

ALISIA CHASE

Exhibition Review: *EJ Hill: Brake Run Helix*

EJ Hill: Brake Run Helix. MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA. October 30, 2022–January 2024.

Of all the interactive art works made within the last half century, perhaps none has been so fully experiential as George Maciunas and Larry Miller's *Flux-Labyrinth*, a two-story maze first conceptualized in 1974, and finally erected at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 1976. This part funhouse, part obstacle course was recreated for the Walker Art Center's *In the Spirit of Fluxus* exhibition, which was on display in 1993, and again for the Frieze Art Fair in Manhattan in 2015. From slippery ramps to fuzzy pink fur passages; marble-strewn floors to latex spiderwebs; piano-operated portals to narrow tunnels lined with hairy, nearly naked men—each iteration of these playful and precarious environs have tested museumgoers' willingness to take risks while tickling their senses. I lived down the street from the Walker in 1993, and visited *Flux-Labyrinth*



Installation view of *Brake Run Helix* (2023) by EJ Hill at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; photograph by Kaelan Burkett.

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numerous times. The lines were long, but the maze was worth the wait. After all, how often does one leave an art museum grinning?

It was these happy sense memories I recalled when I found out that artist EJ Hill had fabricated a functional roller coaster titled *Brava!* inside MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. When I called to reserve my ticket, I was dismayed to find that the museum allowed only one rider per hour, but I didn't pre-judge. Upon arrival, I saw the reason—Hill's coaster is as much a vehicle for a lone performance art piece as it is a machine made to physically thrill. Situated at the far end of the massive gallery space, the entrance to the ride is on the second floor, hidden behind thick, jade-colored velvet curtains two stories high, and the pink figure-8 track that emerges from their opening is encircled by waist-high barriers draped with more of the same. After being securely strapped in, manually pushed to the edge of the platform, and given one final shove, the rider bursts forth into this unorthodox proscenium for their fifteen seconds of fast-paced, gravity-driven fame. Invariably, in the hour-long wait from one performer/rider to the next, a modest crowd has gathered in anticipation, and applauds and cheers when the rider is finished.

Brava!, which is the centerpiece of *Brake Run Helix* (the title of the overall exhibition, and Hill's first solo museum show to date), merges the artist's lifelong love of roller coasters with the most notable works within his durational performance-based artistic practice thus far. As a resident at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2016, Hill lay day after day in the center of a much smaller roller coaster for his performance *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy*. Its tracks were comprised of violet neon tubing, and the light surrounding his prone figure transformed an austere modernist sculpture presumably inspired by Dan Flavin into a scene reminiscent of a police car casting violent beams upon a potentially dead Black male body. The following year, Hill was awarded the Future Generation Art Prize at the 57th Venice Biennale for his piece *Pillar*. In the courtyard of an old Venetian palazzo, Hill stood high atop a rickety, looping wooden track, his body functioning as a stoic, living Atlantid. The risky appearance of the rail-less track and minimal scaffolding was a metaphor for the dangerous path a man of color must traverse in his daily life. That he did so with dignity and a straight spine for hours on end is a testimony to his self-preservation and perseverance.

For Hill, roller coasters are better than art: sculptural in their form, and more figuratively and literally evocative than most works found in a museum. As he states, "I love how roller coasters can offer so many different things at once—thrill, excitement, fear, anxiety, pleasure, and bliss. A lot of contemporary art attempts to do what roller coasters do so effortlessly every day. I've always thought that they were the purest form of sculpture."¹ *Brava!* is sculpture, kinetic sculpture, a genre first attributed to Dadaist Marcel Duchamp, whose *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913 could be spun at will. But the term Duchamp gave to Alexander Calder's early works, *mobiles* (French for moving and/or moveable), seems a more fitting progenitor because *mobile* also translates to motive.

1. Keith Miller, "Roller coaster debuts at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art," IAAPA, March 25, 2023, www.iaapa.org/news/funworld/museums-artistry-attractions.

Calder's *Cirque Calder* (1931), a playful miniature circus comprised of wire figures that he activated for live audiences, was intended to charm. Like that of Calder, Hill's work is meant to delight and uses simple physics to do so. The short track is a shiny millennial pink with a petite turquoise cart propelled along by sheer gravity. Move it does, and with its motion comes dopamine-producing magic.

