

Molesworth, Helen. "EJ Hill." *Artforum* (December 2025) [ill.] [online]

# ARTFORUM

BEST SHOW 2025

## EJ HILL

52 Walker, New York

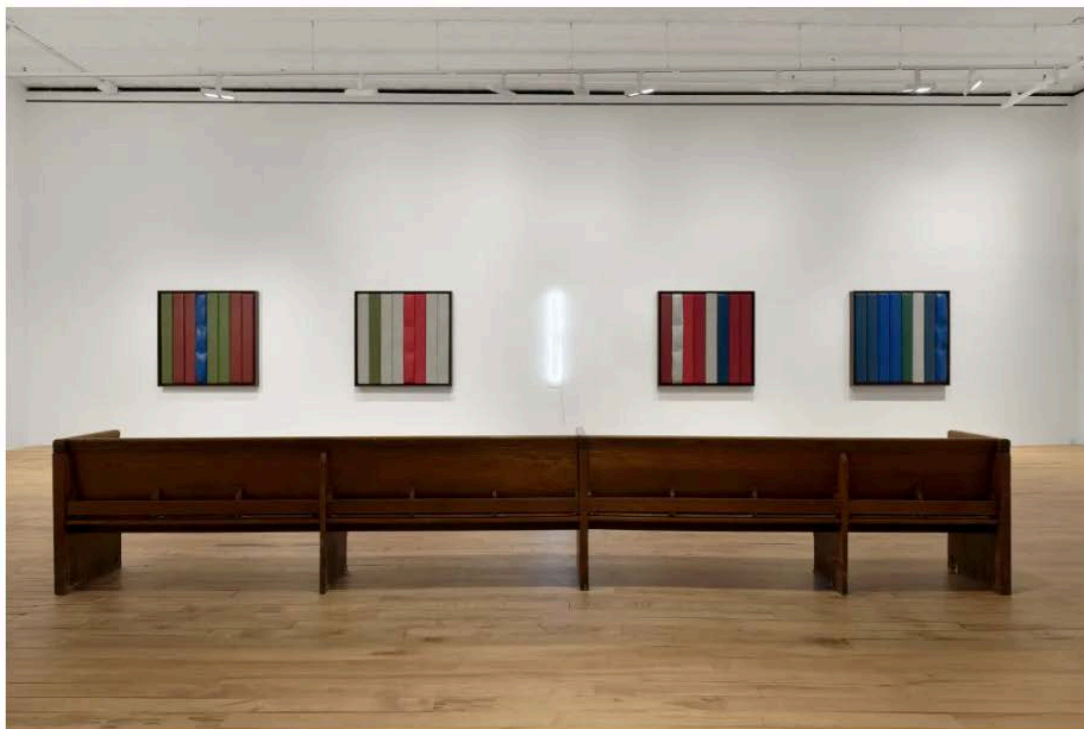
By Helen Molesworth ☞



EJ Hill, *Yearning for an Absolute*, 2025. Performance view, 52 Walker, New York, June 27, 2025.

**THIS SUMMER**, in downtown Manhattan, while the nefarious shenanigans of the world proceeded apace, EJ Hill silently engaged in an endurance performance at 52 Walker. For eight hours a day, five days a week, he knelt.

I knew there would be a performance when I arrived. What I didn't know was that the gallery walls would be lined with objects: paintings, drawings, neons. The immediate vibe was one of quietude. In front of one wall was a long wooden church pew; behind the pew was a "room" constructed out of pipe and drape. Burgundy fabric hung from ceiling to floor, and the curtains were gently pulled apart, forming a subtle opening. There was no sign of Hill, but context clues suggested he'd be in that enclosure.



View of “EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout,” 2025, 52 Walker, New York. From left: *Vigil (for those at the edge of surrender)*, 2025; *Vigil (for a sovereign self)*, 2025; *Symbol for an Anchorite*, 2025; *Vigil (for those whose burdens lie darkly)*, 2025; *Vigil (for the anchors)*, 2025.

The gallery has those beautiful old wooden floors that still manage to grace a few New York buildings. Oak planks burnished, bleached, and faded over decades. Creaking. Soft. The church pew had been positioned such that if you sat in it you faced the paintings, which meant your back would be to the performance. Before much had happened, it was already unclear where to look and just what kind of aesthetic experience was being offered.

