



The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing

By James Elkins

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In this “remarkable tour de force” (Publishers Weekly)-a “ceaselessly thought-provoking book” (Kirkus Reviews)-art historian James Elkins marshals psychology, philosophy, science, and art history to show how seeing alters the thing seen and transforms the seer. Black-and-white photographs.

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The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing By James Elkins Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Because our viewing of people, places and objects is molded by thoughts of using, possessing, keeping or cherishing what is seen, we actually perceive very little of what we look at, claims Elkins. In a remarkable tour de force, this art historian uses scores of intriguing photos and illustrations (of a mermaid, ice halos in Alaska, the surface of atoms, a eunuch, a medieval Russian icon painting, etc.) to buttress his thesis that seeing depends on context, desire and expectation. Elkins, who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, analyzes how we read the human face and discusses pathologies of vision such as blindness and glaucoma. He pays special attention to phenomena that we view with ambivalence or dread-naked bodies, executions, death (a few of the images reproduced here are grisly). He sometimes overstates his case, as when he lamely argues that we exist in "a world full of gazes" because "each object has a certain force, a certain way of resisting or accepting my look and returning that look to me." Nevertheless, his inquiry is a rewarding adventure that draws freely on psychology, literature, art history, neuroanatomy and philosophy to illuminate modes of seeing and of being.

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From Library Journal

"Seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer," writes Elkins, an art historian with Chicago's School of the Art Institute. Elkins further argues that "seeing is irrational, inconsistent and undependable." He uses examples from art and photography to illustrate the nature of vision and its failures. In particular, Elkins describes how we see very little of the world and how "each act of vision mingles seeing with not seeing." He also explores the paradoxical "complicity between blindness and sight." Arguing that there is no such thing as "just looking," Elkins maintains that seeing is a way of "possessing" what is seen. His discussion of our response to the human face is particularly compelling, as is his contention that "vision helps us to know what we are like," forcing us to adjust our version of the self as we see ourselves reflected in others. This unusual, thought-provoking, and well-written book offers an original perspective on the psychology and philosophy of vision.

Laurie Bartolini, Legislative Research Unit, Springfield, Ill.

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From Booklist

Elkins, an art historian, believes that "seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism." What he means is that we don't just point our eyes at things and look; vision involves a great deal of instinct and selectiveness, desire and possessiveness, give-and-take. Following the trail blazed by John Berger, Elkins forges a complex synthesis of art history, biology, neurology, psychology, and his own assiduous and penetrating observations in an effort to understand more about how the eye and mind work in tandem. Almost unnervingly accurate and gratifyingly frank about our habits of sight, Elkins describes and analyzes such rarely examined phenomena as how objects change when you look at them; how we are changed by what we see; how we both see and are seen; and how much we don't see. Elkins considers the way we look at nature versus how we view pictures, especially "forbidden images" associated with sex and death. He also posits that we're always, subconsciously, looking for faces and bodies, then ponders the irrevocable power of a face, the mystery of a body. This mesmerizing performance greatly expands our awareness of all that sight entails.

Donna Seaman

Users Review

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