

IN THE FOREGROUND: CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING
A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

“How to Look with Soft Eyes”: Darby English on Description as Method

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Transcript

Caro Fowler:

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves. In this episode, I speak with Darby English, Carl Darling Buck Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago. In our conversation, we discuss his early affinity with Dutch Golden Age painting, his belief in the vital role description plays in art historical writing, and the necessity of developing soft, slow looking in opposition to the velocity that characterizes cultural production and our lived experiences more broadly.

Darby English:

"The way I have found to establish within the text or within the discipline in some, some prominence for the truth of the object, whatever it may be, is to describe it as faithfully as I can - without centralizing my description and without suggesting, or hopefully without ever suggesting that another describer might see a very different thing."

Caro Fowler:

As a specialist in Dutch painting, I was so struck that you describe your, one of your original art history moments [which] is in the Cleveland Museum of Art with the, with the Dutch galleries. And I was just kind of curious to hear more about that, or-

Darby English:

Yeah.

Caro Fowler:

- I also heard you discuss in an interview that you have your secret, you know, kind of your secret works or your secret loves that you don't write about and you don't discuss. And I couldn't agree more with that. In fact, I hate going to museums with people because I feel like they always want me to pontificate and I have absolutely nothing of interest to say [laughs]. I feel like I just want to sit and view the work. But I would just kind of like to hear about, about your thoughts on Dutch painting...

Darby English:

Yeah, well, it's, I mean, it's true to call them art historical experiences, but they really weren't that for me then -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- because I was a child. I mean, these were just art experiences, museum experiences. But what was it about the Dutch things? I mean, in a museum in the United States, chances are pretty good that you're going to be looking at still life or a landscape -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- or portrait. And that's what we have in Cleveland. I say we, because that's my home museum, that's where -

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Darby English:

- where art happened to me for the first time. And even all of these many decades later, I think a lot of my default art, ideas about my default art experiences are ideas that began to take shape in that building, -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- in those buildings. But you know, I've thought about this a little bit. And you know, I imagine that as a kid, the things that I, that made those pictures make sense to me, were that - especially in the landscapes - they look like where I'm from. They look just like, you know - I didn't grow up in the city. My parents built a house way outside of town. My father was a country boy -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- and my mother was willing to go along with that. And they - the house that I grew up in, at that time it was fully an hour from Cleveland.

Caro Fowler:

Oh, wow. Okay.

Darby English:

And the way that I often describe the area to people now, I say 'There were more cows than people in that part of, in that part of the world.' Back then. That's no longer true because it's been developed, but, you know, van Goyen and Ruisdale, they painted places that looked like what was outside my door.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And I relished the empty space and the quiet, and I think the smallness of the people in those scenes... the sense of a kind of motion that is constant, and clearly idealized, but also somehow immediately human and in that way, relatable.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

The water, the water that predominates in those scenes: I didn't have a big water -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- a big waterway in my life. There was a lake near us in which I failed to learn to swim as a child. It's probably a pretty traumatizing thing at the end of the day. But I don't know what as a child, the water in those works would have done for me. But I think it was more to do with the emotional, the emotional temperature and the quiet, and... Just functionally, like, it was familiar. And as I grew into an understanding and matured, acquired an understanding that this art came from a long way away, both historically and geographically. And in terms of any idea that I could have had [as a child], that estrangement was mysterious because, because the primary feeling [I had] was familiarity.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

So to learn [later] how alien the experience that the paintings came out of in fact is to what I know [and my childhood], was I'm sure, a very captivating mystery out of which I could spend any number of suspiciously linear...

Caro Fowler:

[laughs] teleologies...sure [continues laughing].

Darby English:

Teleologies. Yeah, sure, well of course: 'From that very moment, like I was just [inaudible joking]... The question of history really is...'

Caro Fowler:

[Still laughing]

Darby English:

-.... [jokingly] 'you know, how far away is it really?' But that's not what's going on. I saw a place that looked like my world and...

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

[I saw] just beauty. I loved, I was, especially as a kid, I was just a really happy [laughs], you know I was just a really happy kid.

Caro Fowler:

That's great.