I started to slowly walk around the perimeter of the gallery, respectfully looking at the modest, domestically scaled paintings, all of which were variations on a roller-coaster motif that included sentimental and conventional signs of joy: flowers, sunshine, a sunny palette that Hill’s been mining for a few years. In this show the palette shifted from the artist’s familiar Pepto-Bismol pink to slightly more somber shades, of saffron, eggplant, and rose; the colors had a touch of Bob Thompson about them, blocky flat shapes cohering into apparitions.





View of "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout," 2025, 52 Walker, New York. From left: *a rite of remembrance*, 2025; *Vigil (for the homeward)*, 2025.

I'd seen an endurance work by Hill at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2018. He stood on a plinth in a room, silent and stoic, for the entire time the museum was open to the public. He did not leave for bathroom or food breaks. The room was small and had a glass door that separated it from the other galleries. The walls were lined with photographs; I confess I do not remember them. I stood and watched Hill stand. He struck a middle-distance stare. His breathing was barely perceptible. As people entered and exited the gallery, many did not realize he was a human being—they thought he was a statue. I stood quietly, horrified by the garden-variety racism that structures our everyday lives: Here was a Black man, a brown person, a gay man, a queer human standing in a museum gallery, and even though he was on a plinth it appeared that he still fell below the threshold of visibility for many visitors. I seethed. I thought about labor, and the space in between some people's leisure and other people's work. My neat and tidy reading of the work made me feel superior. I knew what was up. I was a good person. I left after about five minutes.

“

**I was thinking about Walter Benjamin teaching us  
that there is no “culture” without barbarism.  
About how EJ Hill makes paintings of flowers and  
how when we turn toward the beautiful, we turn  
away from the ugly.**

That was six years ago. This time, I felt a quiver of anxious anticipation as I drew closer to the curtains: How was I to behave in the face of whatever Hill would be doing? When I arrived at the threshold I finally saw him, dressed in a long-sleeved white T-shirt and loose white cotton pants, kneeling on what was once the upholstered part of a church pew, a long rectangular form covered in burgundy (maybe leather or Naugahyde) that had been placed directly on the floor. He was completely bent over, his head a mere twelve inches from the floor, his hands held out in front of him in a loose gesture of prayer. I stood very still and took in how much he looked like a beggar, a pilgrim. My feet felt as if they had grown roots through the floor, down into the ground beneath the building. Just staring at him felt wrong; walking away from him felt wrong. I knew when I turned back to look at the paintings this energy would remain. I could not get over the beauty of his clasped hands.



View of "EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout," 2025, 52 Walker, New York. From left: *a rite of devotion*, 2025; *Receivers*, 2025; *And in This Corner*, 2025.

But I did turn away and continued walking, continued looking. As I did so, I made the judgments I am used to making: This painting is "better" than that one; the framed works made with eight strips of upholstery, each of which looked like the fragment of the pew Hill was kneeling on, reminded me "too much" of Theaster Gates. Turning the corner, I realized there was another opening into the space in which Hill was kneeling. As my heart rate ticked upward, I slowed my pace and admonished myself: "Get it together. You're here to be a witness." When I entered the enclosure, I was behind Hill, and his position had changed. He was upright—back straight, shoulders back, hands lightly grazing his outer thighs, with the full weight of his body on his two knees and shins. There was another church pew—long, beautiful, severe, unadorned. I slid in, immediately aware of my sit bones, bone on wood. The artist had provided choices: You could sit in this pew and stare at his back, or you could sit in the other pew with your back to him and stare at his paintings. What penance was being so rigorously staged? Was it for the sins of the ego's need for attention? The desire to make beautiful things? The sublimation of the ugly into the beautiful? Tears started to form in my eyes.



As I sat with my legs crossed so tightly that my hips ached, I found myself in a cascade of thoughts, feelings, ideas, and questions that came in quick and involuntary succession. It began with me thinking about aesthetics. I was a curator thinking about sight lines and formal decisions about placement. I was a critic making distinctions between individual works. I was an art historian placing Hill's work in a historical trajectory. I was thinking about Walter Benjamin teaching us that there is no "culture" without barbarism. About how EJ Hill makes paintings of flowers and how when we turn toward the beautiful, we turn away from the ugly. I was thinking about the long marriage of art and religion. About how making art is both a compulsion and a form of knowledge. I was thinking about how we get paid; about how we are always selling our time on the open market. I thought about Andrea Fraser's *Untitled*, 2003, in which she filmed herself having sex with a collector for money. My ass was starting to hurt. I had a deep childhood memory, of sitting outside the principal's office (the nurse's office?), next to a boy who wasn't in my class. He told me his mother made him kneel on rice when he was bad. I did not tell him that my father whipped me with a belt even when I wasn't bad. I thought about how much the rice must have hurt. I thought about how crazed his mother must have been. I wondered if she was a sadist. I wondered how it had all turned out for the boy. Was he able to find love? Was he able to recover? Was he able to forgive his mother, to understand her with grace?



