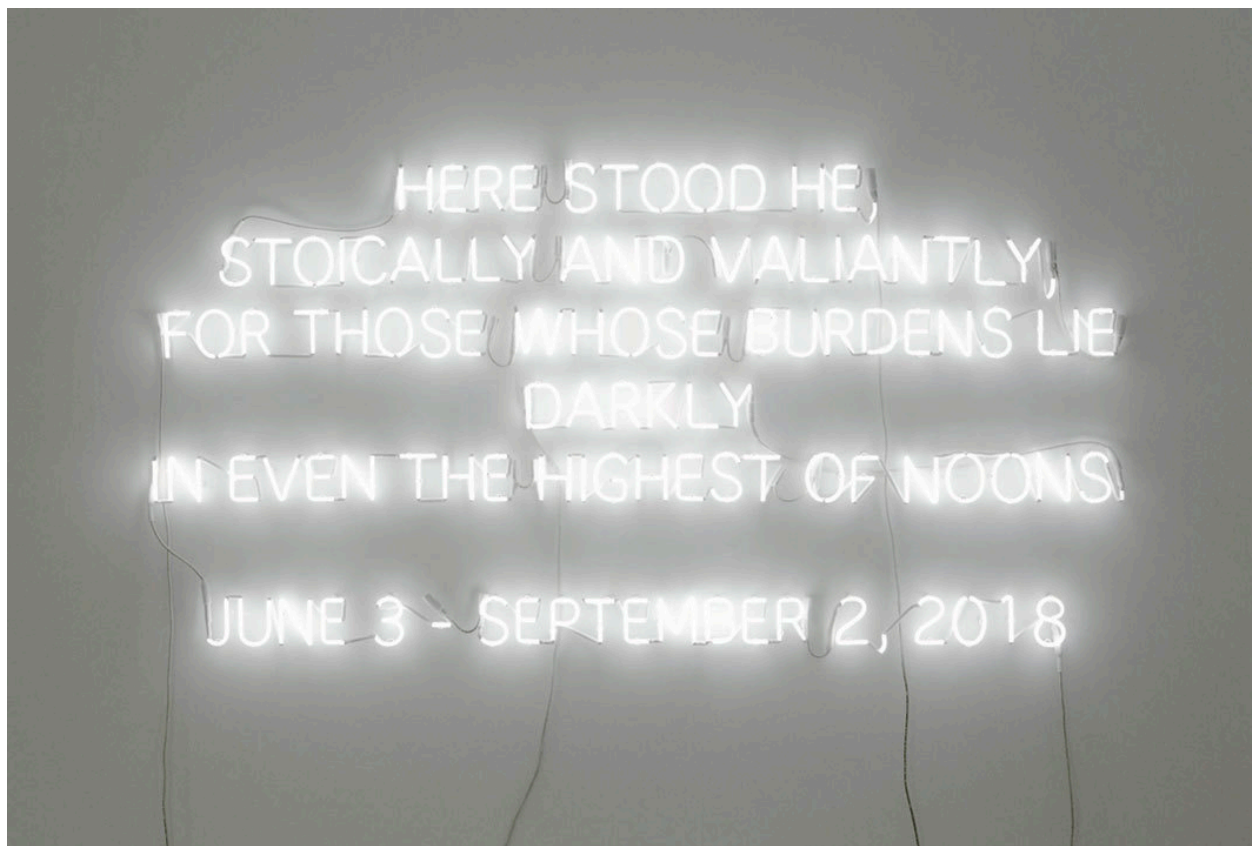


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Dayal, Mira, *EJ Hill*, Artforum, December 2018, print.

ARTFORUM



EJ Hill, *A Commemoration*, 2018

EJ Hill

COMPANY

A white neon sign announced the subjects of EJ Hill's "An Unwavering Tendency Toward the Center of a Blistering Sun": HERE STOOD HE, / STOICALLY AND VALIANTLY, / FOR THOSE WHOSE BURDENS LIE / DARKLY / IN EVEN THE HIGHEST OF NOONS. / JUNE 3 – SEPTEMBER 2, 2018. Given that the sign was rendered in capital letters, a viewer might have first thought that "he" referred to the almighty "Him." The dates also suggested that this could have been culled from a eulogy. Both references are useful, as those days bracketed Hill's performance at the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A. 2018" this past summer, for which the artist stood, during open hours, on a three-level award ceremony podium, in the position of gold medalist—literally honoring himself for running laps around every school he has ever attended, the number of circuits determined by the number of years he had spent at a given institution. The laps, as a meditative yet physically draining exercise, were intended to signify the pain of participating in a system that constantly undermines and erases your body, your history, and your ideas—particularly if "you" are a "black, brown, and queer" person. His standing in "first place" also evoked the Black Power salute given by athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics, a historic gesture of protest. At

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the gallery, Hill delved further into the ways we commemorate and memorialize. Of the seven photographs on view, three depicted statues. The eighth work in the show was the podium on which Hill stood for three months in Los Angeles, the title of which, *Altar* (for victors past, present, and future) (all works 2018), implied its continued utility, as evidenced by the sculpture's worn surface. A ninth work was the neon sign, *A Commemoration*, 2018, which also served to elevate past actions. The words stoically and valiantly additionally seemed to describe the trio of concrete and plaster figures—a torch-bearing woman flanked by two arms-wielding men—captured in Hill's photograph *An Extended Hand* (after Roger Noble Burnham). Located in the Los Angeles National Cemetery, this monument was originally designed by Burnham around 1950 to honor veterans of the 1898 Spanish-American War. Destroyed in an earthquake in 1971, it was later rebuilt—a memorial to the memorial. Shot from below, the three figures are dwarfed by a pair of palm trees (references to LA that appeared in nearly every image on view). The torch carries special significance for Hill, as he also included one in his *Made in L.A.* presentation; there, it was intended to stand for the Olympic symbol, but it also called to mind the tiki torches that white nationalists carried during the 2017 riots in Charlottesville, Virginia. In something of a response to this theme, the photo *A Divine Mother* (after Charles Dickson) showed a statue of a regal, black-skinned Egyptian woman who carries an ankh, a symbol of life. Behind her, a white stucco wall has been painted to create the illusion of a recessed niche, a kind of shelter for the woman. Hill seemed to ask, "Whom do we protect? Whose lives do we celebrate?"

The remaining images in this show focused on the unending sprawl and impious architectures of the suburbs. *A Dam* features a house not far from Hill's own and the Missionary Baptist Church adjacent to it, decorated with a mural depicting a verdant landscape and a towering waterfall cascading down a cliff. Here was another illusion of sanctuary within the quotidian, echoed once more by the only image of Hill in the show: In *An Anchoring*, he floats on his back in a private pool, holding his camera's remote shutter release. His eyes are closed, his face just far enough out of the water to permit breathing. In the context of this exhibition, the image was somewhat jarring for its intimacy, its horizontality contrasting sharply with the phallic verticality of typical monuments. Release refers both to the object in his hand and to the sensation of floating, of being freed from the pull of gravity necessitated by standing on solid ground.