Sarah Thomas, *Witnessing Slavery: Art and Travel in the Age of Abolition*. London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2019. xiii + 286 pp. (Cloth US\$55.00)

This lavishly illustrated book by Australian art historian Sarah Thomas considers art by European visitors to the Americas between 1760 and 1840. Engaging and provocative, it deals mainly with British publications during the heyday of illustrated book publishing, persuasively arguing that these artworks were deeply influenced by the politics surrounding their production. Thomas focuses throughout on European travelers who drew or painted “on the spot,” actually witnessing slavery and thereby establishing a particular kind of epistemological authority. Acknowledging that images of the enslaved almost inevitably deny their subjectivity, she insists that such images, when created by eyewitnesses, nonetheless hold special value and a place in the history of art that helps us understand the ways Europeans confronted slavery and abolition.

Following an introductory chapter, she considers the eighteenth-century discourse of Sensibility, from philosophy to painting. Beginning with “the sympathetic eyewitness” epitomized by John Gabriel Stedman’s self-portrait, standing over his slain Maroon foe (“’Twas Yours to fall—but Mine to feel the wound”), she quickly turns to two leitmotifs of the abolition struggle: the oft-reproduced *Am I not a Man and a Brother?*, perhaps best known in its Josiah Wedgwood form, and the countless-times reprinted cross-section of the Liverpool slaver *Brookes*, tracing revealing histories of both. The bulk of the chapter deals with the ways abolitionism penetrated high art in Britain, considering such paintings as George Morland’s *Execrable Human Traffick* and John Simpson’s *The Captive Slave*.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Agostino Brunias, the Anglo-Italian artist who created a plethora of West Indian scenes showing well-appointed slaves dancing, engaged in ritualized stick-fighting, selling fruits in markets, and—even when attending their masters—exhibiting contentment and wellbeing. Thomas depicts Brunias, using counterexamples from other contemporary art, as a prime supporter of the planters’ defense against abolition—that a humane (and peaceful, profitable) slave society was possible and sustainable, exactly as his patron, Sir William Young, desired.

Thomas next turns to Stedman, in a strong chapter that builds on the Price and Price 1988 edition, arguing that Stedman’s role as an artist/draughtsman played a more significant role in the production of its famous plates than previous art historians (and Blake scholars) have acknowledged. Stressing Stedman’s eye-witnessing of the horrors he painted, she demonstrates that his images of the enslaved “conformed to the same scientific imperatives as those of flora and

fauna; that is, to record factual information about the ‘natural’ world” (p. 115). Her overall argument is for “the reclamation of Stedman as the primary creator of the plates (despite the paucity of extant drawings in his hand) and for the significance of the artist working on the spot in the service of science” (p. 123). And she nicely traces the way the *Narrative*, with its stunning plates, appeared at just the right moment in the abolition debate to enflame the British public and become “some of the most widely reproduced—and contested—images of colonial slavery” (p. 99).

Chapter 5, “Visual Testimony from a Jamaican Resident,” analyzes how James Hakewell’s 1820s–30s “picturesque” “effectively normalised the institution [of slavery], transforming it into a palatable message for his anxious clientele” both in Jamaica and the metropole during the last phase of abolition.

Thomas’s final and longest chapter (“Slavery as Spectacle”) concerns images of Brazil, specifically 1820s Rio de Janeiro (which had the largest urban slave population in the Americas). Here, she considers the œuvres of the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Debret, British-born Augustus Earle, and the Bavarian Johann Moritz Rugendas to raise questions about how “present-day viewers confront the complexities, ambiguities and ethics of witnessing and in so doing ask questions about how the visual culture of slavery can best be understood today” (p. 163). A brief concluding section examines François-Auguste Biard’s *The Slave Trade* and J.M.W. Turner’s *Slave Ship*, both displayed at the Royal Academy in 1840—their contrasting reception, subsequent histories, and place in the politics of Western art.

Throughout the book, Thomas places paintings and drawings by artists not focused on as examples and counterexamples to her arguments. Artists she might have discussed at length—e.g., the Belgian Pierre J. Benoit—make only cameo appearances but their work is beautifully reproduced.

I saw only a few small infelicities. Thomas claims that the “majority of [Stedman’s] images” were engraved by Blake (though only 16 of the 81 were); and had she looked beyond my 2011 email saying we had found no new Stedman drawings since 1988, she would have discovered a handful that now sit in the James Ford Bell Library. This is a fine book that presents memorable images and will stimulate Caribbeanists for a long time to come.

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