Darby English:

And I was never happier than when I was outside -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- like in the woods, beyond the house, around my neighborhood. And I'm sure, like, we're always - even when we're inside with Dutch painters of the Golden Age - we're outside. The outside is in. It may only be reflected in an edge of a glass vase, or a pewter vase, or the blade of a knife, or it may be outside the windows or outside of an open door in an Ochtervelt or something. But, the outside is always there. So, when you're - even, even in those galleries' pictures that are very much using the kind of in, insideness of the museum.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

The fact that we're in a weather-proofed, air conditioned, -

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs] Yeah.

Darby English:

- purified vault of a place.... I think that, that openness was probably speaking to me, too - on -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- on some level. I mean, I still go to those things. I mean - and this is my, the Rijks[museum] for me is, it prompts probably my most.... It's personally my most important museum in the world - for my own -

Caro Fowler:

Oh, really?

Darby English:

- for my own life purposes as someone. Yes, the Rijksmuseum, because it's... That's almost all there is.

Caro Fowler:

That's interesting. So then in some ways the rural nature of Williamstown must've been quite comfortable to you when you came here for undergrad and then when you returned to be at the Clark.

Darby English:

Yeah. Always.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

Yeah, it always was. I mean it felt like it should be a long way, but because the place is... the place that it is, it was immediately very comfortable. And truly, I didn't have to settle into college in terms of place. I mean I had to settle into the culture for sure -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- but no, the location was really great for me. I think a lot about how, how different - I mean, I know now how many, you know, I know more about how many ways people who choose lives as intellectuals or academics are informed by their home places -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah

Darby English:

- either by the things they cathected in those places or by the things that they refused in those places. And I think, I feel very lucky to have been able to kind of extend my sense of home... while also, you know, going halfway across the country and having every other dimension of my -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- aspect of the structure of my life change.

Caro Fowler:

And so when you first came to Williams, did you know you wanted to major in art history or did that happen slowly?

Darby English:

I did know that. I didn't know before I came, but I knew that within a few weeks. I took art history 101.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

Which was at the time a foundational and legendary sequence taught by only two people: Eva Grudin and EJ Johnson. I took that in the beginning, in the fall of my freshman year. And within just a few weeks of the start of that [class], I knew.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I knew that I was going to follow that as far as I could. But I had come to college with an idea about majoring in English and philosophy. I chose Williams because you could double major. You didn't have to choose a minor -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- you didn't have to demote another interest to a primary interest, which I thought was very exciting, and so I stayed with philosophy. I didn't drop the English major out of any - I mean, I never dropped it - I didn't move away from that plan out of anything other than an unexpected attachment to art history.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I took a lot of courses in English, which were really crucial for me. And I probably learned to read in those courses. I mean, to really read. We didn't... this could sound weird, but I don't think - in the philosophy major, right - I think there was a lot of reading for meaning -

Caro Fowler:

Mm.

Darby English:

- in the course of which the literary moment in philosophy, which is so important, I think was elided quite a lot. At least in the experiences that I was having in the major -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- in the courses that I took to fulfill the major. So, uh, I was probably staying with English to keep with reading, which was always an extremely, what do I want to say? It was an important part of my life, to learn to read better. I'm always trying to be a better reader. And English was where I did that. And in art history. I mean, like the reading of the text, the texts were really important, you know? I think that, I mean, that's always been... I'm sure that's true every place, but I was struck [by that at Williams]. I came in with a 17-year-old's notion that an education in the history of art would mainly be about pictures and objects and buildings. Stuff. And in fact, I ended up getting a very richly textual education in art history at Williams, which is probably why I could have, before I left Williams, had an idea that art history was something that I wanted to do because of how I found the writing. Which is not to say that objects and whatnot, didn't play a deciding role. But I was every bit as attracted to the idea of eventually, hopefully, maybe one day joining a community of writers about art.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. And so you've discussed before how you came across Douglas Crimp's work while you were at Williams and that was, it sounds like it was also another moment in which it was just very clear to you that that's who you wanted to work with, and that's the direction you wanted to go in. You would go to the University of Rochester then to do your PhD. And I was just curious, what was it explicitly within Crimp's text on the museum's ruins that really grabbed you as an undergraduate, that just made it so clear to you that that was who you wanted to study with and what you wanted to do?