EJ Hill, *Three Sisters and a Midnight Devotional*, 2025, acrylic on panel, 40 × 30".

Hill was wearing a pair of thick black socks. As he knelt, he moved his toes from being flat on the floor to being tucked underneath his feet. I realized he was wearing the socks to protect the delicate skin on the tops of his feet. I started to weep. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. EJ. It doesn't have to be this hard. I wanted to say it out loud: "EJ, it doesn't have to be this hard." I thought about the starving and maimed and murdered children of Gaza. I thought about how we are not allowed to talk about Palestine. Paralysis. I wanted to walk around and sit on the floor in front of him and beseech him to stop. I wanted to gather him in my arms and offer to bathe his aching shins and feet in an act of supplication. Why didn't I? Abu Ghraib. CECOT. At some point he bent over again; he moved at a glacial pace. I realized he was trying to alleviate the pressure on his legs with minute gestures. He began to cry. I felt like I couldn't breathe. As I started tapping the space underneath my clavicle to steady myself, he began to slowly, gingerly, rise back up. I watched the folds of his shirt move along his back as he steadied his breath and himself. He exhaled deeply. My nose was stuffed with snot. I thought about Diana Nyad swimming from Cuba to Key West, her eyes swollen shut from nearly fifty-three hours of exposure to sun and salt water, her trainer Bonnie Stoll feeding her peanut butter while she swam. I thought about my aunt, a cloistered nun whose monastery rituals involved perpetual adoration and novices lying prostrate on the floor in the shape of the crucifix. I thought about my best friend taking his own life because he couldn't figure out how to live without running afoul of his principles. I realized how much I hoped the energy of my body in the space might help Hill. I felt complicit in watching him do something I desperately wanted him to stop doing. Once more he folded over. Once more he rose. Each time, I experienced the profundity of the gap between oneself and others. Between me and EJ. There is no stopping someone from doing what they feel compelled to do. There is only groping around in the wilderness of oneself for the grace to accept them as they are. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. The gallery attendant gently touched my shoulder. The gallery was closing. I had to leave—like when you must leave someone you love in the hospital, like when the wake is over, like when they put the coffin in the ground. Because everything ends. Hill was upright. Exiting meant



Leaving meant a reckoning. Leaving meant he got to stop kneeling for the day. When I first saw him, it was as if he was in a trance. His eyes were limpid, faraway, flooded with tears, his gaze beatific. Ecstasy. Agony. When he recognized me, he covered his face and began to sob. I bowed from the hip, my face almost touching my knees. When I had the temerity to rise, we looked at each other, through the pain and the sorrow and the starvation and the murder and the lies and the disregard and the inescapable tragedy of being human. He mouthed the words “thank you.” I covered my heart with my hands and clumsily uttered, “My whole heart.” I haven’t felt the same since.

*Helen Molesworth is a writer, podcaster, and curator.*

Schneider, Tim. "EJ Hill's New York performance personifies the art of endurance" *The Art Newspaper* (September 10, 2025) [ill.] [online]



THE ART NEWSPAPER

## Comment | EJ Hill's New York performance personifies the art of endurance

The Los Angeles-based artist is spending eight hours a day on his knees at David Zwirner's 52 Walker space



By the end of the run of *Yearning for an Absolute*, EJ Hill will have spent 56 days across 12 weeks kneeling for eight hours a day  
Courtesy 52 Walker, New York

**Tim Schneider**

10 September 2025

An endurance performance can only be fully understood by one person: the artist themselves. Even if a fanatic were to watch every publicly viewable second, the necessary preparation and recovery that occurs in private would stay hidden. What also remains out of sight is the toll such performances take on the artist, especially when they involve engaging in the same action for multiple hours, almost every day, over several months.

