

EJ Hill

Brake
Run
Helix



MASS MoCA



EJ Hill **Brake Run Helix**

By Alexandra Foradas & Makayla Bailey

EJ Hill has been obsessed with roller coasters since he was young. He recalls, “When I was little, I had these notebooks and they’d all be covered with roller coaster drawings.” He had dreamed of building a roller coaster, adding, “This image has always shown up, time and time again: this idea of the up and down and the round and round of a closed circuit.” *Brake Run Helix*, installed in MASS MoCA’s signature Building 5 gallery, includes Hill’s first fully functional, rideable roller coaster. The roller coaster is surrounded by a wooden stage, and is joined by a series of sculptures, paintings, and works on paper.

The title *Brake Run Helix* comes from the “closed circuit” of a roller coaster, and refers to two elements of roller coaster design: a brake run and a helix. A brake run is a section of track meant to slow or stop a roller coaster’s carts, a moment when riders have a moment to collect themselves, for their minds to catch up with their bodies.¹ A helix, meanwhile, is a moment in a roller coaster’s track when the carts complete at least one 360° turn: a moment of intense g-force and forcible perspectival shift.² The roller coaster in *Brake Run Helix* does not contain a brake run or

a helix. Instead, the exhibition’s title can be understood as a poetic evocation of social and environmental structures that mercilessly subject the body to outside forces.

For Hill, roller coasters are public monuments to the possibility of attaining joy—which, as he notes, is “a critical component of social equity.” For much of U.S. history, the ability to memorialize and monumentalize history on such a large scale has been the province of a select, privileged few. With *Brake Run Helix*, Hill reclaims and commands space through a meticulously indirect, monumental representation of familiar forms.

Amusement parks in the United States were contested sites throughout Jim Crow-era desegregation efforts, when Black Americans were systematically barred access to theme parks, swimming pools, and skating rinks. In the decade following the Supreme Court’s

- 1 In *Brake Run Helix*, the cart comes to a stop by means of gravity.
- 2 Helixes are often the moments on a roller coaster ride with the most intense g-force, or gravitational force equivalent, which causes a perception of increased weight.

EJ Hill, *joy studies (rainbow)*, 2022. Acrylic and neon on panel. Photo by Jon Verney



Euclid Beach Park ca. 1920. Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio

unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, many urban theme parks closed or privatized, or moved to suburbs largely inaccessible to those who did not own cars. Fee structures shifted from ride-based (where admission to the park was free, but visitors paid for each ride they took) to admission-based, further denying access to those without the means to pay these new higher fees.³ Museums, including MASS MoCA, often follow this model, placing access to museum spaces beyond the means of many. *Brake Run Helix* does not exist outside of this paradigm, but rather asks us to interrogate it from within, urging towards a future where leisure and joy are more widely accessible.⁴

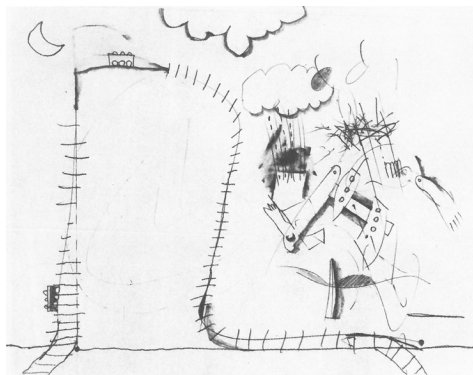
For Hill, institutions provide both context and material. He transmutes formative experiences—whether of athletics, religion,

the American education system, or amusement parks—into artworks that encourage critical investigations of embodied experiences of transformation. At MASS MoCA, Hill reimagines the context and function of a roller coaster by placing it in a museum, often considered places of high art rather than of leisure. The coaster's monolithic track evokes the visual language of Minimalist sculpture, which often used commonplace materials to create simple, abstract forms. Hill's sculptural roller coaster is a sleek subversion of monumental Minimalist form: it is rideable, and invites touch, interaction, and pleasure, as well as associations with the world of forms and material culture outside of museums.

Upon entering the exhibition, with the roller coaster in the background, Hill presents a series of sculptures riffing on forms found

at amusement parks: an arched entrance reminiscent of those which visitors pass under upon entry at parks like Coney Island, speculative roller coaster carts, and a two-story pillar that takes the idea of a roller coaster's vertical drop to an extreme. This last sculpture recalls the hyperbolic roller coaster sketches of Robert Cartmell, whose work also inspired some of the paintings and drawings on view elsewhere in the exhibition.

