025



EJ Hill, *Yearning for an Absolute*, 2025, installed in "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout" at 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

EJ Hill

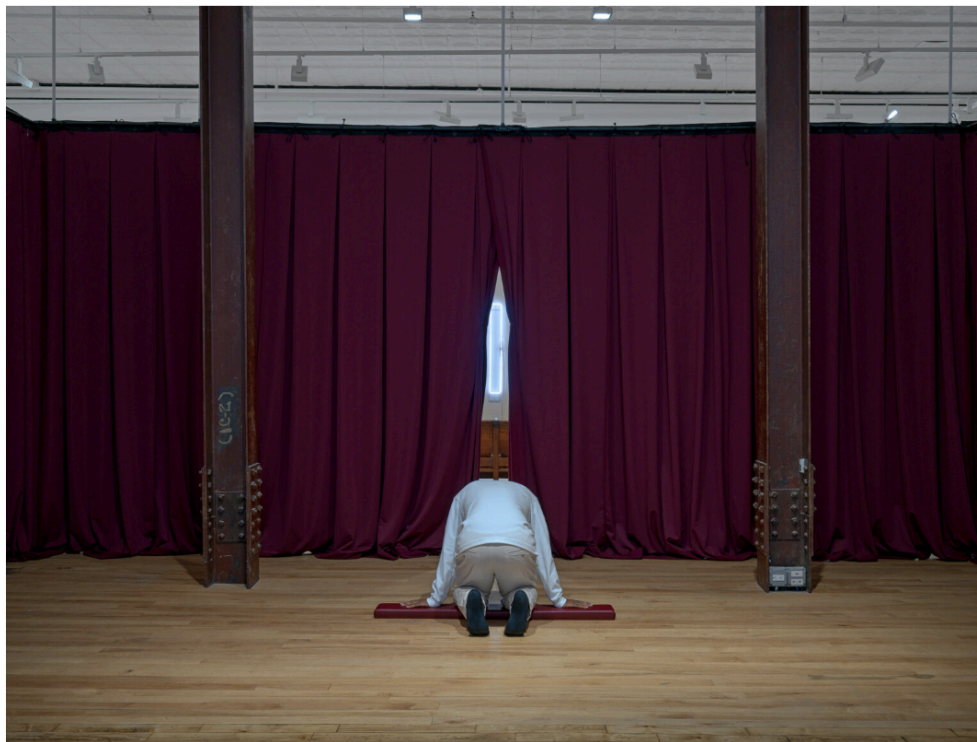
52 Walker | 52 Walker Street

Through September 13, 2025

Kneel. The eroticism of that one word command, given by the Hot Priest, after pulling back the curtain of the confessional. The Catholic church a hierarchy of mostly subs, some doms in starched dresses. Like here, a passage from Simone Weil's notebooks right out of *Fleabag*:

"He led me before the altar and said: 'Kneel.' I told him: 'I have not been baptized.' He said: 'Fall down on your knees before this place, with love, as before the place where truth exists.' I obeyed."

I remove my straw hat when entering the gallery to see EJ Hill's newest endurance project, his first in seven years, for which he kneels every day—all day—during the run of his show "Low-Slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout" at 52 Walker. The mise en scène works immediately: a red velvet curtain, the red leather kneelers, silence. Twelve years of Catholic school come back like muscle memory, the red marks on my knees—white when I press my fingers into the flesh. I wanted to be a nun, marry God, bride at nine.



EJ Hill, *Yearning for an Absolute*, 2025, installed in "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout" at 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

The 40-year-old Black queer artist draws here from bodily prostrations associated with saintly mortifications of the flesh, much like he did in his 2018 performance-installation *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria*, included in the Hammer Museum's "Made in LA" biennial, where he stood on a podium for the length of the show, nine hours a day for three months. This ritual, which referenced not only St. Simeon on his platform, but also athletes on the Olympic medal podium, followed a series of runs or "victory laps" around every school Hill attended, from his preschool in South Central Los Angeles to UCLA (where he earned an MFA), reclaiming space where—the artist has said—he did not feel always feel like he belonged.