Darby English:

Yeah. That's very interesting because it... So what happened was that I, my encounter with, with that collection of Douglas's essays, coincided with my encounter with "Image on the Edge" -

Caro Fowler:

Oh, okay.

Darby English:

- which was, at that time, a brand new book by Michael Camille, which was, and still is, an incendiary and radicalizing intervention into medieval art history.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And what encountering both of those books in 1994 meant for me, was that from inside of my college experience, from inside of my pursuing the [art history] major through courses and conversations and various inchoate campus activities, from inside of that experience, I gained, a very clear understanding of what - of the way art history at Williams was structured and what as out-of-bounds.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

Of what the experience I was having did not want me to know, did not want me to ask, did not want me to bring to bear on art history, from questions I was learning to ask in political theory courses, or in continental philosophy courses, or in English, or in poems that I might be reading, or in poetry criticism that I might be reading... I became aware of the structuration of the discipline while I was learning to inhabit the discipline.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

As opposed to at some anterior moment, either before or after, you know, the primary encounter. So [I had] that dumb luck, just the dumb luck, of having really sharp, critical questions added to my toolbox. That meant that when I finished the major I had a year and a half left after that spring and I kind of spent that whole time, like, wondering what else art history could do.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And I unsuccessfully proposed to the art history department a senior thesis project. I proposed a senior thesis project on Foucault and museums,

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I wanted to write about the museum of art like in a Foucauldian attitude. I had discovered Foucault early in college. It took me half of college to figure out what the words even meant. Then I learned that there were, that there were two other Foucaults that... [both laugh]. I started, you know, everyone begins with "Discipline and Punish" and like, you know, you can't stop there because there's a lot more projects to come, you know?

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

And that experience of having what I thought was a brilliant thesis proposal -

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

- shot down by the art history department -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- that really that really clenched - what's the word - cinched the deal closed?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

That really made it clear that I was up against an institutional limitation that I had not only an obligation to think about, but I needed a way around it. I needed a way through it. And so I thought to try and continue working on these things with Douglas [Crimp]. If we don't use our voices, which are the only ones we have, unless we're acting them, like unless we're performers and we can choose our voices - which, in fact, we are.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. Art history is a performance, if nothing else. [Laughs]

Darby English:

I mean, my life as a speaker... I'm 46 and, you know, I've had speaking [issues] ever since I could speak. So let's say 44 years, minimum, of a fraught relationship to voice and voicing, and speech and speaking, and talk and talking, and being heard and being - well, being listened to, of course - but really being heard as another related matter. And at a certain point I had gained enough control over my stutter to not give little talks to my audiences at the beginning of my lectures about how I was probably going to stutter, there's going to be pauses, please don't be uncomfortable - I'm not uncomfortable - we just just have to be patient, I always get through it. I would take a couple of minutes at the beginning of every single lecture and talk about stuttering. And I, like, I always find a way to make it funny on the spot because the laughter that people had helped me hugely. And I have to believe that it probably also helped people in that setting, who might've been somehow discomfited by a speaker with a speech problem to be a little bit less, you know...

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

So... But at a certain point I stopped giving that preamble. But I have a device which no one knows about. We're going to share now [laughs], which is: I have around my typescript, at all times above it on a post-it note like this, I write in big, black Sharpie, 'Slow like Crow.'

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

And that means that I channel Tom Crow's lecture voice.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughing] Oh, really?

Darby English:

Yeah, I do. And if I have forgotten what that means, I will take a few minutes in the green room before a lecture and pull up his Mellon lectures on YouTube -

Caro Fowler:

Wow.

Darby English:

- and listen to 20 to 40 seconds of Tom giving a lecture, which he does from typescripts, but with a lot of, a lot of improvising or asides and, you know, always very brilliant and on-point, as we say; and, you know, in a strange way, for all of the erudition and the preparedness of it [Tom's lectures], somehow immediately colloquial is his idea in that context.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And I find it absolutely inspiring. And more importantly, on those occasions, it's the reminder that I need that I don't have to rush, and that if I don't rush, the speaking part will be much, much smoother than what I, in my most neurotic expectations, or apprehensive expectation, expect it to be.