EJ Hill is living out this challenge in *Yearning for an Absolute* (2025), the centrepiece of his solo show at 52 Walker (until 13 September). Every day that David Zwirner's kunsthalle-inspired Tribeca dealership has been open to the public since 25 June, Hill has donned a white long-sleeved t-shirt, off-white trousers and monochrome socks, entered a part of the space partitioned by tall velvet curtains and knelt on the crimson pad of a church kneeler for eight continuous hours. There is no food or water, no speaking or distractions, no breaks. By the end, the performance will have taken place for a total of 56 days across 12 weeks.

"This is far more gruelling than anything I've done before," Hill tells me from a yoga pose in his makeshift green room, which has been established in 52 Walker's office area. We were talking shortly before his performance on 30 July, near the midpoint of the show's run. The aches and pains were already widespread.

"I feel so much more of it in my lower back, because my knees, quads and thighs are trying to support everything above it," he says. His shoulders and wrists had become increasingly sore, too, from intermittently dropping to all fours for minor relief while kneeling.

States of physical and psychological extremity are these days extremely familiar for the Los Angeles-based Hill. For his 2016 performance *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy*, Hill capped his residency at the Studio Museum by lying on his back at the base of a purple-lit rollercoaster sculpture day in, day out; as part of *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria* (2018), his multi-pronged contribution to the Hammer Museum's *Made in LA* biennial that year, he stood atop a sculpture resembling an Olympic podium for all the hours the show was open. Both exhibitions ran for at least three months.



**Mental challenges**

Although *Yearning for an Absolute* completes a “performance triptych” with these pieces, Hill says it also exists in “an entirely different ballpark”. The human body is built to lay prone or stand upright for hours on end—not to kneel.

We resumed our conversation at the end of the same day—an endurance artist’s equivalent of a post-game interview. Hill shuffled out of the exhibition space like a nonagenarian, then kneaded dab after dab of balm into his legs as we talked. He explained the mental challenges the performance posed. “In order to complete a day of this, I have to put my mind somewhere else and not think about time as much as possible,” he says. “I understand the rhythm of the day in a way that’s hard to describe.”

Ebony L. Haynes, a senior director at David Zwirner who oversees and programmes 52 Walker, places Hill’s performance in the tradition of canonical greats such as Tehching Hsieh, Chris Burden and Marina Abramović. She calls it “a consideration of the mind over the body” that “places itself within the context of socio-cultural commentary, reflecting or mining something greater than itself”.

Although Hill’s performance most overtly references Catholicism—he attended church services and Catholic schools until his early teens—he intends it as a nondenominational embodiment of the extreme difficulties people bear, quietly and privately, across cultures and contexts every day. He hopes the work’s strenuousness can jolt viewers into offering “a little bit of grace, understanding and compassion” to others after they leave the gallery.

But Hill, too, will leave a changed man. “I turned 40 on the third day of this performance, which is crazy. It feels transitional in a way,” he says of attempting this work at this point in his career.

Yet endurance artist is an unrelenting profession in more ways than one. The day after completing his Hammer performance, Hill flew across the country to embark on a year-long fellowship at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. Similarly, as much as he would like to take a true holiday after his latest performance ends, it may not be possible: “The irony is if I’m not working, I can’t really support myself,” he says. “So I may have to go right into the next thing.”