Of course, beyond the devotional, kneeling connotes power—even brutality—and evokes protest, as well—allusions Hill layers onto this piece. Tibetan monks have kneeled and self-immolated in protest. Colin Kaepernick and others have "taken a knee" during the national anthem to reenact and resist the carceral restraint and killing of Black Americans, men especially, by the police. Walking around the Tribeca gallery, I don't kneel on one of the reclaimed red leather kneelers (listed for sale), above which the artist has written a note, dated the week earlier, speaking of a "desire for padding." (It continues, in part: "I used to scoff at 'thoughts and prayers' after disaster and catastrophe.") I walk quickly past the large, framed, striped monochromatic kneeler pad "paintings," marked with the artist's indentations; the Flavin-esque neon rectangle (perhaps a nod to the Minimalist's installation in the Santa Maria Annunciata Church in Milan); past the velvet enclosure, around back, to sit on a wooden pew and regard the artist as present.



Installation view of "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout" at 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

I sit in the enclosed space for a while and observe Hill, clad all in white, except for black socks, his toes pointed towards each other. The neon rectangle glows through the gap in the curtain, which is now in front of us both. At times, the artist shifts, moving his hands or his feet, a subtle swaying movement. A kneeling pose is a meditative, although strenuous, ritual (you can use a blanket under your knees in yoga, even a sub can ask for a pillow).

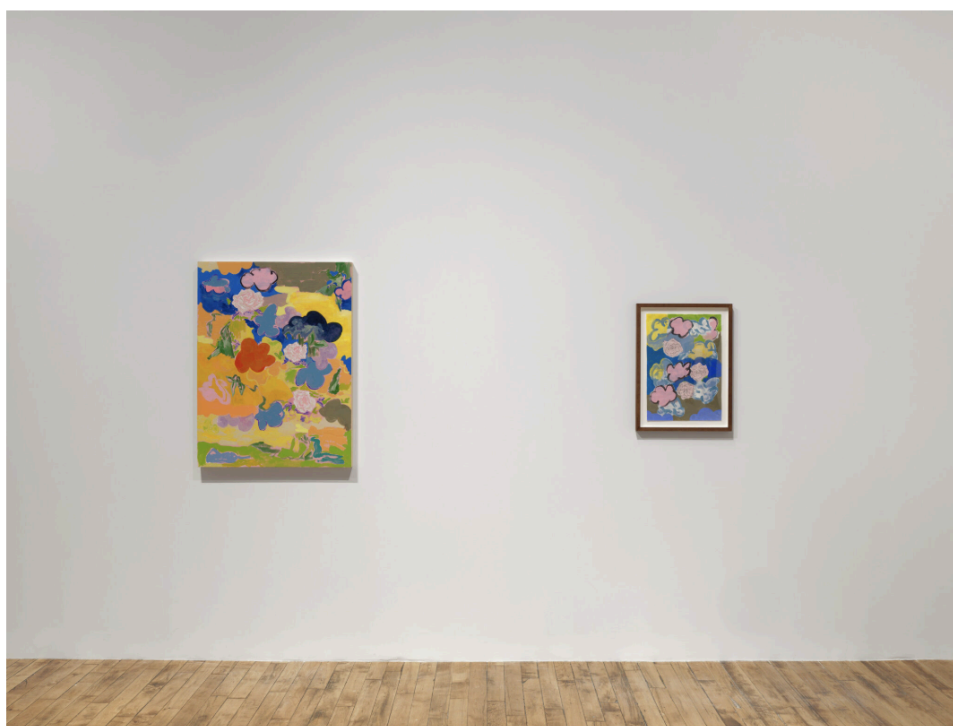
In the history of durational art, there's a distinction between more private works, such as Tehching Hsieh's punching of a clock in his studio once every hour for a year, from 1980-81, and pieces that necessarily involve an uncomfortable audience. I experience an intimacy in Hill's exhibition that evokes Yoko Ono's kneeling *Cut Piece*, 1964, as well as Marina Abramović's sitting and staring in *The Artist is Present*. While Abramović's performance at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010 was so stark and heavy, there's a lightness here—the artist offers some space to the viewer. Hill creates the sense of being together that's like being in church—at once with others and alone—as well as a sense of stretched-out time. The space is silent except for the sounds of gallery workers (I hear an errant ringtone when I walk in) and, more distantly, the clamor of the street. I wonder how aware he is of me.



