

# James Castle

## Show and Store

### Castle's Place

Imagine a body of art-work created over seven decades by a man who devoted himself virtually full time to his vocation, and who managed to preserve most of it for posterity. This extraordinary corpus comprises vast numbers of drawings made with soot, constructions stitched together from found pieces of card-board, and handmade books. None of these artefacts are dated or titled; nor are there records that would illuminate their chronology. There are no interviews with the artist; he never wrote about his activity; and relatively little is known about his choice of materials and techniques. Born in 1899 in rural Idaho, James Castle worked in almost complete isolation from the art world until his death in 1977. Only in the late 1990s did his work begin to appear in mainstream art circuits: during his lifetime it had circulated locally or under the rubric of Outsider or Self Taught art.



Untitled, n.d.  
Soot and saliva on  
found paper.  
12,70 x 10,80 cm  
Private collection

Among the drawings made from soot collected from a wood burning stove and mixed with saliva, the largest group is devoted to the landscape, ranch and farm house in Garden Valley where Castle was born and spent his early years. Other subjects include clothing, figures, printed matter, and texts. Together with fair copies of advertising materials, there are also some that reflect his fondness for transposing a motif so that images which start out as faithful representations gradually morph into simple geometric forms over a series of studies. Repetition, in manifold guises, is a key feature of his practice. Like all Castle's works, these small delicate drawings were executed on found material: packaging, commercial brochures

and religious tracts, discarded envelopes and invoices, ice-cream cartons and the trays of matchboxes, even his siblings' homework. Less numerous are the wash drawings made by soaking tissue and other coloured papers in water then applying the bright dyes to absorbent surfaces with wads of paper. Like most of the techniques Castle devised, this too could create nuanced effects, as seen in his delicate depiction of an alarm clock, and in a series of small spare landscapes composed from two close-toned hues, an olive green and a chalky blue, densely applied to flaps torn from ice-cream cartons. As these diverse works attest, the hallmark of his finest drawing is an assured economy of means and making put in service to the investigation of pictorial idioms.

The handmade books range in size from the miniature dimensions of a match book to a hefty reference tome. Their contents, too, are diverse; some are comprised solely of texts and/or syllabaries and calendars; others are filled with portraits in the manner of a family photo album, while others contain anecdotal scenes. While several have as few as four or five pages, many are much larger, containing up forty or more spreads. Since there is little trace of ghosting, the artist likely drew the images or lettered the pages before assembling and binding them between stiff card covers, whose outer surfaces seem selected with an eye to their decorative as well as protective qualities. Occasionally, Castle appropriated pamphlets and brochures whose texts he obliterated with his own writing. From time to time he resorted to the ready-made option of drawing groups of wavy lines to stand in for text. Mostly, however, he seems to have preferred to introduce new scripts in which he combined Roman letters with borrowings from other alphabets, such as Cyrillic, alongside his own typographic inventions. Although illiterate,

Castle well understood both the multiple functions served by books and their design protocols: the role of margins, the integration of text and image, or the positioning of the author's name. But, rather than adhering strictly to the conventions governing structure and layout, he played with them and so imparted a distinctive identity to each book.

The repertoire of subjects found in his constructions is considerably narrower than in the other two principal bodies of work: coats and, less often, dresses and hats; wild and domestic birds; pitchers, bowls and jugs, and squat blocky figures of both sexes. By far the largest group, however, is comprised of architectural motifs: they range from economical renderings of doors and door-frames to blind windows, fragments of papered and patterned wall, and even a section of wall containing a light socket. Crude stitches baste the pieces of card together in the way a dress-maker might tack parts of a garment into place before the final seaming. The detailing is crucial: on the coats, for example, the buttons and belts attest to a discerning sartorial scrutiny. When applied to the constructions of the smaller birds that same probing regard imbued them with an unexpectedly tender, whimsical tone.

*James Castle: Show and Store* is designed to foreground some of the principal concerns informing Castle's art making. It therefore privileges matters relating to practice over those of biography, whether they relate to his deafness and illiteracy, his isolation from the artistic mainstream, or his limited formal training. The point of departure is Castle's singular manner of hoarding, safe-guarding, handling and installing his work. As his drawings record, and the volume of his extant work attests, Castle developed a distinctive approach to the preservation of his art. Similarly sized works were gathered into groups then wrapped and carefully tied into bundles, or fitted snugly into customized boxes. These containers were then placed well out of the reach of the curious, concealed from view high above the ground on rafters, or buried within the walls and floor of a disused building – a barn or chicken coop – that he commandeered to do double duty as a storehouse and a make-shift show-room. His assiduous care for his work cannot be divorced from the fact that virtually everything feels like a “finished” work made with total commitment. There is almost nothing that can be described as a brief notation, an abandoned sketch, or a cursory study. Few works bear even the signs of major revision or reworking. The constructions and drawings appear to have been realized in a single session, whereas the grander of the hand-made books must have been done over extended periods. Like the bundles and boxes they, too, may be deemed storage vessels and containers.

