

The New Criterion

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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero



"Installation View: Hamilton, History, Lincoln and Paint" at Anna Zorina Gallery.

It may be natural to see "Hamilton, History, Lincoln and Paint" John Bradford's exhibition now at Anna Zorina Gallery, in light of other recent efforts to update the American past in the idioms of the cultural present. In Bradford's case, this means processing such scenes as *Hamilton Chasing Benedict Arnold* (2017) and *Lincoln Writing the Emancipation Proclamation* (2017) through the modes of expressionistic painting.

This kind of effort rises or falls on the convictions of technique. History, as passed through a modern mode, can become easily mannered, or at the very least ill-suited. Bradford plays it straight. Paint gets built up, smoothed over, roughed up, and scraped away. His scenes have the uncanny ability to come together or fall apart depending on one's distance from the canvas. The dense crowds of *Publication of Declaration* (2017) up close dissolve into daubs of paint. The play of surface and depth encourages movement as history comes in and out of focus.

Drawing on some of the styles of folk and outsider art, these paintings seek to depict not just American history but also our collective memory of history. Far from anachronistic nostalgia or postmodern gloss, the paintings have something to say: that history can still be felt.