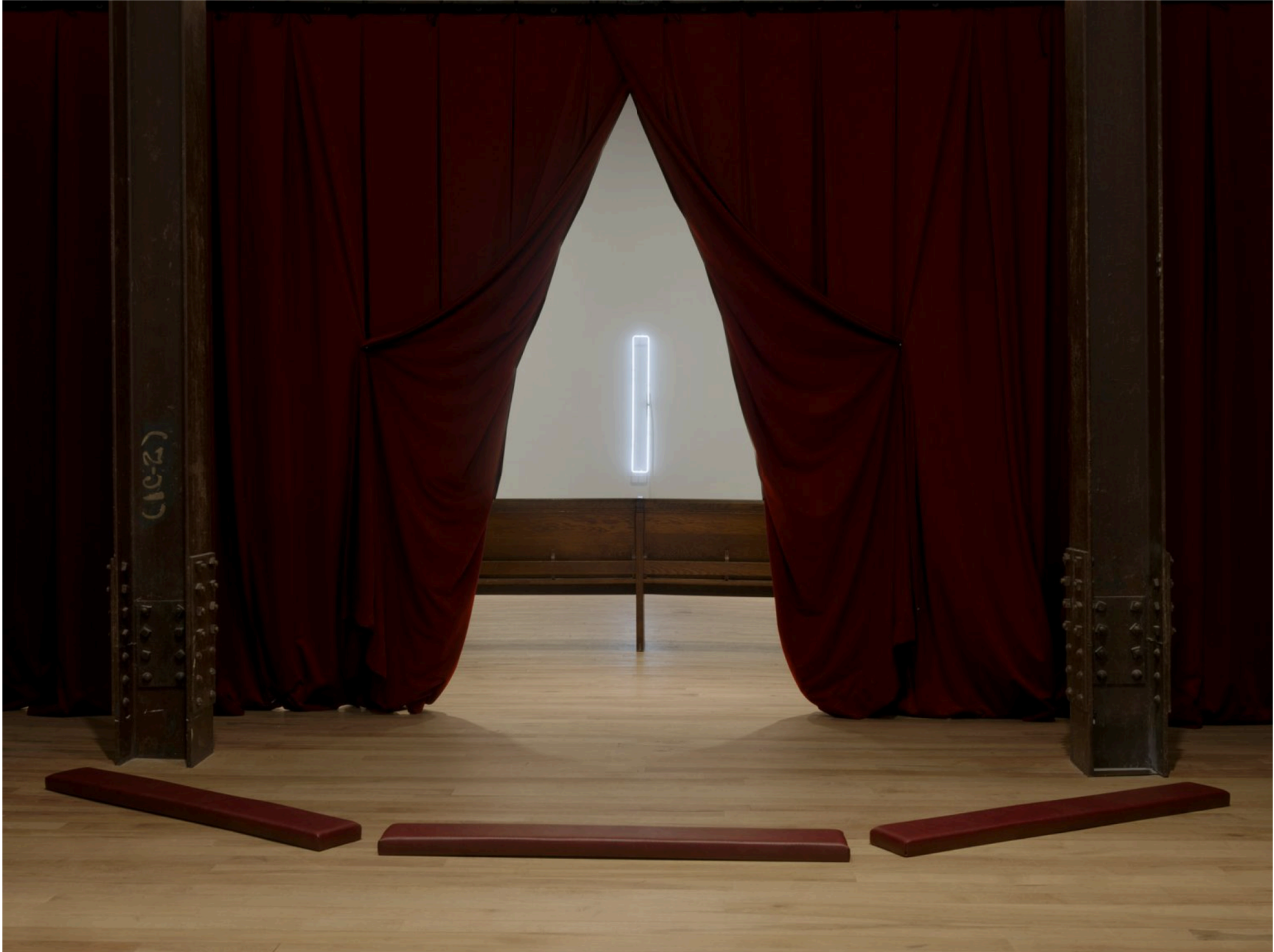
- EJ Hill: Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout [↗](#), 52 Walker, New York, until 13 September

Kim, Ho Won. "EJ Hill Behind the Curtain." *ArtReview* (September 1, 2025) [ill.] [online]

# ArtReview

## EJ Hill Behind the Curtain

Ho Won Kim   Reviews   01 September 2025   ArtReview



EJ Hill, *Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout*, 2025 (installation view). Courtesy 52 Walker, New York