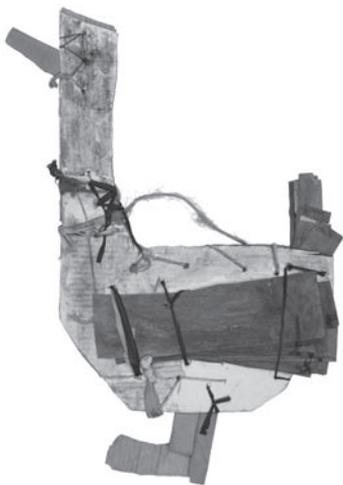
If safeguarding his work was a determining impulse for Castle, so too was displaying it. Often, and with evident pleasure, he showed drawings (but not books and constructions) to family members and occasional visitors. By contrast, in his make-shift show rooms he concocted – at least in imagination, possibly also in reality – elaborate presentations comprised of all three types of work. Whether set up for his exclusive pleasure or for a hypothetical audience, these dense installations juxtaposed drawings and constructions over the walls of an otherwise empty room. Sometimes, constructions were also placed along the beams, or propped at the junction of floor and wall, or arrayed in boxes stacked up to form an impromptu theatre set. On occasion, books might be laid out casually on the ground. Recording these installations are some of the most detailed and refined drawings Castle ever made, as notable for their subtle and complex renderings of space, ambience and atmosphere, as for their documentary qualities.

Alongside those improvised exhibitions, Castle imagined more familiar roles for his works. Some drawings depict his pictures displayed on the walls of the family residence, where they appear alongside portraits and sundry items. In yet others, small constructed figures invade the house, where they grace the top of the piano, or gather as if for a group portrait. In 1962 a selection of Castle's drawings was exhibited at the Boise Art Gallery. Exceptionally, the artist attended this public event, which he recorded in a unique drawing that portrays a selection of his works

arranged in a single well-spaced line around three walls of a vaulted gallery. That conventional way of installing is very different from the more traditional salon style hang he preferred when curating his own shows. Those signature modes of showing and storing provide the conceptual basis for this exhibition, and inform its presentation.

Castle seems to have figured out for, and (largely) by, himself what the role and significance of written language might be. He reached a like understanding of the range of functions played by art works of various kinds in daily life. In addition, he grasped many of the conceptual problematics associated with picturing and related modes of visual representation. An impulse to record the world was thus only part of what fuelled his broadly based art activity. The fantastical also had its place, as seen

Untitled, n.d.  
Construction; string  
and cardboard.  
53,34 x 36,83 cm  
Private collection



in a number of studies of landscapes have been invaded by groups of unidentifiable vertical elements. Of less interest than the question of where these enigmatic forms may have originated – whether in something as familiar as a scarecrow or telegraph pole, or whether as visualizations of unnameable fears and anxiety – is the expressive affect they generate. They infuse what in Castle's art was usually a contemplative subject based in childhood recollection with dark, disquieting moods. Also indicative of his readiness to dispense with a realist idiom is his willingness to deploy patterning which, as many of the wall papered interiors demonstrate, he clearly relished in and for itself, for more than decorative ends. Never partial to modelling as a means to create volume, Castle introduced a herringbone design in place of shading to impart a sense of texture, mass and substance to buildings. Metaphorically as well as literally, this inspired gesture underscores the fact that architecture, like clothing, shelters and houses the body.

Also anomalous within Castle's *oeuvre* is group of little known landscape works, executed with the most minimal means in monochromatic washes of blue or pink or a subtle palette of greys and black. A combination of suggestion, ellipsis and elimination infuses these unidentifiable featureless locations with an allusive elegiac, even melancholic mood such that they invite comparison with experimental landscape studies made by J. M. W. Turner, Alexander Cozens or Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot. Conjured through the act of making rather than conceived as a record of something seen directly or remembered, they stand apart from most of Castle's drawings not only on stylistic and formal grounds but in their content: they mark a significant shift from the notion of place as *genius loci* so central to Castle's mental universe.

On one of his rare hybrid works – a construction/drawing – the word “place” is spelt out: a sign or marker for a nameless location. When this sign is read as an injunction, however, it takes on other valences. The command “to place” challenges the reader not only to position the object within the artist's *oeuvre* but, by extension, to place that *oeuvre* in an appropriate framework. Given the compelling beauty, and formal inventiveness of much of Castle's art, its presentation in an institution devoted to modern and contemporary art, like Museo Reina Sofia, would seem to require little justification. For what is at stake is not whether Castle should be considered an Outsider artist. Castle's work needs to be placed within a framework, a discursive context, that foregrounds the languages of representation at its core.

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**Museum hours**

Monday to Saturday

from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Sundays

from 10:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Closed tuesdays

Galleries close 15 minutes  
prior to Museum closing

**James Castle**

Show and Store

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**Images**

Courtesy of the Tayloe Piggott Gallery,  
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**Text**

by Lynne Cooke

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