



In John Bradford's Dynamic Paintings, the Past Never Sleeps

"With scabrous swipes and fleshy dollops of pigment, the artist achieves a visceral presence, going beyond the portrayal of iconic events"

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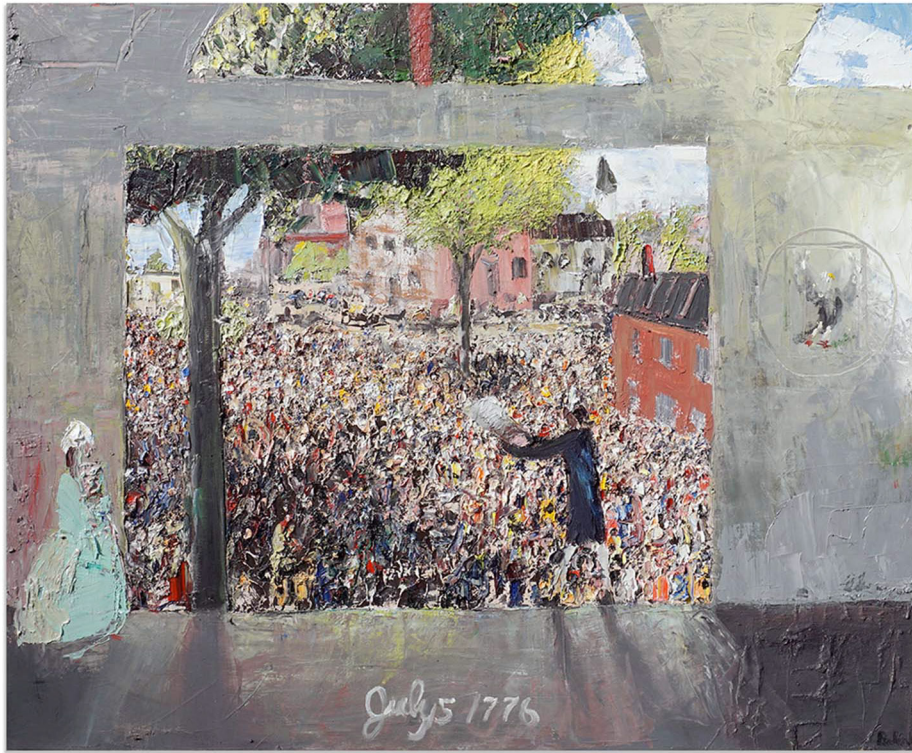


"Hamilton Chasing Benedict Arnold at West Point" (2017)

Our current political discourse consists too often of verbal punches, rhetorical cold-cocks, and bullying tweets calculated to stoke fury and bloodletting. But such has it ever been with American politics (minus the tweets), no more so than when the nation prepared first for revolution and then for civil war. With scabrous swipes and fleshy dollops of pigment, John Bradford's history paintings at Anna Zorina Gallery achieve a visceral presence, going beyond the portrayal of iconic events. Bradford, born in 1949, attended Cooper Union and Yale, and over the decades has enhanced the density of his subject matter with surfaces as smooth as cream cheese and as rough as buffalo hide, using colors that range from sepulchral to gaudy. He cites painters from Corot to the abstract expressionists as influences, and while his figures can be wildly simplified, his skilled drawing concisely portrays that weird amalgam of body and brain that can have us dancing one moment and slumping in despair the next.

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Bradford comes by his intense interest in American history through a personal connection — he is descended from William Bradford, who served five inconsecutive terms as the governor of the Plymouth Colony between 1621 and his death in 1657. In this current series of paintings, Bradford looks at our history through both public and intimate tableaux. At center stage in *Publication of the Declaration* (2017), a man in waistcoat and breeches waves a large sheet of parchment before a surging multitude. In the days before cell phones and Twitter, important announcements were made in print and heralded in town squares.



"Publication of the Declaration" (2017)

Through paint thick and swirled as cake icing, we get the sense of a conflicted crowd — giddy about the Declaration of Independence's call to freedom but agitated by their own defiant act of rebellion. The orator stands in the broad opening of a large interior space; behind him, shadows overlap like lead sheets, contrasting with the sun-bright throng. Bradford wields his palette knife like a gold-medal fencer — a quick thrust here, a whipped contour there, deft scorings through paint to stand in for the lines of revolutionary text printed on the flapping page: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Incredibly moving words, but shot through with hypocrisy even as the ink dried. It is to Bradford's credit that his fiercely graceful gestures convey the seeds of future conflict already abloom in those lines. As in James Ensor's great 1888 painting *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, a fraught — but maybe transcendent — future is evoked, the mob enthusiastic but volatile.

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That brings us to Bradford's *Lincoln Writing the Emancipation Proclamation* (the dozen or so works in the show were all painted within the past year). The president sits at a desk that looks too cramped for his lanky frame, his only companion a sleeping dog. Beyond soaring windows, figures can be seen strolling across a sunny lawn. But Lincoln resides amid gloom, red drapes fading to soot behind him. Gazing at this accreted melancholy, this linked chain of smudged texture and abraded color, a viewer might get an inkling of the weight of history bearing down on this flawed man's shoulders, as he became the first American leader to come to grips with the savagery and unforgivable sin of slavery. Human chattel formed one pillar of America's economy even as it gave the lie to the lofty rhetoric of our young democracy. In Bradford's roiled surfaces, we can feel the undercurrent of anxiety that surely came with the normalized shame of a society that allowed the capture and brutalizing of fellow human beings for profit — a disgraceful heritage that we see Lincoln sweeping away with strokes of his pen. But Bradford's scarred surfaces also convey the president's awareness that the grievous wound of slavery upon the body politic would be a long time healing, certainly beyond his own lifespan — which was, of course, shorter than he would have imagined.



"Lincoln Writing the Emancipation Proclamation" (2017)

In another painting, *Signing the Emancipation Proclamation*, the striped wallpaper seems to writhe and windowpanes shiver at the immensity of that moment. A painting inside a gilt frame hangs on the wall over the president's head, a quickly scribed shadow implying its physical heft. This conceptually witty picture within a picture depicts a

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a sailing ship approaching a shore lined with classical ruins, history's calamities transformed into tranquil picturesqueness by time's healing passage. But, as in Anselm Kiefer's portrayals of shattered Nazi architecture, Bradford informs us that the past never sleeps, and that historical serenity means only that you are not paying attention. In his painting, set in 1863 as the Civil War was at its height, Bradford gives us Union officers standing rigid — concise verticals of paint conveying the men's realization that there was no turning back, that they must fight to the wretched end. In *Gettysburg July 3, 1863*, clouds scroll across a blue sky above a vista of tiny, ranked figures. Smoke — conjured from twists of a palette knife through clots of white, brown, and green — gathers into a pall, fitting for a battlefield that saw thousands of the Blue and the Gray fall that day.



"Gettysburg July 3, 1863" (2017)

Death of Hamilton focuses on a single casualty, when Alexander Hamilton was shot by Aaron Burr in a duel on July 11, 1804, in Weehawken, New Jersey. Bradford envisions a pale-pink sun burning through the gray mist of a humid morning as the implacable political rivals face off. With maybe a dozen brushstrokes, he captures Hamilton falling to the ground, white shock of hair flapping, and then uses a few more to depict Burr as a blue right angle, implying an arm still held out stiffly as it aimed.

In that space between the raw materiality of Bradford's slathered paint and the people those vibrant gestures represent resides a history of humanity, rather than one of facts and body counts.

'John Bradford: Hamilton, History, Lincoln and Paint'

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