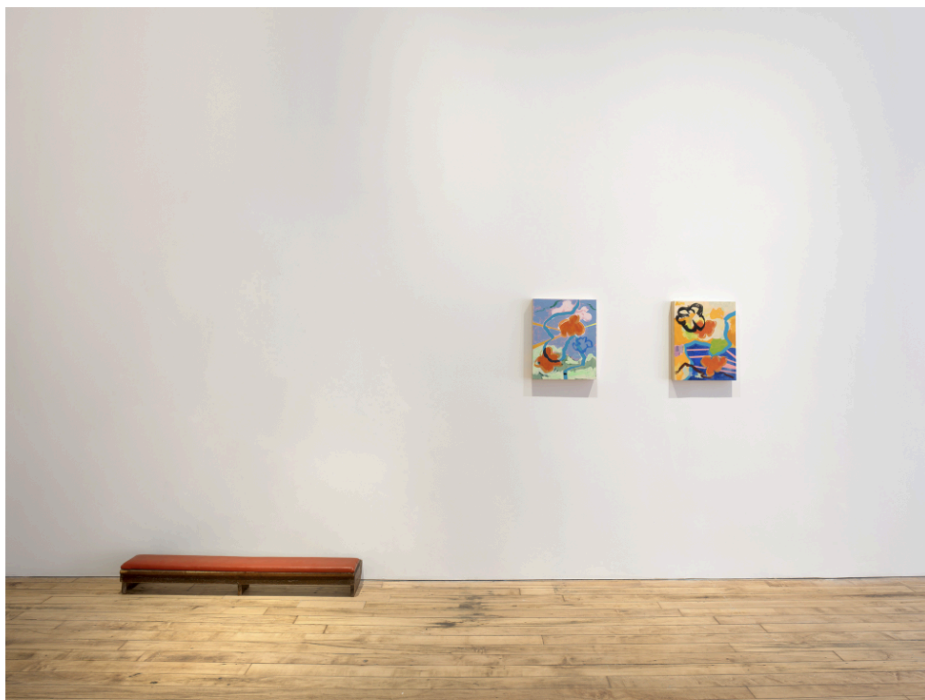


**At 52 Walker in New York, you'll find the artist kneeling at the altar, at all times. What is he waiting for?**

Entering EJ Hill's solo exhibition at 52 Walker feels like stepping into a chapel. Heavy burgundy velvet curtains block one's view of the gallery's centre, evoking a soft-walled confessional, with a wooden pew positioned outside. Facing this central installation hang four framed 'paintings' from the series *Vigil* (all works 2025). In each frame, Hill has mounted eight church kneeler pads vertically like minimalist abstractions. One pad in each composition bears deep impressions where knees once pressed into foam. These indentations archive what can be seen as acts of spiritual and social submission, mapping where flesh met devotion, where bone pressed into doctrine.

The source of these material traces can be found inside the installation. Through a narrow gap in the curtains, visitors glimpse Hill himself kneeling in sustained silence during gallery hours. This partial view invites more intimate engagement: viewers can peer through the opening or enter from the back for fuller access. Hill – a Black, queer artist who was raised Catholic – knows intimately how religious institutions reserve their harshest disciplines for certain bodies. He has long employed acts of physical endurance to interrogate how marginalised subjects might reclaim joy within systems designed to deny it. Marking his return to durational performance after seven years, this act of kneeling feels distinctly private compared to his previous public marathons, such as when he stood for months atop a plinth or lay prone on a roller coaster-shaped sculpture. Behind the velvet, his breathing remains steady as each hour of stillness passes. The longer he endures this religious posture, the more powerful and ecstatic his performance becomes.

The dialogue between the *Vigil* impressions and Hill's living presence forms the core of *Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout*. Both bear witness to institutional pressure to perform devotional rituals, yet, by constructing his own confessional and drastically overstaying the typical duration of confession, Hill appropriates gestures traditionally associated with obedience to refigure submission as a site of potential resistance.



*Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout*, 2025 (installation view). Courtesy 52 Walker, New York

Two neon works expand his performance's historical scope: *Symbol for a Stylite* outlines a classical column crowned by a cartoonish cloud, wryly nodding to fifth-century ascetics who performed self-denial atop pillars. *Symbol for an Anchorite*, a glowing vertical rectangle, references medieval hermits voluntarily walled into church cells. While Hill partakes in solitude and self-control commonly associated with hermeticism, he does so not to escape from society but to engage with it. Unlike historical figures who sought divine connection through isolation, Hill's confinement behind velvet creates a charged space of collective recognition.

Elsewhere in the gallery, acrylic and ink paintings of flowers and clouds provide relief from the sombreadness of the performance, creating productive friction against the austerity of *Vigil*. With the inclusion of these unabashedly vivid, pleasure-inducing works on paper and panel, the exhibition argues that refusal and ecstasy exist not in opposition but in generative tension.

Through these visual allusions – and the simple insistence of a body that kneels on its own terms – *Low-slung Promises...* rewrites the grammar of redemption. Where traditional salvation demands suffering as down payment for grace, Hill's works subvert this transaction. His endurance becomes not penance but a method of claiming the joy that was always rightfully his.

