

# What Painting Is

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Unlike many books on painting that usually talk about art or painters, James Elkins' compelling and original work focuses on alchemy, for like the alchemist, the painter seeks to transform and be transformed by the medium.

In *What Painting Is*, James Elkins communicates the experience of painting beyond the traditional vocabulary of art history. Alchemy provides a magical language to explore what it is a painter really does in her or his studio - the smells, the mess, the struggle to control the uncontrollable, the special knowledge only painters hold of how colours will mix, and how they will look.

Written from the perspective of a painter-turned-art historian, *What Painting Is* is like nothing you have ever read about art.

## James Elkins

is Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is the author of many books, including *The Poetics of Perspective* (1994), *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996), *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (1997) and *Why are Our Pictures Puzzles?* forthcoming from Routledge. When one looks at a Monet, what exactly is one looking at? A framed painting, surely. And, too, as traditional art history texts would suggest, an "impression of light and atmosphere." But for art historian and painter Elkins, the essence of a painting--"what painting is"--goes beyond such abstractions. For one must not overlook the "process" of painting itself, the process by which artists get their hands dirty mixing oils and pigments, jabbing and scraping until one day the mess of paint blobs magically emerges as water lilies (or a haystack or a field of poppies) on the canvas. Indeed, it is the transformative power of the act of painting that Elkins explores in *What Painting Is* and that he elucidates expertly by way of another transformative art--the ancient practice of alchemy. In each of the nine chapters, Elkins draws parallels between artistic and alchemical processes. Like the alchemist, the painter sequesters him- or herself into the studio to mix and match substances in search of a recipe that will turn unpromising materia prima into the perfect painting (the philosopher's stone). Elkins, a true alchemist of ideas, has conjured up an original and insightful book that is sure to transform the reader's understanding of painting. Veronica Scrol

### Other Books

Pat Steir, "The pictorial universe of Pat Steir is usually divided into different styles, epochs and categories. In this monograph, for the first time, art historian Doris von Drathen traces a logical line of thought that runs through the whole oeuvre, from the artist's earliest works to her most recent; although richly diverse, the paintings are all linked by an underlying investigation into the illusion of reality and its perception - a philosophical inquiry that perpetually asks: What do you see, and what do you think you see? Every painting is an exploration that questions the nature of what it is: a painting. In this way, over the past 40 years, Pat Steir has built up an essential body of work with a far-reaching contemporary influence - one that might best be described as "a school for seeing." "--BOOK JACKET. ? ? ? ? ? . &quot;The pictorial universe of Pat Steir is usually divided into different styles,

epochs and categories."