

Join Us! The Center for Contemplative Studies

Thursday, March 28, 6:30-8:30pm

Distinguished Speaker Series Presents:

James Elkins, PhD:

"Intense Encounters with Artworks"

John H. Baker Art Gallery, E.O. Bull Arts Center
2 E. Rosedale Ave., West Chester University

This is a FREE community event. More information and tickets at www.wcupa.edu/cs



James Elkins grew up in Ithaca, New York, separated from Cornell University by a quarter-mile of woods once owned by the naturalist Laurence Palmer.

He stayed on in Ithaca long enough to get the BA degree (in English and Art History), with summer hitchhiking trips to Alaska, Mexico, Guatemala, the Caribbean, and Columbia. For the last twenty-five years he has lived in Chicago; he got a graduate degree in painting, and then switched to Art History, got another graduate degree, and went on to do the PhD in Art History, which he finished in 1989. (All from the University of Chicago.) Since then he has been teaching in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Jim's interests include microscopy (with a Zeiss Nomarski differential interference microscope and Anoptral phase contrast), stereo photography (with a Realist camera), playing piano (contemporary "classical" music), and (whenever possible) winter ocean diving.

People talk about having intense encounters with artworks; they are hypnotized, transfixed, lost in the artwork, they have immersive or absorptive experiences. These same words are used to describe religious experience. Over the last several decades, I have studied the misunderstandings between the artworld and people of faith: religious themes remain unwelcome in the artworld, unless the art is critical of religion; and openly religious scholars are mistrusted in mainstream academia.

I will propose two reasons for this strange relationship between art and religion. First, there's the very close coincidence between the language describing religious experience and the words for aesthetic experience--a closeness some people may find uncomfortable or misleading. Second, academics and religious practitioners have different forms of conversation: the former tend to begin conversations with specifics about the artworks, and the latter may prefer to begin with general talk about the viewer's knowledge and experience of faith. I think this second reason can help a great deal in fostering conversations between the fields.