Hill also believes that roller coasters "are public monuments to the possibility of obtaining joy," a necessary element of social equity.² The idea that joy follows from fairness has a long history, and was first codified in the Supplementary Civil Rights Act of 1875. Meant as an addendum to the 1866 Civil Rights Act, and rooted in the 13th Amendment, it stated that:

All persons within the jurisdiction of the United States shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment . . . of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement; subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law, and applicable alike to citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude.³

With this act's passage, slaves were finally free to enjoy forms of leisure once denied them. Sadly, the system simply became more wily, and the exhibition's wall didactics recount how amusement parks in the post-Jim Crow era moved out of urban areas and instituted a high-priced flat fee structure. Both changes prevented many African Americans and others ensnared in poverty from engaging in such liberatory forms of recreation. Curators Alexandra Foradas and Makayla Bailey adroitly self-own the hypocrisy of an exurban art museum moralizing visitors about exclusion, and advocate for a future where no one is denied a ride. This is a smart proposition. Images of paintings and photographs and



Installation view of *Brake Run Helix* (2023) by EJ Hill at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA; photograph by Kaelan Burkett.

2. "EJ Hill: Brake Run Helix," <https://massmoca.org/event/ej-hill>.

3. National Constitution Center, "Civil Rights Act of 1875," <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/civil-rights-act-of-1875-march-1-1875-an-act-to-protect-all-citizens-in-their-civil-and-legal-rights>.

sculpture are so ubiquitous—so democratically available via one’s cell phone—that if museums want to be more than rarefied destinations with a few Instagram-worthy installations, they might start by having more participatory art projects like Hill’s, and making sure people of truly diverse means can get there. In an age of interactive gaming, bodily engagement in the museum is critical, which is probably why MASS MoCA hosts so many weddings under the white lights of Spencer Finch’s installation *Cosmic Latte* (2017). But very few can afford such a high-dollar endeavor.

Class is also addressed in Hill’s abject but earnest maquettes of “home-made” or “backyard” coasters that surround *Brava’s* stage. Made of recycled materials, more utopian dreams than practical plans, they nonetheless serve as reminders that everyone aspires to ephemeral pleasures. Hill’s charming pink watercolor sketches of imaginary roller coasters do the same. Like an optimistic adolescent’s journal pages, they are adorned with blooming roses and big fluffy clouds with a few neon flourishes—halcyon visions of his perfect day.

As you can probably guess, the most recent version of *Flux-Labyrinth* required visitors to sign a waiver, and *Brava!* does the same. In an age of rampant anxiety and “safetyism,” it is easy to see why institutions are unwilling to gamble on the potential emotional or physical fallout caused by such works, but there is something particularly tiresome about having to read a lengthy list of physical limitations and rider responsibilities before one begins. Conversely, one could argue that seeing the potential risks in fine print right before you ride does heighten one’s sense of the precariousness of life. I’ll admit my pulse started racing a bit when I read the section that said I had to possess at least one arm and one leg in order to participate, and I was immediately reminded of Hill’s pink neon sign on the floor below that read “PROMISE ME PERIL.” It also inspired more than a modicum of gratitude in me, and this is where Hill’s genius lies. The entire process of riding *Brava!* becomes part of the work of art’s meaning. As Amelia Jones has written with respect to how performance art radically changes art historical methodology, movements like Fluxus, body art, feminist, queer art, Black art, and other practices that center identity explode “the idea of the artwork as wholly manifest within itself, calling upon . . . viewers to engage themselves through situational and *performative relations* of meaning making.”⁴ It is close to impossible to know what another person feels, to genuinely relate to them, unless you have undergone a similar experience. As a queer Black male, Hill says he understands “bodily threat in a very real way. Every day when I leave my place, the threat to my bodily existence is palpable.”⁵ The big plunge down the first descent of *Brava!* puts your heart in your throat, but when it’s over, you’re thrilled you’ve survived. Is this what Hill feels after he’s crossed the hazardous tracks that American culture sets before him?

4. Amelia Jones, “Unpredictable Temporalities: The Body and Performance in (Art) History,” in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), 58.

5. Siddhartha Mitter, “EJ Hill Wants to Take You on a Ride,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/10/21/arts/design/ej-hill-roller-coaster-mass-moca-art.html.

Riding alone also underscored the museum's elitism and my own privilege. I honestly kind of felt like a jackass getting off the roller coaster by myself—especially given that the audience cheering for me was a visiting second-grade class from a local elementary school. I wanted to shout to them, “You should be on here, too! It shouldn't matter that you're under forty inches tall! Joy is everyone's birthright!” If, as Jones avers, the point of performance is to be *changed* by the work one relationally engages with, then bravo for *Brava!* It provoked the feelings the artist most likely wanted it to, and once again, I left an art museum grinning. Let's hope Hill's encore is one where we can all get on board and share the joy. ■

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