Installation view of "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout" at 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

There has always been religiosity in endurance-art rituals. Linda Montano turned to performance after leaving the convent as a novitiate in the 1960s, her silent performances inside St. Patrick's Cathedral a precursor to Hill's kneeling. Walking out and around again, I peek through the curtain, and the artist is as still as a statue, eyes closed.

In a talk given in 2019, Hill traced a movement, from the more confrontational pieces of his art school days that reacted against the insularity of the art world and the alienation he felt (licking a wall during an open studio event until his tongue bled, creating a shaky line drawing reminiscent of Ana Mendieta's lowa-period *Body Tracks*, dating from the 1970s), to more recent practices that leave space for restorative justice within his sensitive and intense investigations. He recalled the total exhaustion and inertia that he felt during the murders of Black Americans by police in 2015 to constantly "speak on large systematic oppressions," while aware of the lethal threats to his own body, when outside, in public space. That year, he returned to painting bright, fluffy abstractions as a way of restoring calm and energy. A few of these acrylic works—on paper or panel—are on view in the show, their loose geometric patterns mimicking those of a stained-glass window (the charge of the pink in them echoing in the pink neon sky sculptures shown elsewhere).



Installation view of "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout" at 52 Walker. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

In 2016, he also created *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy*, first shown at the Studio Museum in Harlem, a neon-and-wood 40-foot-long rollercoaster sculpture, with a central platform upon which he lay for months, up to nine hours a day, without bathroom breaks or food. This was a ritual that came out of a desire “to reframe how the motionless, horizontal black body reads,” from being connected purely to death to other affects—joy and love, space and slowness. In that same 2019 talk, Hill lists as an influence Pope.L’s public performances for which the artist crawled, wearing a business suit or Superman costume, as a way to demonstrate his “lack of verticality, lack of position of power” as a Black man.

As I walked around Tribeca after visiting Hill’s show, I also thought of Pope.L, especially about the knee pain from his endurance pieces, from crawling the length of Broadway, and the stark contrast between the unhoused people on the street (who Pope.L was putting himself in the position of) and their gentrified gallery-district surroundings. I think of how Hill contributed a blank pink page to the 2022 Whitney Biennial catalogue, conceiving it as a space of beauty and resistance against the expected art-world grind, and am unsure what to think of the artworks on offer, given the ephemerality of the tradition that Hill is working within here. It’s difficult to know how to read the reclaimed pews listed for sale, as cynical or as a playful stunt, or as commentary. I don’t know why I found that especially conceptually awkward. I liked the flower and cloud pieces, the spirit and process of them, although they also felt somewhat out of place, feeling less contextualized than the neon and kneeling-pad works. But how else does one make money off performance art?

Haddad, Natalie. "For EJ Hill, Art Is an Act of Faith." *Hyperallergic* (August 5, 2025) [ill.] [online]

HYPERALLERGIC

For EJ Hill, Art Is an Act of Faith

Without irony, Hill draws on his Catholic upbringing in his current solo exhibition to cultivate a secular spirituality and a space for hope.



Natalie Haddad 18 hours ago



EJ Hill, "Yearning for an Absolute" (2025), installed in *EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout* at 52 Walker, New York (courtesy 52 Walker, New York)

There's something about seeing a neon sign in daylight: The usual associations with seedy nightlife or unbridled consumerism are swept away by an otherworldly glow of light upon light. It can feel almost religious in the right context. That glow illuminates parts of *Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout*, EJ Hill's solo exhibition at 52 Walker. Without irony, Hill draws on his Catholic upbringing to cultivate a secular spirituality and a space for healing and hope.



Installation view of EJ Hill: *Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout* at 52 Walker, New York (courtesy 52 Walker, New York)

Upon first glance, Hill's inspiration for the artworks appears to be less his childhood Catholicism than the agnostic faith of modern art: The first neon work on view is a tall, white rectangle flanked on each side by square "paintings" of multicolored vertical stripes that are actually composed of the kneelers' cushions with indentations from the artist's knees. A long wooden church pew faces the wall. All together, they invoke modernism's sacred or quasi-sacred spaces, from the Rothko Chapel to a James Turrell installation.