Caro Fowler:

Many people who talk about your work - and you're also quite, you talk about it yourself - is the prominent role of description and the role that description plays. And really sitting with it as a practice. Where for you does description fall in terms of... I mean, in some ways I think of Steven Best and, and Sharon Marcus and Heather Love and their work on description. And also kind of surface reading and the ways of thinking about that in terms of surface, and also perhaps a sense of, kind of trying to rescue a project of description from being merely descriptive and trying to articulate it within a process of making knowledge while also, at the same time I think, arguing that the method of description allows or

asks the writer, while it acknowledges the authorial voice, it also asks for perhaps a greater sense of humility?

Darby English:

Yeah. That's a great question. I'm still thinking about what, what description is and what it means to me. Yeah. I have a commitment to description, for sure. And it's a strong one. It goes back. And it has developed over time. I think it could be helpful just to say a little bit about what it goes back to?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

For me, it goes back to some moment where... I can't be too specific because it's, you know, it's a bunch of moments throughout that kind of run together, but. A period of time in which, you know, I had decided I was interested in some art or other, and as the first investigative move after just observing the work for awhile, and coming to some sense, coming....: Like, you see some art and something happens and you get excited.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And you feel yourself to have exhausted the looking part of dealing with the work. So you turn to the library.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

Between the library and the work is you know, maybe the label or the catalog essays or whatever. But eventually you get to the library. And you go to the parts of the library where the authoritative accounts of that work can be found. And you read those exhaustively. And in doing that and doing that for various reasons, in response to certain responses to works that I had had, I found, I noticed myself asking books and essays over and over again, like, 'Have you looked at what you're talking about?'

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

All these words about this thing, or [about] some art historical phenomenon.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

Some actual or conceptual art historical object has been gone on and on and on and on about by you and by some other person... those other people... everybody on these shelves. There are all these words about these discrete things, which by and large tell the truth about themselves. Did you look at what you have written? What you wrote about? Because I don't know how else to understand the gap. How else to think about the emergence and the historical meaning of the gap between what I see - what I saw - when I looked at that thing. And what you've written 10 million pages and 12 million footnotes about.

Caro Fowler:

Right.

Darby English:

I don't know how to think about the gap between those two entities without wondering what produced the gap between the described - between the object and these accounts of it. And I came to a certain, I think exasperation, with how often the gap was present. And how often the remainder, you know, like all the rest of the work that was left behind after you got the thing that you came for.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I call it out with my students, I talk a lot about the hypothetical burden that we carry as art historians. I think it's a vestige of our scientism.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And it has to do with coming habitually to works of art with a hypothesis that we intend to verify or satisfy or confirm. And one of the many things that means is that we only leave with the piece that we came for. And the remainder remains on the wall, on the floor, in the situation, floating in discourse, unaccounted for. And the gap, again, between the things for which we have produced accounts and what the accounts actually account for. It seems like unintended, you know.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I think, I at some point I got it in my head that my work is to think about the gap, to historicize the gap, to cover the gap when I can, when it feels - not when I can, but when it feels important. And sometimes it feels urgent to account for the difference between what something is, as I understand it, and what it has been said to be.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

So that's where that's... So, we're supposed to be talking about description. I think I have tended to think of description as a way to do that gap-attending, -

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Darby English:

- as exhaustively and truthfully as I can. Like, you know, if there's a remainder, if you accept, if you buy this thing I'm saying about the remainder, -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- that remainder has to be accounted for in order for a really equitable discursive situation or a verbal supplement to form around the material. And description is one way of doing that. It's also, for me, you know, it addresses a completely unrelated problem. I'm sure it's related in some manner, but it feels to me thematically very different from that first thing. Another thing that has made description feel very, very urgent is an increasing attraction to, or tendency to be content with interpretations that fall back on really common sense -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- keywords, trending signifiers, large topoi and themes -

Caro Fowler:

Mhm.

Darby English:

- that everybody is interested in. You know, often I feel that the artworks and other cultural texts are called on to exemplify those themes, to body forth those keywords or popular concepts, that really aren't up to the task of doing that. That they've been called on to do a kind of representational work that is not in league with the representational work they themselves seem to do.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And one way to prove that a representational project of a work of art or cultural text differs, importantly from someone else's representational project - whether it's a curator with a theme or an art historian with a bee in their bonnet about some big topic or another - one way to prove that these projects are different and not to be confused with one another is to describe the thing to a point of exhaustion. There is a kind of object-truth that I, that I think, warrants more advocacy than it receives at the moment. And one way to, I think, one way I have found to establish within a text or within the discipline some prominence for the truth of the object - whatever it might be - is to describe it as faithfully as I can, without centralizing my description and without hopefully ever suggesting that another describer might see a very different thing.