**Low-slung Promises on the Tongues of the Devout** 52 Walker, New York,  
[through 13 September](#)

Ho Won Kim   Reviews   01 September 2025   ArtReview

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**

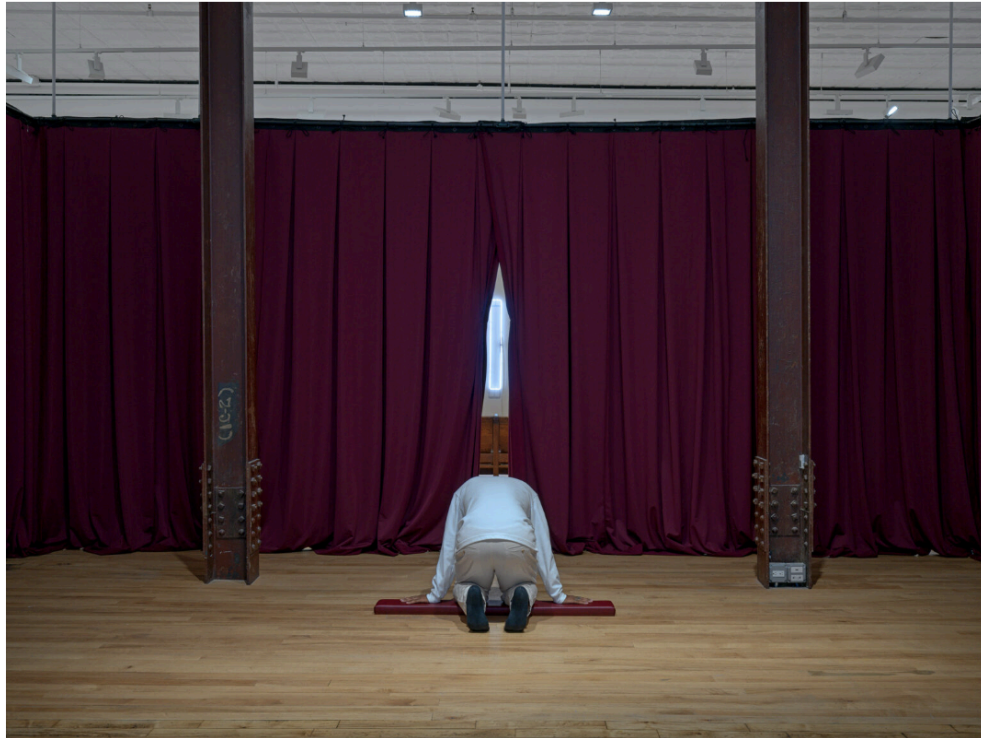
52 Walker | 52 Walker Street

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).

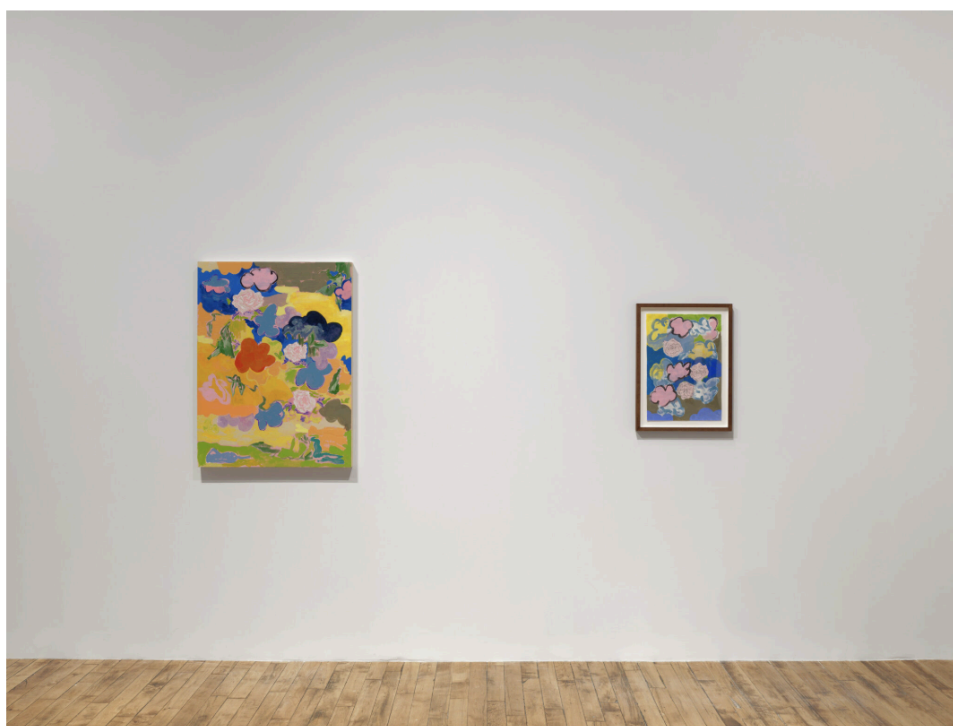
In the history of durational art, there's a distinction between more private works, such as Tehching Hsieh's punching of a clock in his studio once every hour for a year, from 1980-81, and pieces that necessarily involve an uncomfortable audience. I experience an intimacy in Hill's exhibition that evokes 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?"

