

JAMES CASTLE (1899-1977)

In the contemporary art world, when we discuss historical figures of art, we must be careful not to romanticize too greatly the details of their personal lives or professional situations. That said, we cannot ignore those same circumstances as reasons for their motivation as artists or as an explanation for their choices of subject or media. This is especially true for self-taught artists, and indeed, all artists who work outside the confines of predictability. In the end, their work has to survive and flourish within the art world on its own strength and merits. The appeal of so-called 'outsider' art is its lack of self-consciousness and its unedited nature. As contemporary viewers of art we operate behind so many levels of analysis, irony and projection that it is a revelation to discover art in its purest form—art of pure exuberance, pure obsession, and pure courage. This is the art of James Castle.



JAMES CASTLE
UNTITLED UNTITLED (
friend in black jacket), date unknown
Soot on found paper, folded, 4.5 x 2 inches

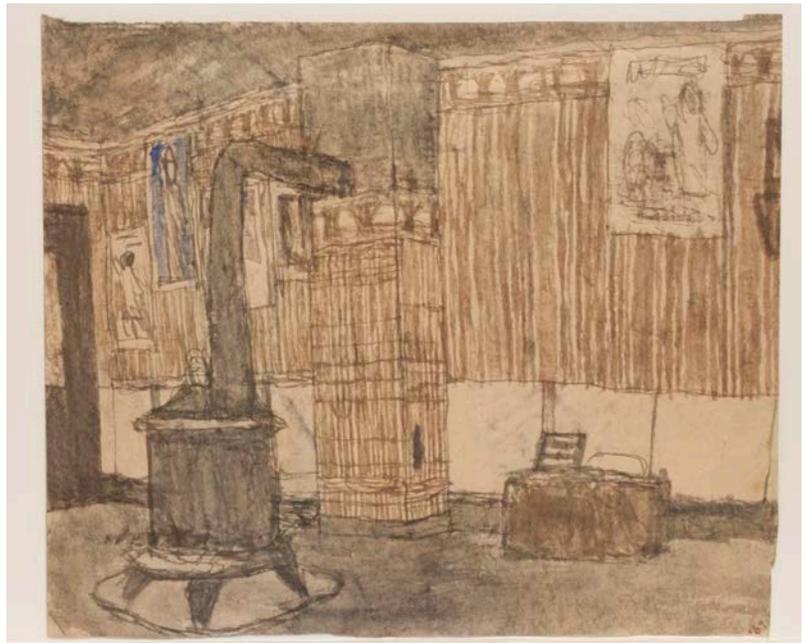
DRAWING AS COMMUNICATION

Castle's most eloquent means of expressing what he felt about the world around him was through drawing, often drawing accurately from memory. Whether drawing the domestic interior scenes of his home or rendering the rustic architecture and pastoral terrain of rural Idaho, Castle repeatedly tried to place the viewer within his own idiosyncratic world. Castle's attempt to communicate his unique experience is virtually unparalleled in the history of art. Comparing Castle's devotion and sheer output, one can think of Goya obsessively drawing on the walls of his house in Madrid, Cocteau's diaristic compulsion to draw, or van Gogh repeatedly painting views of his bedroom at Arles—all artists whose work transcends their biographies.

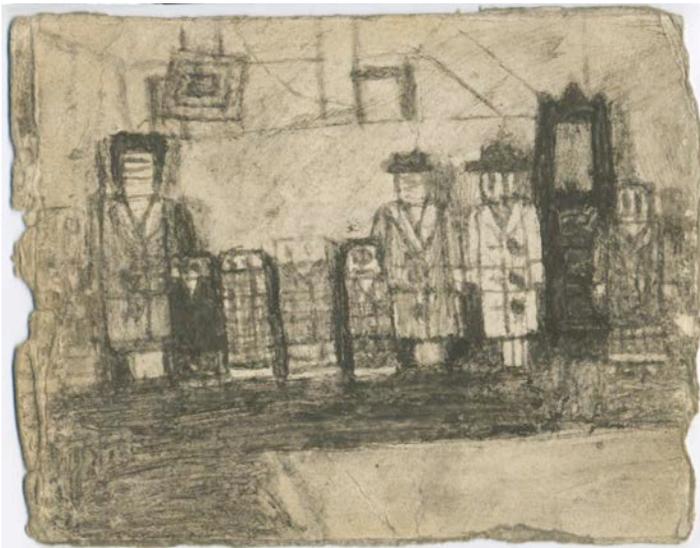
PERSONAL HISTORY

James Castle was born deaf, and many believe now that he was autistic. Clearly, he never learned to speak, read or write. He employed a unique system of home-based signs and gestures within his own family. Graphic type, letters, numbers and symbols apparently meant something to him, and often appear in his work, but it's unclear how he perceived them.

