

Greta Pratt is not the first artist to witness the transformation of democracy into kitsch, though her documents are among the most humane, and telling. In “Taking Liberties,” her recent retrospective at Richmond’s Candela Gallery, she depicts an America where people both observe and re-enact varied versions of their history- one where families celebrate Thanksgiving in day-glow war bonnets, and where tax preparers make the poor dance for pittance in foam rubber crowns. To see such things without cynicism, condescension, or irony-laden snark is remarkable.

Pratt’s series “Wavers” initially greets you, and its effect is jarring. Shot slightly from below in a way we conventionally view monuments are four verdigris-colored figures standing like lords of manor paintings past, until you come to discern that these are the often destitute persons sent to street corners in Statue of Liberty costumes. Before even reading the gallery guide (Pratt provides her subject’s full names) it is apparent that underneath so much tactless raiment are strongly individuated people- clearly someone’s mom, daughter, nephew, or son. Rodney Parker’s probably-homemade “pain” tattoo is visible at his wrist, and Christine Sweeney’s doughy hands sport gecko-green manicured nails. Pratt deftly manages to humanize these figures without reducing them to typology. We don’t learn whether one is a recovering addict, or another a battered mother; we’re “told” only that these are people were compelled to cede a degree of dignity for a nominal wage. It’s a trade off nearly most of us- those who remain employed- can deeply empathize with. The fact that these particular people embody “liberty” only makes the realization more acute.



Pratt’s “Nineteen Lincolns” provides a similarly subtle, though equally discomfiting take on individuality. Following a row of portraits of several historical impersonators, we’re eager to know who these odd strangers are, and are given ample fodder to ponder. It’s easy to snicker at the affected gravitas of these men in Lincoln drag as they clutch waistcoat lapels, or gaze stoically into the mists of history. We weigh the dedication or the degree of delusion of each, are allowed to study their glued-on and genuine beards, their appended moles, and are left to wonder if they are avid historians, eccentric hobbyists, or what. Asked to represent themselves as each thought Lincoln might want to be photographed, one can steadily be won over by their evident sincerity. I was especially

moved by a father and (probable) son portrait- the man grey-bearded, more John Brown than Honest Abe, Tad at his feet presenting an uncomfortable sideways glance. The image of these two sharing an unusual hobby looks to stem less from the vernacular of contemporary photography than that of Abraham and Isaac. Pratt here also brings nine Lincolns together for a group portrait perched on a Kentucky battlefield fence. The disparities and similarities between Lincolns are measureable, and as destabilizing in effect as Warhol's "Nine Jackies;" repetition reinforcing the manufactured qualities of image. Abraham Lincoln long ago left us for the austere realm of myth, but his legacy hasn't. Viewed as either an emancipator or a tyrant, he remains a divisive figure. It seemed especially poignant viewing these works in the capital of the confederacy, in a city the Civil War had reduced to "a sea of flames." Here, just days following the South's surrender, Lincoln assumed Jefferson Davis' statehouse chair, and met dockworkers who had just recently become former slaves.

Following these two solid series are works that elaborate upon Pratt's themes of individuals negotiating unusual roles. "Trail Maids" features several young women, starkly foregrounded on sun-dappled lawns. They're tour guides, nearly overwhelmed by a constrictive mélange of parfait-colored taffeta. Pratt requested that they not smile for the camera, which might have allowed her subjects a welcome reprieve. Ideals of the Southern Belle and her inviolate femininity are heavily freighted enough without the addition of Disney-like signifiers, and of an infrastructure that might intimidate a "Lion King" extra. This could account for why I found them collectively to be little more than elegant ciphers, fitted into costumes nearly as ludicrous as the previous liberties, pressed into the service of a vapid stereotype.



The series "Using History" is more loosely thematic, and offers more to rhetorically take in. Myths of the American west, seen through landmarks and tourist re-presentations of it prevail: Q-tip-headed seniors witness the fall of an OK Corral gunslinger, a predominantly heavy set family in matching t-shirts takes in Mt. Rushmore from a designated scenic overlook, and in shades of "Gunga Din" a Sikh tourist bridles a cavalryman's steed. There is abundant humor, and modest pathos in these. Among many affective images is a haggard mom in full Land-o-lakes princess trappings pushing a cartload of white bread and Velveeta, flanked by a boy and girl in pioneer garb. The grocery store's signage stating "Fresh" crowns the scene and punctuates its oddity.

Pratt's depictions are rarely didactic, which allows the viewer ample free play to construct their own narratives. What viewers brings of their own American experience informs the work, as much as what we're brought to see. We move forward in time, carrying our past. Whether our history becomes a talisman or a millstone depends as

much on how meanings are constructed for us, as on the ways we independently create meanings for ourselves. Pratt's work begs the question "what are you wearing," and raises the thornier matter of whether that is wearing you.

"Taking Liberties" is on view until December 22, 2012 at Candela Books + Gallery, 214 West Broad Street, Richmond, Virginia. Call 804 225.5527. Tim White, 12.2.2012, contact [whitedog35@gmail.com](mailto:whitedog35@gmail.com)