The sculptures in *Brake Run Helix* are made from reused and found materials, including scrap wood from MASS MoCA's woodshop and premade neon shapes from Lite Brite Neon in Kinderhook, NY. Though the use of found materials and objects is frequently cited as one of the characteristics of modern art, reused and found materials have been employed in visual culture around the world for millennia. The art of making do—of innovating new forms or repairing old ones with available materials—offers an alternative to the capitalist pressure to consume. This practice emphasizes collective work over individual impact, as evidenced in Hill's collaboration with MASS MoCA's fabrication team and the makers at Lite Brite Neon to craft and design these sculptures.



Robert Cartmell, *First Hill*, 1982. Pencil drawing. Courtesy of the Estate of Robert Cartmell

Hill's use of materials also recalls the practice of creating backyard roller coasters, a form that has emerged in America in recent decades. In contrast to commercially engineered and fabricated roller coasters, they are often created over the course of many years through trial and error, using readily available materials. In the U.S., where white communities have historically had greater access to materials, land, and other forms of wealth, backyard roller coasters have usually been created by white people. Hill's installation instead invites a broader practice of joy-oriented creation.

In recent years, Hill has made two installations that used roller coaster forms on a model-like scale, first at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, in 2016, and later for the Future Generation Art Prize exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2017. In each case, the sculptural installation was also the site of an endurance-based performance by Hill. *Brake Run Helix* marks a shift: while the seats of the cart-like sculptures imply the possibility of physical engagement, they remain empty. The performance, instead, takes place further back in the room, on the roller coaster itself: members of the public are invited

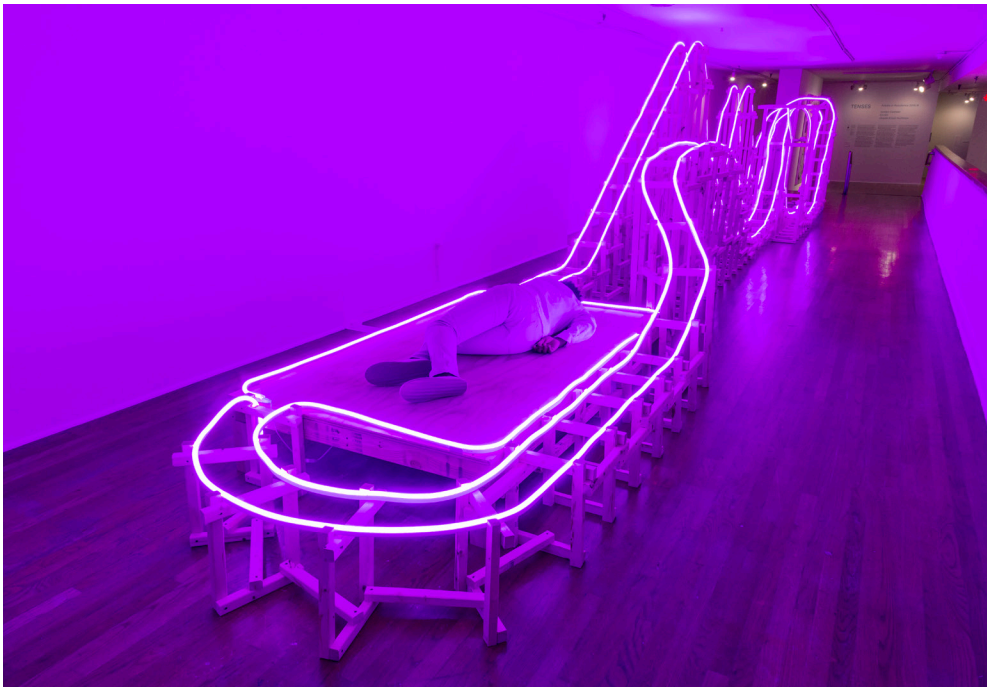
- 3 For a detailed history of the relationship between segregation, civil rights, and amusement parks, see Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012).
- 4 Visitors to MASS MoCA can access free admission by "checking out" a family membership from the North Adams Public Library and other libraries in the region (more information, including a full list of participating libraries, at massmoca.org/library-pass-program). Admission is \$2 for EBT/WIC/Connector Care/Wonderfund Access Card Holders. Admission for staff and students from Williams College, MCLA, Bennington College, and Yale University is free, as is admission for kids under 5. Keep an eye on our Instagram, Facebook, and website for information about free and discounted programming around *Brake Run Helix*, and days when admission to MASS MoCA is free.

to participate in activating the sculptural roller coaster by riding its single cart.⁵

In *Brake Run Helix*, Hill inverts the experience of riding a roller coaster, transforming it from a shared ritual of ecstasy and terror to an individual performance: only one person may ride the roller coaster at a time. The coaster's single cart emerges from behind a two-story velvet stage curtain, moves across the coaster's tracks, and ultimately comes to rest on the wooden stage, while onlookers observe from below. This creates a temporary sense of sharp separation between the rider and audience. Upon disembarking onto the stage, however, the rider rejoins the crowd of viewers at the exhibition, no longer subject to the scrutiny of spectacle.⁶

