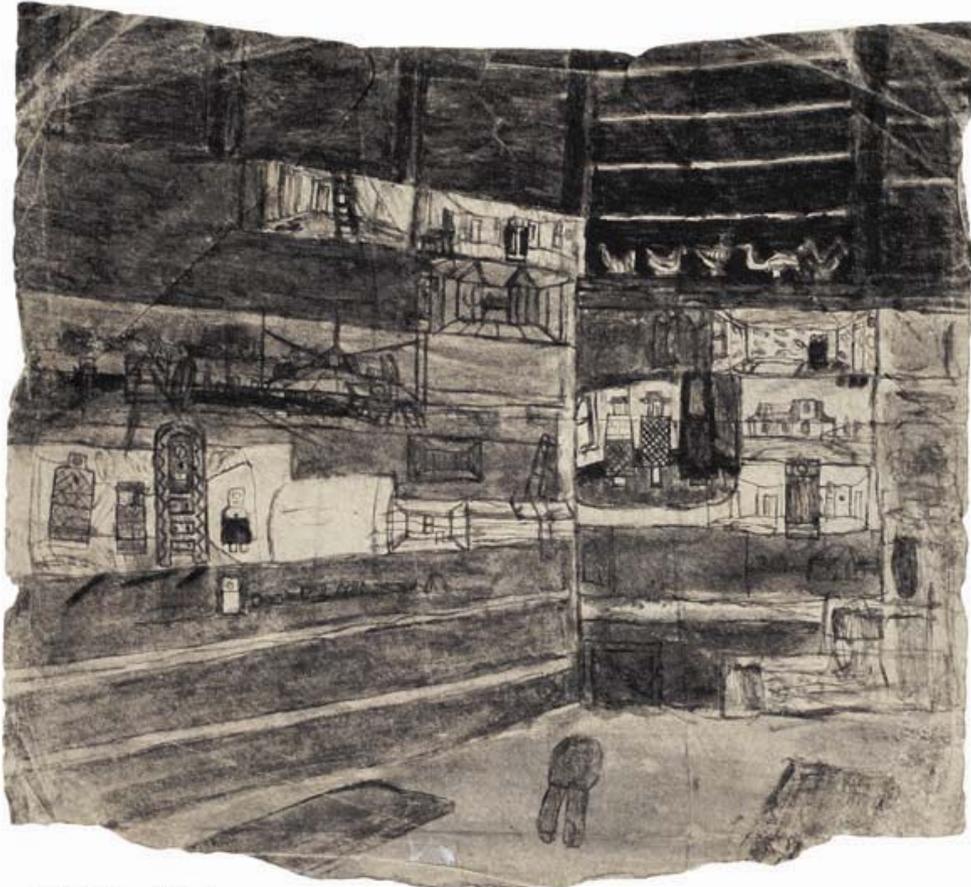


James Castle Show and Store



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Untitled. Drawing. No date.

James Castle Collection and Archive. Courtesy of Koedler & Co. New York

- Dates:** 17 May – 05 September 2011
- Place:** Sabatini Building, 3rd Floor
- Organization:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
- Curator:** Lynne Cooke
- Co-ordinator:** Leticia Sastre

Opening on 17 May at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía is a general review of the work of James Castle (1899-1977) entitled **Show and Store**, whose aim is to make viewers more familiar with the career of this singular American artist, largely an unknown quantity in Spain.

James Castle was born in a small town in Idaho and worked almost entirely on the margins of the art world until his death in 1977. Illiterate and born a deaf mute, Castle was a self-taught artist of the rural environment who evolved an imagery of his own inspired by the world around him. His prolific oeuvre is the product of nearly seventy years of incessant artistic activity. The artist himself took care to preserve most of his production for posterity. His drawings, sculptures and books are characterized by a creative imagination that transforms its immediate reality, materialized on recycled paper or cardboard in an ink he made himself out of soot and saliva.

The strategic starting point for the exhibition *James Castle. Show and Store* is “**his singular perseverance in hoarding, safeguarding, manipulating and installing his work, and the ways in which this painstaking task manifested itself**”, explains the curator of the show, Lynne Cooke. Through a selection of about five hundred works, the exhibition organized by the Museo Reina Sofía proposes a conceptual redefinition of Castle's contribution to art.

An artist preoccupied with the conservation and exhibition of his work

The exhibition at the Museo Reina Sofía is designed to highlight some of Castle's principal preoccupations. It therefore favors matters relating to practice over biographical concerns, whether these have to do with his deafness, his illiteracy, his isolation from dominant artistic trends or his limited training.

As reflected in his drawings and in the volume of work that has been preserved, **Castle developed a singular concept of the conservation of his art**. He grouped works of similar sizes, wrapped them up and carefully tied them in bundles, or else kept them in boxes made for the purpose. He then placed them well out of sight of curious eyes, high above the floor among the roof beams or relegated to a disused building – a barn, the chicken coop – which he would appropriate for a dual function: as a storeroom and an improvised exhibition space.

