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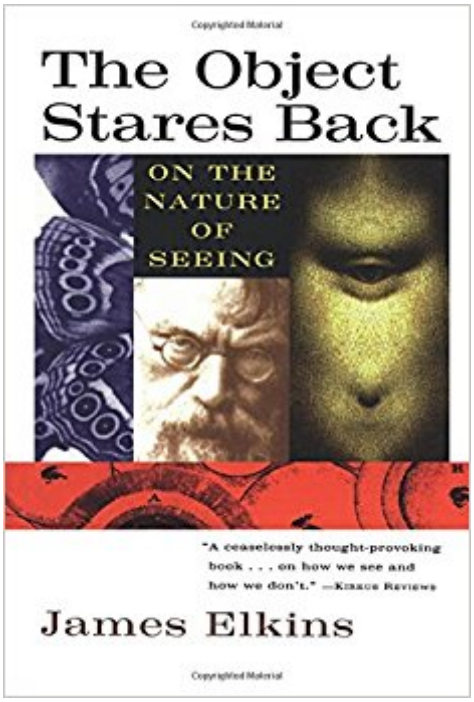
The Object Stares Back: On The Nature Of Seeing



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Synopsis

In this â œremarkable tour de forceâ • (Publishers Weekly)-a â œceaselessly thought-provoking bookâ • (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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Customer Reviews

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. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information,

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"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.Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

James Elkins gives a lot of interesting speculation on the experience of seeing, but unfortunately, he fails to give much linkage of his subject to the experience of making and seeing art, which is curious in that the author is an art historian. He attaches a lot of importance to the idea that conventional seeing is a form of "blindness," that is, that conventional day-to-day seeing is extremely limited, but, again, he seems to be uninterested in the ways that artists remove these limits, both for themselves and their audience. So much of the writing is about how the author himself sees and does not see, that eventually I became bored, as one usually does listening to one person talk on and on about his own limited experience of a subject.

Delivery was fast and efficient and the product came to me in great condition, also just in time for my trip, which was the reason for purchasing the book in the first place. I had already been reading this book as a loan from the library, so I knew what to expect in terms of the content, but I was impressed by the quick delivery and good condition of the book.

LOVE this book. Have read it two times and am teaching out of it this semester.

It was in great shape and delivered on time. It's an enjoyable read too. I can't wait to find out what other works James Elkins has.

James Elkins is a masterful writer. His work is very philosophical, though he is an art historian. I heartily recommend all of his books, but The Object Stares Back is my favorite. The books makes me sad, angry, creeped out, proud, excited... Elkins is masterful, clear, and insightful. He forces you to reconsider your ideas about what it means to see and to be seen. Great book.

I like reading about art from craft to philosophy, but this book was a big disappointment. Too many words for too little substance, fuzzy thinking. He could have made his point in one chapter. If I weren't so lazy, I'd immediately put it back up for sale. Wasted space on my bookshelf, a example of an interesting notion, the kind you might wake up with, that never gets developed. Great title but the book -- stillborn.

Please do not buy if you are scientifically inclined. If you really want it, I can send you mine. I have to look and find it though, because it occupies a lot of space.Why am I saying this?Well, I have absolutely no problems with art critics, and no problems with scientists. But when I see an artistic/critic scientist wannabe (and vice versa), it makes me cringe. It is not that the combination is not possible; it is that some people try to project something that they are not, and honestly, it takes quite a bit of time to become competent at (either, let alone both). The point is that there is a total lack of rigor when providing scientific explanations. The author is the type of people that want to make quantum mechanics something esoteric and mysterious. I had to put the book down a quarter of the way because I thought I could spend my time better doing something else. I am really interested in the topics of this book, but unfortunately he is too superficial and pretentious. My shipping offer stands as long as I can find the book.

By paying careful attention to language, Elkins almost transcends the linear logic of prose to get at the complex, ambiguous nature of seeing. Sometimes he writes in a free, stream-of-consciousness way, and his musings can become oddly tangential, but he's always honest, humble, and sincere, and often he pierces through the obvious to capture the subtle ineffability of his subject.Some of the most stimulating parts of the book for me were the discussion of the power of objects; the idea of the visual field as containing complex topographies that attract and repel a viewer's attention; the inextricable connection between seeing and blindness; and, the centrality of the body and the face in human vision.Although the process of seeing is a mystery whose complexity will remain forever unfathomable, Elkins helps readers to enter into the mystery and to make us more aware of the vast

beauty, subtlety, and complexity that we often fail to see in the world around us.

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