On its own, the idea of artworks made from ecclesiastical objects evoking modernism within a white-cube gallery feels a little too on the nose, at once enamored of its predecessors and self-evident. And several colorful paintings depicting clouds and flowers can come across as too cute in their naivete; Hill displayed similar works in 2022 at [OxyArts](#) in Los Angeles, where they were tasked with carrying perhaps too much of the show's weight. The difference here is his actual presence. It's understated — he can be glimpsed through a sliver in the crimson curtains, and he might not register at first if you're not already aware he's there. Viewers can enter the curtained area a few feet behind Hill, where a more elaborate neon work — a white Ionic column with a blue cloud attached — is installed on the wall.



Installation view of EJ Hill: *Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout* at 52 Walker (photo Natalie Haddad/Hyperallergic)

From there, Hill is seen from the back, kneeling in a prayer stance. He is unmistakably the show's emotional center, his quietude making everything else feel more profound. Yet this is, after all, a gallery, not a chapel, which doesn't lessen the gravity of his devotion as much as situate it in a lineage of performance art. Durational and other endurance performances are already charged with religious undercurrents — artists both give of themselves as the art and suffer for it. This scenario casts the artist somewhere between creator and symbol. Unlike a White artist like Chris Burden (think of his modern-day crucifixion, "[Trans-Fixed](#)," from 1974), Hill's performance as a Black artist is layered with the additional dynamic of the pressure to "[perform](#)" identity for the predominantly White gaze within the blue-chip space.

As part of a whole, the artworks gain meaning that's sometimes lost individually. In conversation with those physical objects, Hill's performance cuts through potential cynicism or preciousness and proffers a sense of solace — at least that was my takeaway. Durational performances don't require devotional themes to feel spiritual, but by interweaving them, Hill seems to be inviting anyone who enters the show to share in his gesture of faith. In other words, here, spirituality is not a pose, but an offering.



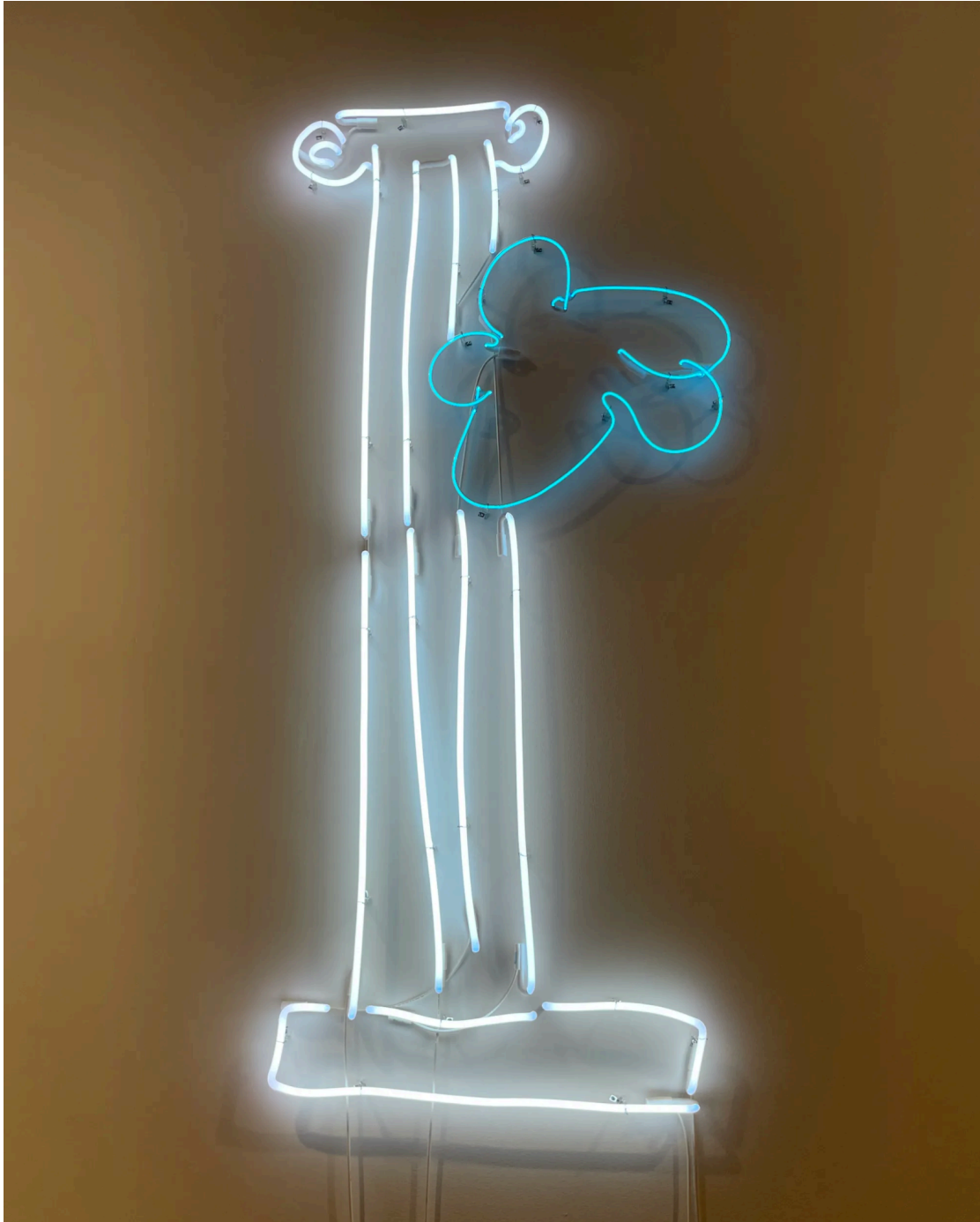
EJ Hill, (left) "Receivers" and (right) "And in This Corner" (both 2025) (photo Natalie Haddad/*Hyperallergic*)