Caro Fowler:

Right. And how do you see an understanding of that encounter in relationship to say, Michael Holly's engagement with phenomenological encounter - but even more that, it's an encounter that from the very outset, in some ways, as bound-, is bound to fail within language, that there's always going to be, there's always going to be something lost when the experience of the work moves into language. And I guess I'm just curious to see how you, as someone who worked very closely with Michael for a long time, I'm just curious how, how you understand your relationship with language and the object vis-à-vis Michael's.

Darby English:

Yeah. Well, I think Michael has, you know, she has a conviction in the inevitability of that, of that breakdown.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I don't.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

So that's, that's one important difference between the kind of, the principle from which we set out -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- or a character of the assumption from which we set out. The kind of culminating act that Michael theorizes and historicizes so beautifully -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- and so persuasively in her work, you know, the final act is always known in advance. [Both laugh] That, and I would say it to her just like this, I would say, you know, I love the show.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

I love the show.

Caro Fowler:

[Continues laughing]

Darby English:

You know? And I think she's got great taste in art too. It's like, I could listen to this show for the rest of my life. I could listen to it -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Darby English:

- but, you know, I'm just bothered by always knowing the ending [in advance]. You know? [Laughs]

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

It's like, I'm slightly unnerved by always knowing that we're going to end in some kind of a place where none of the things we've said matter -

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

- or, or that they matter terribly, but we can't say them without these incredibly weighty qualifications about, you know, their -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- about pretty obvious differences between their character as utterances and the character of artworks as utterances. So, it's just, you know. I don't think we, I don't think we disagree very much.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I think it's, what is interesting in the conflict between our approaches - in the encounter between our approaches, let's say, because I don't even think it's conflictual - what's interesting in the encounter between our approaches is the attitude towards conclusion.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

If I can say it that way. Something.... you know, I never know what my students or another viewer are going to do with something that we look at together. I never know. And that means a kind of perpetual surprise - like a kind of ongoing surprise - is a feature of talking about art for me. And I think there should be a place for surprise in our argumentation, too, you know?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

It can't - to me - it can't stand that surprise can so consistently and completely characterize the nature of our conversations about art, but somehow appear so infrequently in our literature about art. Art History never surprises me -

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

- which is why I would-, more often than not I'd rather read in another discipline -

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

- and bring in something that I found in another discipline to art history. I am against knowing in advance -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- because it's perverse. It's backwards. Because we never really know what's about to happen, even when we're looking at something that we think we know by heart for the umpteenth time. Something in

the context around it and around us may have shifted, may have shifted things sufficiently to yield another kind of insight, another fragment of insight, another idea. Maybe we need to have another kind of conversation altogether because of some change that has taken place since the last time we did this. And when we know in advance, we, I think, assume wrongly that nothing new can happen.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. What you're talking about reminds me about the ways in which you describe your encounter in the studio of Kerry James Marshall with the painting of the Black police officer sitting on the car and the ways in which you came to that with a set of assumptions and the painting demanded that you think about the ambivalence of that position and meaning, really holding the complexity of that work. And when you've been talking, I've just been thinking about that chapter in your book, and the ways in which you lead the reader through that process for yourself.

Darby English:

Absolutely. Yeah, I mean, I wanted... I saw an unfinished painting in the studio and I finished it in my head. And I asked Kerry to come back when it was done. And I went back and it was done and he had not painted the picture that I finished in my head.

Caro Fowler:

[Laughs]

Darby English:

I had really wanted that painting.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

And I had to think on the spot, I had to reorient. I didn't dislike what he had done. In fact, I was profoundly moved in the best way. But I had to actually, like, I had to like jackhammer a space into my conceptual map, into my conceptual map of, like, paintings of policemen by Kerry James Marshall.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

Paintings of policemen period. I had to create a space in my conceptual map to let that picture in. If I had not done that, I would have been in some kind of, like, furious... I would have just spun off into some, some dismissive, judgmental disappointment about Kerry or the painting - when in fact the problem would have been that I simply didn't make the necessary adjustments, you know?