Underneath the mezzanine is a retrospective look at Hill's lifelong obsession with roller coasters, and his pursuit of practices that commingle performance and joy. The space begins with a group of works in which velvet is draped and wrapped around canvas stretchers. Hill's use of velvet evokes the curtains on stages in auditoriums and concert halls, demarcating the separation between performers and audience. The rich velvet softens the rectangular stretchers' hard angles and seems to encourage the pleasure of touch, suggesting that perhaps the gap between performer and audience—between artist and viewer—is not as wide as it may sometimes appear.

Soft pink runs through many of the works in the exhibition, appearing on track of the



EJ Hill, *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy*, 2016. The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Wood and LED neon flex. Performance duration: 512 hours over 3 ½ months. Photo by Adam Reich

sculptural roller coaster, in the light washing the sculptures, and as the ground for a new suite of paintings. These paintings also include flowers, blooming improbably amid roller coasters' geometric supports. These flowers, taken together with the association between pink and femininity—and with “sissy boy shit”⁷—implicitly offers queer, femme alternatives to the laborious performance of hypermasculinity: nurturing, softness, and joy.

“Pink is where all of it starts, crazy
Pink like the halls of your heart”⁸

The works on paper and photographs share the title *joy studies*, calling up the academic artistic tradition of creating preparatory studies for artworks. For Hill, however, these studies are not preparations for a completed artwork but rather are studies of another kind: an ongoing practice of learning and seeking joy. This is a “study without end,”⁹ as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney put it in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. This is a form of study rooted in refusing to professionalize, resisting the mandate to perform, and embracing practices of ongoing conversation and rest; a form of study which, as Harney and Moten explain, can take place in “a study group, [...] a nurses’ room], [...] a barber shop, [...] a squat, a dump, a woods, a bed, an embrace”¹⁰—or, as Hill’s works boldly suggest, an amusement park.

Addressing systems that have historically denied Black, poor, and queer folks access to softness, pleasure, and leisure, *Brake Run Helix* offers the pursuit of joy as a widely accessible form of study inextricable from social equity.



EJ Hill, *Regalia (line drawing)*, 2020. Brass ball chain, brass furniture pin, brass tubing on draped velvet.

- 5 Interested in riding the roller coaster? Sign up at massmoca.org/ej-hill
- 6 Artist and roller coaster enthusiast Robert Cartmell once said that “a roller coaster is the most musical architecture ever built.” It is fitting, then, that the stage around the roller coaster will be activated by performances and events created by MASS MoCA’s community—both its regional community, and its global community of artists.
- 7 “No more wringing myself dry. Just flowers, and clouds, and puppies, and ribbons, and pink, and other sissy boy shit,” wrote EJ Hill in a now-deleted Instagram post, quoted in Scarlet Chang, “After exhaustive performances and pandemic stress, EJ Hill takes a break to paint,” *The Art Newspaper*, 18 February 2022.
- 8 Janelle Monáe, “PYNK,” Track 7, *Dirty Computer*, 2018
- 9 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 67.
- 10 Harney and Moten, 67–68.



EJ Hill: Brake Run Helix

October 30, 2022–January 2024

This exhibition is organized by Alexandra Foradas, Curator at MASS MoCA. Makayla Bailey is the Co-editor and Interpretation Consultant.

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Cover: EJ Hill, *To Fall (a Reprise)*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist

EJ Hill (b. 1985) has held residencies at OXY ARTS, Occidental College (2021), Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University (2019), and The Studio Museum in Harlem (2016). Hill's work was featured in the 2022 Whitney Biennial, *Quiet as It's Kept*, and has previously been exhibited at OXY ARTS, Occidental College, Los Angeles (2022); Prospect 5, New Orleans (2021); Made in LA, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2018); The Underground Museum, Los Angeles (2017); The Future Generation Art Prize at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017); and The Studio Museum in Harlem (2016). Hill studied at the University of California, Los Angeles (MFA) and Columbia College, Chicago (BFA). His recent work addresses the status of the education system as a site of joy and trauma. Much of what he knows, he has learned from: Estelle Thompson, Karen Thompson, Ernest Hill Jr., Margaret Nomentana, Joan Giroux, Adam Brooks and Mat Wilson (Industry of the Ordinary), Andrea Fraser, Mario Ybarra Jr., Matt Austin, Young Chung, Jordan Casteel, TLC, Lauryn Hill, and Augie Grahn. He is forever indebted to these educators and thanks them endlessly. He lives and works in Los Angeles. ejhill.info



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