Installation view of *EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout* at 52 Walker, New York
(courtesy 52 Walker, New York)



EJ Hill, "Vigil (for the anchors)" (2025) (photo Natalie Haddad/*Hyperallergic*)



EJ Hill, "Symbol for a Stylite" (2025) (photo Natalie Haddad/Hyperallergic)

EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout *continues at 52 Walker (52 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through September 13. The exhibition was curated by Ebony L. Haynes.*

Amin, Lakshmi Rivera. Haddad, Natalie. Schneider, Julia. Zhang, Lisa Yin. "New York City Shows We Love Right Now." *Hyperallergic* (August 5, 2025) [ill.] [online]

HYPERALLERGIC

New York City Shows We Love Right Now

From Moomins to Warhol to posters protesting nuclear war and prayer as healing, we're all about uplifting shows this week.



Peter Kennard, "No Nuclear Weapons" (1980) (photo Lisa Yin Zhang/*Hyperallergic*)

If we need anything from art at this dire time, it's faith and fun. The shows below encourage flights into the imagination or nurture hope for the future. Artist Tove Jansson and her Moomins creations are nothing if not beacons of warmth and inclusivity, while EJ Hill's installation and endurance performance transforms 52 Walker gallery into a space of healing. Likewise, an exhibition of historical media about atomic power at Poster House offers an unexpected message that protest can change the world for the better. And Andy Warhol's early fashion drawings — well, those are just a pleasure to see. While you're gallery hopping, make sure to visit [Carrie Yamaoka's](#) captivating solo exhibition *See-saw*, ending this weekend at Anonymous Gallery on the Lower East Side. —*Natalie Haddad, Reviews Editor*

EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout

52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, Tribeca, Manhattan

Through September 13



Installation view of *EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout* at 52 Walker (photo Natalie Haddad/*Hyperallergic*)

“In conversation with physical objects, Hill’s performance cuts through potential cynicism or preciousness and proffers a sense of solace” —*NH*

[Read the full review.](#)

Saltz, Jerry. "To Do: July 30–August 13." *New York Magazine* (July 28, 2025) [ill.] [online]

NEW YORK

AGENDA

To Do: July 30–August 13 Our biweekly guide on what to see, hear, watch, and read.

By The Editors

7:00 A.M.

SAVE COMMENT



Photo-Illustration: Vulture; Photos: Lionsgate, Apple TV+, Timothy Norris/Getty Images, Netflix

Art
18. See E.J. Hill

Almost like going to church.
52 Walker Street, through September 13.
Hill was born in 1985, but the mise-en-scène of his work lets us know that he is an old soul. Walk into the centerpiece, an enclosed velour curtain, and you'll find the artist on his knees, resting on a maroon kneeler with his head down. Reverence and endurance mingle. All around are his strictly minimalist stripe works. A sacred space is conjured that makes us get very quiet. —J.S.

Danilewitz, Joel. "Transcendent Light." *Family Style* (July 9, 2025) [ill.] [online]

FAMILY STYLE

ART

Transcendent Light

Devotion is an act of endurance for EJ Hill. As the artist enacts his first performance in seven years, he invokes agonizing rituals of both prayer and protest.