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I, you know... Another thing that I say to my students all the time is that, you know, you can never pay too much attention. Ever. It can be a Roni Horn glass monolith on the floor of a gallery, on the stone - it can be nothing but solid glass pervaded by pigment and invaded by light, some texture, maybe not. That could be all, all there is to it. I'm doing scare quotes, 'That that could be all there is to it.' You can not look too much at that thing. Like, you cannot pay too much attention to that thing. But you can look too hard. You can never pay too much attention, but you can look too hard at a thing. And what I mean by looking too hard at a thing is the kind of looking that is so fixated on what is in fact, a mental object.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

A fixation that creates a concerted effort to turn what's right in front of our bodies and eyes into the thing in our head, to make it conform with what we're projecting onto it. That's what I mean by looking too hard. We do the same things with interpretations that we have, that we're attached to, concepts that we're attached to, themes that we're attached to. Even if they're just, like, the way so-and-so makes a picture or the way so-and-so works, or the kind of big '-ism' that so-and-so represents, you know? This leaves artists very little room to move in.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

It gives artists and artworks and viewers and thinkers and historians about art very little room to move in. It doesn't only overdetermine things. It constrains thought, and action, and intellectual practice in culture -

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

- in the arena of culture, in terribly, terribly narrowing and suffocating ways. So, you know, soft eyes. Figure out how to have soft eyes and use them. And it also means something very slow. My colleague Lauren Berlant, here at Chicago, she said, 'Darby you want to slow your object down.' And I had to agree.

Caro Fowler:

Yeah.

Darby English:

I had to agree. And it came, that way of putting it, it came as a bit of a surprise because I always thought of me as the one that needed, that I was trying to slow me down. Because I am the spazz who looks too hard at everything to get it done and get onto the next thing. I am that spazz. But in fact, what Lauren putting it that way to me - 'Darby, you want to slow your object down' - showed me, was that I'm in a relationship with my stuff, with the things I'm writing about, and asking you to look at with me for the

duration of the text or the reading of the text. Because of the cultural space that we're all in together - you and me and our common object - because that place moves, moves us along so quickly from the moment of the appearance of the thing, to a meaning that we can attach to it, to call it what it is and move on to the next thing so that we can label that and move onto the third thing. And we can label that and move onto the fourth thing. That context moves all of us along through experience, through perception, through reflection, through writing, through teaching, through lecturing, through Q&A, through the dinner after the Q&A...

Caro Fowler:

Yeah. As an outsider, to both modernist and American art history and African-American art history, it seems to me that your entire project, from "How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness" until now has been about allowing for the complexity of African-American and Black artists within the art historical canon. And that by doing that, you are writing a new art history that isn't about white modernist and Black artists, but it's about art history. And it's about, it's about the ways that all these worlds come together, in ways that are slow and messy and complex. And it seems to me that there's a way in which that writing of art history - while at the same time it's something that the discipline claims to want and all these job searches, and all these movements - it's actually a writing of art history that is too complex sometimes for our current moment.

Darby English:

Yeah, I think that's right. I don't think I could get a job in the current moment. I couldn't do it. Because I - I mean, I hope I could - but I think I couldn't because if I'm given the choice between a simpler and a more complex account of something that a serious artist has done, I will always choose the more complex account. Not for the sake of complexity itself, but because I think the more complex thing is more likely to be adequate to something that a serious person is attempting to show me. A serious artist is trying to show me something that she knows I haven't seen before. It's going to take time. And also it's going to entail some difficulty and effort on everybody's part to come to terms with, and for, something that we haven't seen before. We opt out of the harder, slower, less-sure-to-make-sense-thing. We don't want the mud of the real on our shoes. We definitely don't want tracks of the mud of the real coming into our house or our workplace. We confidently name everything that appears before us. The last thing we want is sustained contact. I get up every day and write to try and work at a complexity that's a little more agreeable than, you know, then the one before. And maybe one day the complexity will be wanted as much, or as often as, as the easy image is wanted.

Caro Fowler:

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clarkart.edu/rap/podcasts. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn and additional support provided by Jesse Sentivan and Alice Matthews.