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The Domain of Images (review)

Roy R. Behrens

Leonardo, Volume 34, Number 1, February 2001, p. 77 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press



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## THE DOMAIN OF IMAGES

by James Elkins. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY, U.S.A., 1999. 282 pp., trade. ISBN: 0-8014-3559-5.

*Reviewed by Roy R. Behrens, 2022 X Avenue, Dysart, IA 52224-9767, U.S.A.  
E-mail: <ballast@netins.net>.*

For whatever reason, some of the most daring, experimental writing in the field of art history is now coming out of Chicago. Barbara Maria Stafford (who teaches at the University of Chicago) is one of the chief innovators, as is James Elkins, the author of this book, who teaches at the Art Institute of Chicago. Purely in terms of output, Elkins is phenomenal. In the past 5 years, he has published eight important books, all of which are worth looking into: *The Poetics of Perspective* (1995); *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996); *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (1998); *On Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (1998); *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (1998); *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?: On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (1999); *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (1999) and this title, his latest. How is this even possible? The answer in part is that each of his books, while being unique, is more or less about the same range of issues: They are all about “art history on the edge,” about aspects of art and design that defy categorization and that easily fall through the cracks in doctoral research programs. Like Gyorgy Kepes (*The New Landscape in Science and Art*) and E.H. Gombrich (*Art and Illusion*), whom Elkins must surely be influenced by, he almost always argues (by example, if not by the actual words that he writes) that art historians should look beyond their traditional subject areas and focus as much on the images in science, technology, commerce, medicine, music and archaeology.

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