

## The Presence of James Castle

By Ricki Morse



James Castle (1899-1977) was an artist from Idaho whom we engage only through his art. He was highly intelligent and profoundly deaf and mute. He did not read, write, speak or sign. From his teens to the end of his life he made art every day, working alone, using found materials. Scraps of paper and flattened boxes became his canvas and the covers of his books of drawings. He carefully preserved all his work, packing it into the walls of his family

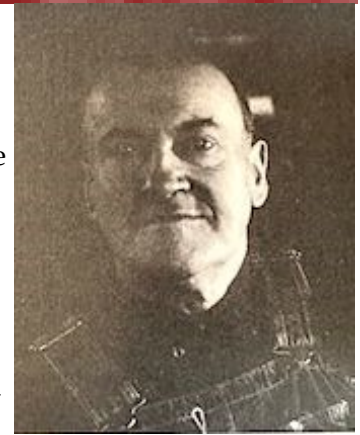


Photo by Robert Beach, Tom Trusky Papers, Special Collections/Archives, Boise



James Castle, Bundles of art, photograph, James Beardsley, Memory Palace, 2021. Photographed before removal from a wall in Castle's home in Boise.

home, barn and storerooms. As the work is all undated, we cannot track his development as an artist. We must meet him where he is, present to his memories and surroundings in a given moment.

When we step into his visual world, devoid of sound, rich with memories, we experience the huge silence, the lack of distraction, the "presence" which is the power of his work. We understand why he chose solitude for making art. His meticulous and minutely accurate memory and his present vision provided his material, uncluttered with art history or theory. He is present without any desire to put a stylistic mark on the image. He is also the master of his own vision, not disabled but a competent originator. That is the immediacy we experience in viewing his work--from the porch of his first home drawing to a construction of two men, contrived of folded paper.



Left: James Castle, Untitled, n.d., soot and saliva drawing on found paper, n.d., The porch on his childhood farm home in Garden Valley, Idaho. In the remembered scene, the tree trunks now become taller, framing a welcoming porch, in many versions including his seated father.



Above right: James Castle, Untitled, n.d., The two figures with squared-off heads constructed of found cardboard display Castle's fascination with the varying textures of paper, and his humor in the jaunty angles of the coat.



## The Family

James was born in Garden Valley, Idaho, a remote mountain farming town, into a convivial, prolific family drawn to the area in the gold rush. His Irish mother, Mary Scanlon, and English father, Frank Castle, naturalized Americans, worked 320 acres of farmland and were the post-masters of the community. According to the family story, James, the fifth of their seven surviving children, was born deaf. At this point our stories diverge into James' private, silent art world and the raucous household of the farming family.

From the family memory of his first drawing at age six, we follow his world through his art, a world of his own invention. He created his own materials, collecting advertisements, flyers and



James Castle, *Untitled*, n.d. soot and spittle, Found paper. The Garden Valley Ice House, his first home drawn from memory.



James Castle, *Open pages of handmade book*, n.d., soot/spittle ink on found paper, memories of the Idaho State School of the Deaf and Blind, fanciful collection of numerals and signs, a drawing of perhaps his parents.

paper from

the family post office, making his own ink from his spittle and soot, sharpening a stick as a marking instrument. He turned his back on farm chores, withdrawing to an outbuilding to draw and build paper constructions.

In 1910, he was sent to the Idaho State School for the Deaf and Blind in Gooding, where he continued his daily dedication to art, refusing to participate in the oral exercises which the school promoted, remaining silent, without reading skills, producing works of art which he carefully preserved, packed into the walls of the house and barns. These early works were lost in 1923 when the family moved out of the mountains to Star, Idaho, where his parent operated a mill. "Uncle Jimmy" was a loved and cared for member of an

extended family which remained close.

Frank died in 1931 and James moved to a farm in Boise with his mother, his sister Peggy, her husband Guy Wade and their infant daughter, again leaving behind James' stored work. In 1931 Peggy downsized again to a small house in Boise on only five acres in which James remained in for the rest of his life, finally with two of Peggy's daughters, and it is the work produced here that we have today. Before his death he took his nieces to the houses and out buildings in Boise where he had stored his art through the years.

## The Discovery

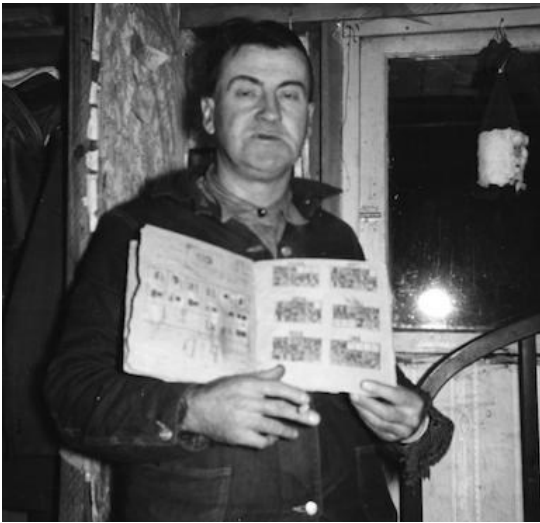
James Castle enjoyed sharing his drawings and books, often gave them as presents to family members, and used his prolific "book" production as a way of "showing" his art. This collecting and sharing are

