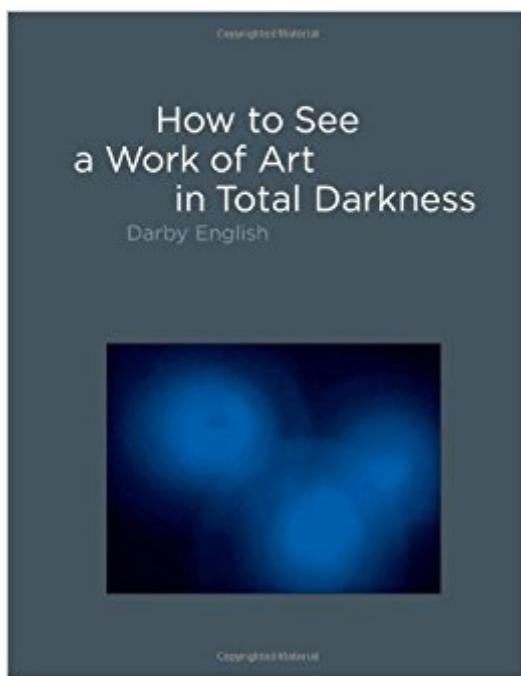


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# How To See A Work Of Art In Total Darkness (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Work by black artists today is almost uniformly understood in terms of its "blackness," with audiences often expecting or requiring it to "represent" the race. In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Darby English shows how severely such expectations limit the scope of our knowledge about this work and how different it looks when approached on its own terms. Refusing to grant racial blackness -- his metaphorical "total darkness" -- primacy over his subjects' other concerns and contexts, he brings to light problems and possibilities that arise when questions of artistic priority and freedom come into contact, or even conflict, with those of cultural obligation. English examines the integrative and interdisciplinary strategies of five contemporary artists -- Kara Walker, Fred Wilson, Isaac Julien, Glenn Ligon, and William Pope.L -- stressing the ways in which this work at once reflects and alters our view of its informing context: the advent of postmodernity in late twentieth-century American art and culture. The necessity for "black art" comes both from antiblack racism and resistances to it, from both segregation and efforts to imagine an autonomous domain of black culture. Yet to judge by the work of many contemporary practitioners, English writes, black art is increasingly less able -- and black artists less willing -- to maintain its standing as a realm apart. Through close examinations of Walker's controversial silhouettes' insubordinate reply to pictorial tradition, Wilson's and Julien's distinct approaches to institutional critique, Ligon's text paintings' struggle with modernisms, and Pope.L's vexing performance interventions, English grounds his contention that to understand this work is to displace race from its central location in our interpretation and to grant right of way to the work's historical, cultural, and aesthetic specificity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This groundbreaking and lucid book expands the social and intellectual context for recent African-American art. It reminds us that this work-far from simply 'representing the race'-resonates with multiple meanings and influences. Rescuing this art from the narrow-mindedness of its critics, English illuminates the significance it holds for all of us." (Maurice Berger, Senior Research Scholar, Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County) English's discursive and dialectical way of comprehending the practices of black artists emancipates both 'black art' and 'black artists' and provides a necessary road for creative ways to 'do' African American art history. (Steven Nelson Art Bulletin) Equally thorough and successful in his presentation of new readings to familiar works of art, English reminds the reader with each carefully considered example that 'to take this art seriously is to traffic in the unfamiliar.' (Jennifer Jordan Camerawork)... How to See is a timely and relevant book, opening a debate that is long overdue. (Art Review) How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness is a standout piece of work at several levels. It is one of the smartest, subtlest, and most compassionate books coming out of the academy to deal with the fraught issues pertaining to identity politics. It is heartening to encounter a work that pushes through the stagnant impasse that the identity debate has become. (Miwon Kwon, Department of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles)

"Set against today's fast-paced, cut-and-paste art spectacles, Rauschenberg's collages, combines, art and technology experiments, and multimedia performances may seem old hat, a bunch of outmoded forms and tamed ideas. But through impeccable archival research and a detailed rereading of Rauschenberg's early works and the context of their emergence and immediate reception, Branden Joseph revivifies the radical spirit of the old. Random Order's recasting of the not yet canonical artist as a Deleuzian deconstructionist and an inheritor of Artaud's theater of cruelty is bound to be controversial among not only Rauschenberg scholars but also historians of the postwar neo-avant-garde. All the better to encourage a reimagining of the present."--Miwon Kwon, Department of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles "English's discursive and dialectical way of comprehending the practices of black artists emancipates both 'black art' and 'black artists' and provides a necessary road for creative ways to 'do' African American art history." Steven Nelson Art Bulletin "Equally thorough and successful in his presentation of new readings to familiar works of art, English reminds the reader with each carefully considered example that 'to take this art seriously is to traffic in the unfamiliar.'" Jennifer Jordan Camerawork " How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness is a standout piece of work at several levels. It is one of the smartest,

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