Words by Joel Danilewitz

July 9, 2025



EJ Hill, *Yearning for an Absolute*, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker, New York.

Dressed with an air of jocular athleticism, as if he is attending Wimbledon finals, EJ Hill is mentally preparing for the enervating journey he is about to embark on at 52 Walker. For the next three months, the painter, sculptor, and performer will enact his first endurance performance in seven years.

Inside, the back of the downtown Manhattan gallery has been transformed into an agnostic place of worship, complete with pews and dense curtains fit for a dorsal. The installation and surrounding works evoke religiosity while resisting blatant Christian signifiers. In each of the five works of his "Vigil" series, Hill has arranged eight kneelers vertically. Every set is an orchestrated readymade consisting of stripes of unique colors reminiscent of a flag, as in *Vigil (for the homeward)*, 2025, a composition that alternates white, green, and red. Of course, the kneelers on view resemble those found in churches—he worked with a company that specifically makes furniture for Christian genuflection. On some, one notes indentations of someone's knees, traces of prayer reified as a ghostly, ongoing act of worship.



Installation view of "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout." Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker, New York.

From now through mid-September, the artist plans to kneel continuously during the gallery's operating hours. This physically taxing dedication echoes his previous works: At UCLA Open Studios in 2011, he crawled around the exhibition space, licking the walls as his tongue bled. What remained were stuttering trails of red, yielding a brash, visceral record of his movements.

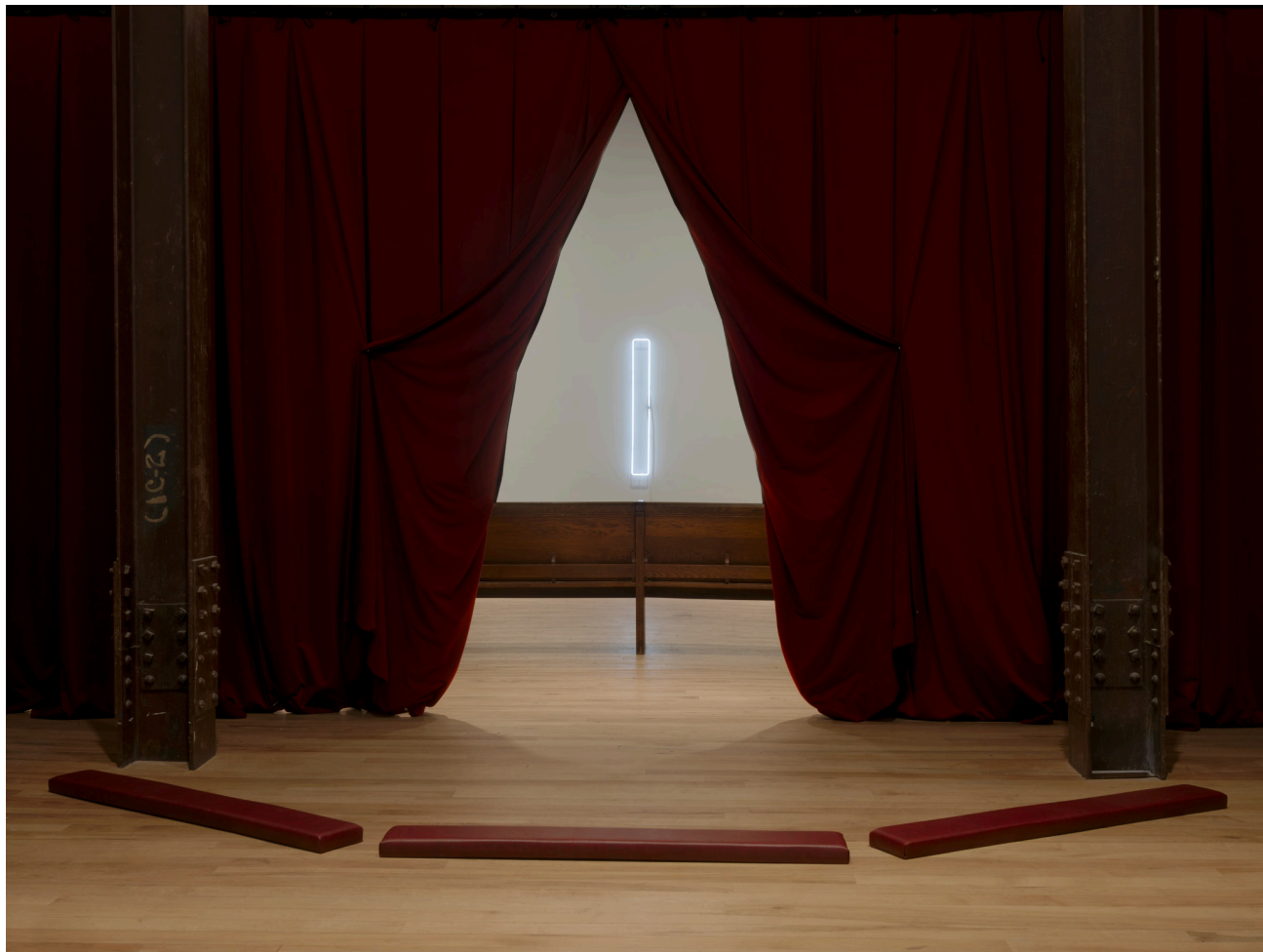
In a 2014 performance titled *The Fence Mechanisms* at Commonwealth and Council, the artist jumped over a rope tied to a chain-link fence for two hours until he collapsed. For *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy*, 2016, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, he spent every day for four months laying face-down at the base of a neon-rigged roller coaster sculpture. Then, as part of his most recent endurance test at the Hammer Museum's 2018 Made In LA biennial, Hill spent every day of the three-month long show standing on an athlete's podium in front of a neon sign with the question: "Where on earth, in which souls and under what conditions will we bloom brilliantly and violently?"