Snapshot of "Uncle Jimmy", 1960s, with his great niece and great nephew.



materials





A 1950's family snapshot of James sharing one of his homemade books with his family.

certainly consistent with Castle's independent development of his life as an artist. He had always found within his private world whatever was needed, from materials to commitment of time, to the sharing of his work. In 1950 his nephew Robert Beach, who was a student at the Museum Art School in Portland, shared James' work with his instructor, who soon accompanied Beach to James' home in Boise, a visit which resulted in a small exhibition in a gallery at the Museum Art School in 1951. Another instructor at the Museum School who owned The Image Gallery in Portland was fascinated with the drawings he had seen. He undertook the first in-depth exhibition of James Castle in 1962 entitled "The Voice of Silence".

This title followed a succession of western exhibitions, which increasingly generated sales of drawings and funded Castle's first true studio. The family purchased a house trailer, parked it near the chicken coup, his former studio now returned to the chickens.

Heated by a gas furnace it became his year-round home and working studio until his death in 1977.

James Castle attended his opening at the Boise Art Museum in 1963, enjoying the sharing, celebrating the sales. However, the show's title emphasized his deafness, limiting the interest in his work. We again experience the separateness of James Castle, who relied on his acute sight and a phenomenal memory for material and his innate talent for execution. The wide interest in Outsider Art in the 1990s led to the inclusion of his work in many exhibitions, including visionary, ethnic, folk and naïve art, culminating in "Raw and Cooked" at MOMA in 2018 which also included machine-made work.

Clearly Castle's art has little in common with folk or naïve "Outsider Art," as his work was initially labelled. His use of advertising materials is closer to the pop art of the late 1950s. The meticulous accuracy of his architectural drawings is hardly naïve, and his use of perspective is a far cry from the flatness of folk art. He also explored a wide range of subjects from landscapes to interiors to still lifes, and his assemblage constructions are closer to Rauschenberg while his commercial collages echo Warhol.



James Castle, Untitled, n.d., found paper, soot/spittle ink. Boise house interior drawing, the paper shape providing a theatrical setting for his book display.



### Recognition

The prestigious NYC Knoedler & Co. Gallery was the first to mount a solo James Castle show, "The Commonplace in 2000: Structures, Signs and Symbols," followed in 2008 by Castle's first comprehensive retrospective at the Philadelphia of Art. In 2011 a major European museum, The Museo Nacional Center of Arte Reina Sophia, in Madrid opened "James Castle: Show and Store."

Photograph, 1963, Castle attending the Boise Art Museum opening of his first Boise exhibition. The museum today holds the largest James Castle collection and provides tours of his restored home.





*Left: The Family Weekly, "The Idaho Sunday Statesman," January 15, 1956, from James Castle's ephemera collection.*

*Right: James Castle, Untitled, 1956 or later, soot, color on found paper. Castle projects the feeling of the magazine cover more abstractly yet more intensely than the photograph.*



The Smithsonian American Art Museum acquired 54 James Castle works in 2014 mounted an extensive exhibition, "Untitled, The Art of James Castle." They were followed in 2018 by the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., "Outliers and American Vanguard Art". Generated by this wide display of his art, James Castle became the subject of several books, including John Beardsley's Memory Palace, on which I have relied heavily.

And, closer to home, our SBMA director, Larry Feinberg not only is the curator of our James Castle exhibition "The Private Universe of James Castle," (June 25 to September 17), with over 90 works in McCormick and Wasserman Galleries, he is also the author of a book on Castle hot off the press in June!



*James Castle, Untitled, n.d., found paper, string, color. Smithsonian AAM.*

### The Man

Getting to know James Castle is a fascinating and rewarding journey, one I could not have undertaken without the in-depth research which John Beardsley undertook in his Memory Palace. His interviews with surviving family members cleared the popular stories which arose around James Castle, that he was severely disabled, that he was autistic, that he was a recluse. I now feel confident in sharing with you the man I have met. From his earliest days of drawing at age six, the healthy, intelligent, deaf boy chose his path, from which he never deviated. Intuitively he chose art. He actively rejected all attempts to teach him to speak or use sign language. He rejected an identity as disabled. He also rejected chores on the farm or in the classroom at the school for the deaf. Instead he focused on making art all day, seeking privacy to work intently.

He devised an independent life, not depending on the help of others, making his own ink from soot and saliva, collecting discarded paper and boxes for his medium. He carefully preserved his work from damage or loss by packaging and storing it in the house walls. And he was happy as "Uncle Jimmy" to literally dozens of first and second generation nieces and nephews of his six siblings, accepting a nephew's introduction to a gallery owner which generated his first exhibition, continuing to live with his sister Peggy's two daughters until his death, finding satisfaction in seeing, drawing and sharing the world as he saw it, living freshly in the world by actualizing his core identity. A self-made man. ■



*Left: James Castle, construction, n.d. found paper, string, soot and color. The carriage construction with string for hanging, captures Castle's daily involvement with a growing family. Right: James Castle, Untitled, n.d. construction of found paper, string, soot and color. Thought to be a self-portrait.*

