

HYPERALLERGIC

THE BEDROOM WHERE LINCOLN SLEPT WITH ANOTHER MAN

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February 21, 2014



Skylar Fein, "The Lincoln Bedroom" (2013), at C24 Gallery (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

American presidents are the closest thing Americans have to mythological figures. Their lives are minutely documented, their actions considered and reconsidered every generation, their names placed on buildings and museums, and they become the stuff of legend, lessons for children, and inspirations (and cautionary tales) for future generations. Few presidents are as revered in the American pantheon as Abraham Lincoln, the fabled liberator of slaves and man who held the Union together. Yet, over the last decade, there has been a growing debate about the sexuality of President Lincoln, who, like many men of his generation, slept with other men in the same bed. That fact, which may seem peculiar to a contemporary audience, is the subject of New Orleans-based artist Skylar Fein's new work "The Lincoln Bedroom" (2013), at C24 Gallery in New York.

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A view of Skylar Fein's "Remembering the Upstairs Lounge" (2008) in New York, 2010

Fein's art often probes forgotten or little-known moments of LGBTQ history, and his best-known piece, "Remembering the Upstairs Lounge" (2008), recreated an infamous gay bar in New Orleans's French Quarter that burned down under mysterious circumstances on June 24, 1973. Both the bar and Lincoln's former bedroom are flash points in the historical record with obvious queer dimensions but no clear answers. Fein's interest seems lodged in that ambiguity.

"The Lincoln Bedroom" is Fein's most intricately produced work yet. The Upstairs Lounge was recreated with accents that augmented our experience of a place once home to the era's sexual renegades; his Lincoln re-creation is so detailed that it's hard to believe it isn't original, even if it is obviously staged for dramatic effect. The artist used images of other contemporaneous structures — since none of the original exist — to create his vision of the building that housed the historic room, complete with hay and the scent of tobacco. Most importantly, Fein tucks a theatrically lit, straw-stuffed mattress on one side of the room, and we're led to believe that this bed, with its messy, quilted blanket, is similar to the one that Lincoln shared with Joshua Speed, the son of a wealthy Kentucky plantation family.

In his accompanying wall text, Fein suggests that he's undecided in the debate over whether Lincoln and Speed had a sexual relationship, but the evidence he presents — if you can call it that, since the setting is manufactured from the artist's imagination — points to so many questions that the conclusion can feel inevitable. The two men shared the bed from 1837 until 1841, and Speed wasn't Lincoln's only male bedmate: he invited a young captain of the guard to share his bed when his wife was out of town, another fact that Fein provides to the gallery viewer.

Fein is probing the shifting sands of bromance, a contemporary term that might capture some of that non-sexual relationship men of Lincoln's era enjoyed, even if it has different connotations today.

Fein's installation is seductive. Walking through the building, you feel like you're about to uncover a secret somewhere in the shadows, but it never steps out of the darkness. All the ghosts of the place remain hidden.

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A view of Fein's re-creation of the bed that Lincoln and Joshua Speed shared

The appeal of this provocative work is that we're left to question history, and our relationship to it. Whether we believe Lincoln and Speed enjoyed a love affair is our own decision.

The American imagination often includes scenes of people talking about growing old together on a porch, and it evokes images of unspoken warmth that can only be shared by people with a long history together. But there's only one chair on Fein's "The Lincoln Bedroom" porch, suggesting that even if you believed Lincoln and Speed did share more than the warmth of their bodies in the bed, the public face of their relationship was very different, involving a reality that would have ultimately emotionally imprisoned them both.

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