EJ Hill, *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria*, 2018. Photography by Brian Forrest. Image courtesy of the artist and the Hammer Museum.

Given how draining such performances are, it's no surprise that the artist had stepped away from these spectacularly exhausting demonstrations for some time. "A practice that incorporates a lot of strenuous, difficult, physical feats, that you can't really do every day—even the best athletes on the planet have off-season, you know, training when they're about to get back into it," he explains. "I feel like maybe my off-season has been years because I've needed it to be replenished for what I'm about to enter into." Now Hill has a new locus for his stoic disruptions: the site of devotion.

"Religion helps people make sense of death and loss and grief and community and love, and there's a lot of important, core lessons at the base of all religions," he reflects, now 40 years old. Despite not practicing since his Catholic upbringing, spirituality has become a pillar of strength as he's gotten older. "The more structured or institutionalized religions become, the message gets lost, but I think all of them at the core offer ways into love and care and support and a lot of other beautiful things," he continues. "But they have the capacity to become perverted based on somebody's quest for power." This critique of structural power and individual ambition is a throughline of the artist's work. In his mixed-media series "Lessons", 2019-2020, he emblazoned chalkboards with neon letters that bore enigmatic aphorisms like "Twice as good is too much." Now, at 52 Walker, Hill's inquiry is more introspective. He cites the ways in which the "light, energy, and presence" of holy spaces can alter peoples' "internal architectures", or inner emotions, without making them beholden to the oppressiveness of organized religion—and he puts it to the test.



Installation view of "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout." Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker, New York.

When I visit 52 Walker again the following week, the curtain is barely parted. Hill kneels upright, eyes closed, facing viewers. Silvery light emanates from the sculpture behind Hill, *Symbol for a Stylite*, 2025, giving him a faintly celestial glow. On the wall opposite the pews is a medium, vertical rectangle made of white neon, *Symbol for an Anchorite*, 2025, placed at eye level to avoid any hierarchical posturing. Around both corners are his paintings, energetic pastel abstractions with occasional clusters of faint roses. "I very rarely have chances to just play in art," Hill says regarding the paintings. Indeed, these works, like the lights, diffuse the show's greater solemnity.

Hill embraces the dichotomy of the sacrosanct and the profane—kneeling itself is a pious expression and, sometimes, a carnal one. But beyond disparate impulses, he seeks to bring us into his quietude. "This is, first and foremost, an action for me. And maybe an attempt at self-preservation or restoration," he states. "Hopefully by embodying this example, whoever comes to visit can also join in that peace and stillness."

"EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout" is on view through September 13, 2025, at 52 Walker, 52 Walker Street, New York, New York 10013.