With the exception of a difficult six-month term at a school for the deaf, Castle spent his entire life within the confines of his family's home and neighborhood. They lived in Garden Valley for 25 years and the rural Boise area for 52 years. Castle's parents ran the local general store and Post Office from their home in Garden Valley, which functioned as a gathering place for the community. Still, Castle's life was quite solitary in most respects despite his roles as a well-loved son, brother, and uncle to his family. Although his family encouraged his artistic endeavors, providing him with the necessary support and opportunity to create, he was also sheltered from the outside world and didn't venture very far into it. His status as an "outsider" is perhaps irrelevant. His determination as a self-taught artist is much more compelling.



JAMES CASTLE
UNTITLED (interior with stove / interior with coffee grinder), 20th c.
Soot and color of unknown origin on paper, 8.5 x 10.25 inches



JAMES CASTLE
 UNTITLED (family of friends / star house exterior), date unknown
 Soot and saliva on found board, double-sided, 5.5 x 7 inches, \$25,500.

By all accounts, Castle's mastery of perspective drawing was self-taught from observation and mimicry. This ability became more assured as his work progressed over the 70 years in which he made art between his birth in 1900 and his death in 1977. While a level of playful inventiveness and independent resourcefulness pervades the tremendous output of his productive life, some of the most intriguing aspects of Castle's work were his particular choices of media, and how some of his techniques unknowingly parallel major artistic innovations of the 20th Century.

ARTISTRY IN SPIT AND SOOT

Using stove soot mixed with his own saliva on the tips of sharpened sticks, Castle devised a unique substitute for graphite or ink. Despite the rudimentary materials and eccentric technique, Castle achieves an astonishingly varied sense of light and shade in each work with powerful lines and brilliantly nuanced textures that enliven the surface. From hand-mashed scraps of colored tissue papers and color printed packaging, Castle made a kind of paper pulp and pigment utilized as another artist might use paint. Castle used this colored pulp to create mysterious works with softly focused forms reminiscent of the paper pulp prints of Chuck Close or David Hockney from the 1980s.

Although we can safely assume that he had little to no knowledge of trends in art during his 70 years of production, it is a strange bit of synchronicity that much of Castle's work employs two of the most important 20th Century innovations in art, collage and appropriation. Recalling the work of Schwitters and Warhol, Castle used colored papers and found bits of plain or printed cardboard to fashion intricate constructions depicting birds and people as well as inanimate objects such as doors, books, cups or items of clothing. Akin to the strategies of Art Brut, Castle also built figural totems--called 'friends' by his family--made of dozens of layered rectangular pieces of cardboard that the artist painstakingly sewed together with irregular stitches. Referring to body parts, the stacked geometric forms recall the blocky volumes Marisol uses in her sculptural portraits.

THE POWER OF WORDS

The most intriguing and enigmatic works in the exhibition are Castle's text pieces. Ever since Picasso included scraps of *Le Figero* in one of his compositions, text has played a major role in 20th century art. Considering that Castle never learned to read or write, it is intriguing that he was fascinated with printed text throughout his life. And although he likely wouldn't have known a Jasper Johns from a Rauschenberg, it is interesting to note these artists when confronted with Castle's work.

Castle fastidiously copied alphabets, numbers, and symbols, used his own invented personal glyphs, and produced book-length collections with numbers and symbols. Even volumes that appear to be calendars of some sort. And in some of the most puzzling pieces in the exhibition, Castle chose (or was given) phrases out of newspapers and magazines, cut out of them tiny rectangular pieces, and then meticulously glued the text back together. These works are remarkable not only for the care in execution, but also for the phrases themselves. But we have to remember that the words or phrases such as "CASTLE GATE," or "STAR," or "LEAVES," held a much different appeal to Castle than what we perceive in the word. For Castle, it may have been a question of the graphic qualities of text while for us, the secret code of an elusive artist yet to be deciphered.

Like many other self-taught artists, such as Bill Traylor, James Hampton, the Gee's Bend Quilters, or Bessie Harvey, the peculiarities of Castle's life can be emphasized to the extent that they overshadow the extraordinary accomplishments of his life's work. The Greg Kucera Gallery is pleased to present this work within the fuller context of contemporary art.



JAMES CASTLE
 UNTITLED (leaves), date unknown
 Found paper and wheat paste, 3.5 x 6 inches