Not only preserving his work, but its exhibition was a determining impulse for Castle. He would often show his drawings (but not his books or his constructions) to his family or occasional visitors, observing their reactions attentively. He also devised – certainly in his imagination, though possibly also in reality – complex presentations of his principal types of work in improvised “galleries”.

Some of Castle's most detailed and refined drawings are representations of these installations. They are notable both for their subtle and complex representation of space, ambience and setting and for the documentary information they provide.

“Nevertheless, beyond distinctions between types of presentation, what is significant is that in his cultural environment – the time and space Castle lived in for most of his life – he should have conceived of exhibitions, real or imaginary, for his art,” Lynne Cooke points out.

Drawings

Among the drawings made with a mixture of saliva and soot from a wood-burning stove, the main group is devoted to landscapes showing the farm and homestead of Garden Valley, where Castle was born and spent the first years of his life. Among other subjects also tackled are clothing, figures, printed materials and texts.

Repetition is a fundamental feature of his artistic practice. Like all Castle's works, these small drawings were executed on recycled materials like packaging, commercial brochures, religious pamphlets, bills, used envelopes, ice-cream cartons, matchboxes or the schoolwork of his siblings. Much less numerous are the gouaches which he made by soaking tissue paper and other colored papers in water, and then applying the dyes to absorbent surfaces with wads of paper.

Books

The hand-made books vary greatly in size, from miniatures with the dimensions of a matchbox to weighty reference tomes. Also observable is a wide diversity of contents. Some are made up only of texts and/or syllabaries and calendars that combine his typographical inventions with Latin characters and elements of other alphabets like Cyrillic, while others contain portraits after the fashion of a family photo album, and a final group presents anecdotal scenes.

Although he was illiterate, Castle well understood the multiple functions of books and their design protocols, including the use of images, the integration of text and image, and the position of the author's name. Instead of adhering strictly to the conventions governing structure and arrangement, however, he would play with them in order to endow each book with a characteristic identity.

Constructions

The repertory of themes found in his constructions is considerably more limited than in the other two main corpora of work. They include coats and, less frequently, dresses and hats; wild and domestic birds; jugs, bowls and vases; and squat, rigid figures of both sexes. However, the largest group is made up of **architectural motifs**, from simple representations of doors and door frames to blocked windows, fragments of papered and painted wall, and even a section of wall with an electric socket. In them, James Castle displays his enormous attention to detail.

Representation of the installations

Together with the drawings showing possible installations for his oeuvre, Castle imagined other exhibitions for his works closer to home. Some drawings show his pictures on the walls of the family homestead next to portraits and various other paintings. In others, his little constructed figures appear *en masse*, adorning the top of the piano or gathered on the floor as in a group portrait or collective performance.

Rendering the outside world: Landscapes

James Castle proved receptive to many of the conceptual problems associated with painting and its related modes of visual representation. Only in part, however, was he motivated by an impulse to capture the world around him, which stimulated his copious artistic activity. Fantasy also had an important place in his work, as can be seen in a series of studies whose landscapes have been invaded by groups of unidentifiable vertical elements.

Less interesting than the question of the origins of these enigmatic forms -whether they are derived from familiar objects like scarecrows or telegraph poles, or visualizations of unnameable anxieties and fears- is the expressive emotion they arouse. They infuse what is habitually a contemplative subject in Castle's work, based on memories of childhood, with a lugubrious and disturbing frame of mind.

Also anomalous within Castle's production is a group of little-known landscape studies executed with a minimal deployment of media in monochrome layers of blue or pink gouache, or a subtle gamut of grays and blacks.

James Castle, a prolific self-taught artist

Born in 1899 in a rural part of Idaho, James Castle worked almost entirely on the margins of the art world until his death in 1977.

Castle has been labeled a “transgressive” or “visionary” artist, but also a “outsider” or “self-taught” one from the perspective of 20th century historiography. He started to become known through modest exhibitions in the 1960s. Only in the late 1990s did his work start to appear on the main artistic circuits, and it was then that important museums like the Art Institute of Chicago and the American Folk Art Museum in New York started to take an interest in acquiring and exhibiting his work. Until then, it had circulated locally or under the category of “marginal art” or “self-taught art”.

James Castle’s vast and extraordinary oeuvre includes drawings made with soot, constructions of sewn fragments of colored cardboard, and hand-made books. None of these artifacts is dated or titled, nor are there any references to clarify the chronology of the works. The artist gave no interviews and never wrote anything about his production. And because he disliked being watched while he worked, relatively little is known about his techniques.

CATALOGUE

To accompany the exhibition, a catalogue will be published with texts by the curator, Lynne Cooke, and by Suzanne Hudson, Zoe Leonard and Briony Fer.

JAMES CASTLE EXHIBITION FTP ACCESS DATA

<ftp://77.226.250.242>

User: CastleExpo

Password: PYT479FJY

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