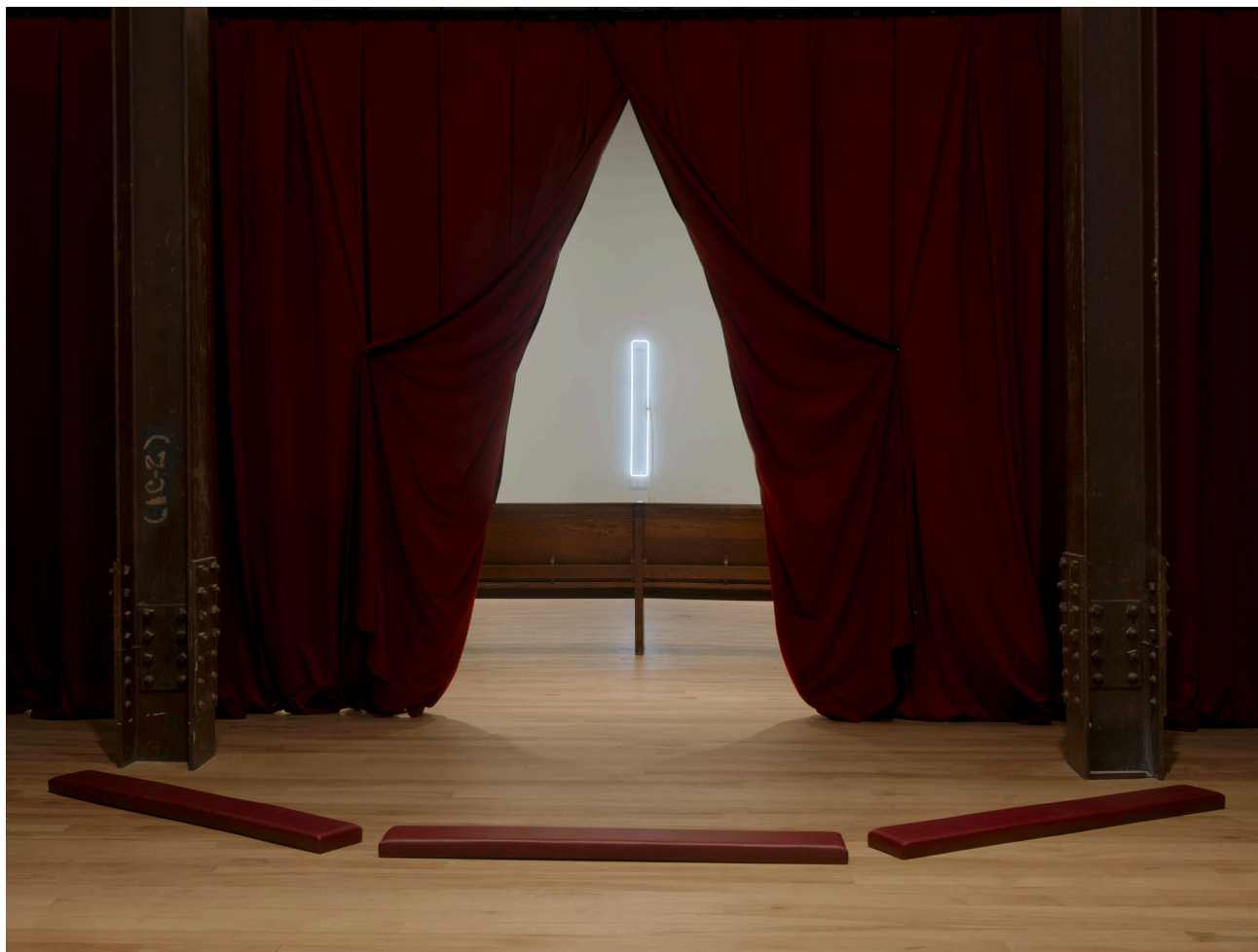




EJ Hill, *Excellentia, Mollitia, Victoria*, 2018. Photography by Brian Forrest. Image courtesy of the artist and the Hammer Museum.

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.