

Brooke Wyatt

Cultural Studies Common Seminar

Professor Terry Smith

April 29, 2020

"A dynamic dialogue with the world": James Castle's Art of World Picturing

Artists show us world pictures in operation and imagine other ones. They highlight connective threads, or breakages, and point out pathways forward. And they celebrate locality, or demonstrate dislocation, often as a loss, but also, in some situations, as an opportunity. In pursuing these processes, artists, like the rest of us, manifest the desire for a sense of ourselves as being *in place*, in a place that has a clear connection to other places, close and distant. We do so in a world everywhere defined by the contradiction between the ever-present contemporaneity of difference and the need to forge a shared future on an increasingly fragile planet.

—Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art*

In this essay, I argue that an intimate connection between looking, picturing, and placemaking is central to the art making practice of James Castle (1899-1977, U.S.). In Castle's work, a process of meaning-making unfolds through representations of space and place, ultimately creating linkages through acknowledgement of different kinds of difference: between inside and outside, and between self and other.¹ Castle delineated the shape of the world he observed and experienced, representing relationships between objects, beings, and spaces, and ultimately placing himself, as well as viewers, into an active state of relationality, of being *in relation to the world*.

Through an investigative practice embedded in drawing and close observation, Castle undertook methods of seeking, describing, and responding to the world through the development

¹ I would like to thank Professor Terry Smith and my colleagues in the Spring 2020 Cultural Studies Common Seminar at the University of Pittsburgh for their insightful responses to Castle's artwork during our discussions, which have informed my argument throughout this essay.

of language forms suited to his purpose—textual, visual, and otherwise. His work evidences study, reflection, and transformation of the places and objects of everyday life into a kind of visual alphabet. Through a process of world picturing, Castle has asked and offered responses to a set of questions about what art making is, and, by extension, what it means to "be" in the world at all: to view the world from a particular vantage point, and to attempt to understand the world from that perspective.

James Castle was not formally trained as an artist. Stated another way, his artistic development was entirely self-motivated, auto-directed, and realized of his own resourcefulness. This is not to suggest, however, that Castle's art is therefore limited or solipsistic, that it imagines the artist himself as the exclusive viewer, or that it holds only narrow artistic or art-historical interest. Castle worked with materials that he came across in the context of his life on his family's farm in rural Idaho, where his parents operated a local post office. His *œuvre* encompasses three categories of media: objects crafted from found pieces of paper, cardboard packaging materials, and string (referred to as "constructions" in the Castle scholarship), drawings made from soot mixed with spit and applied to paper with handmade instruments, and numerous books where image and text are juxtaposed and where drawings are often overlaid with advertisements, brand logos, and other printed matter.²

Castle was born deaf and did not communicate verbally or through sign language, nor did he use reading and writing in conventional ways. His status both as an artist who worked outside of established art world parameters and as a person with disabilities has typically led to his work's consideration under the rubric of "outsider art." This category risks diminishing artists' agency and voice while positioning them at a remove from an implied geographical, intellectual,

² James Castle Collection and Archive, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://jamescastle.com/>.

and temporal "inside." In contrast, this essay builds on the work of several art historians, artists, and curators who have begun the work of critically contending with such qualifiers and markers of difference, instead addressing Castle's work in terms of its formal, material, and conceptual parameters, and in relation to the artist's studio practice.³

The art historian and curator Lynne Cooke, who organized the 2011 exhibition *James Castle: Show and Store* at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, is one such scholar.⁴ In Cooke's essay for the exhibition catalogue, entitled "Castle's Place," she considers an enigmatic construction with drawn elements in which the word "place" is inscribed on a thin cardboard surface, which itself is stitched with twine onto another piece of cardboard ([*P/lace*], fig.1).⁵ Horizontally sewn pieces of twine act as lines, suturing the letter "p," whose character is smaller in scale, brushier in application, and lacking the grid-like pattern that covers the remaining letters, to the word "lace." Castle has taken the materials of the cardboard and twine, appropriated text in a font perhaps borrowed from advertising or product packaging, and by rendering the drawn elements in soot and spit, turned these component parts into a symbolic or conceptual representation of *place*.

Cooke refers to the "shifting yet ever-present play with notions of place in Castle's art" that this work embodies.⁶ As the artist Zoe Leonard (b. 1959, U.S.) speculates about Castle's use

³ I am indebted to the work of art historian and curator Lynne Cooke, as well as art historian Suzanne Hudson and artist Zoe Leonard, whose writings about Castle have inspired and informed this essay.

⁴ Cooke included a significant number of Castle's work in two subsequent exhibitions she curated: *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos* (2012-13, Museo Reina Sofía, New Museum, New York, Serpentine Gallery, London), and *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (2018-19, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., High Museum of Art, Atlanta, LACMA, Los Angeles).

⁵ Castle's works are untitled and undated, and will be referred to primarily by their figure number, along with titles that have become associated with works, where applicable. When available, image captions will include the catalogue number assigned by the James Castle Collection and Archive.

⁶ Lynne Cooke, "Castle's Place," in *James Castle: Show and Store*, ed. Lynne Cooke (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011), 110.

of text more broadly, "[m]aybe the visual aspect of the words and their definitions aren't entirely separated from each other but at the same time are not bound together in the traditional sense."⁷ Collapsing the distinction between visual and textual language, and experimenting with binding disparate elements together, as in the case of the twine stitches, Castle prompts viewers to reflect on the experience of being "in" and "of" a place. Considered in light of the numerous drawings of landscapes, buildings, and interiors that Castle executed, this particular mediation on place is suggestive for conveying both a sense of location and the shape of an ontological inquiry. Noting the cluster of vertical rectangles appearing in the area of the composition between the letters "p," "l" and "a," Cooke makes the following remarks:

Small parts of the sign's letters and surrounding ground have been incised, removed, and then carefully and precisely glued back into place. Despite such physical and conceptual dislocations, the sign retains its functionality. When read as an injunction rather than as a marker of site, it challenges its readers to position the object in relation to others within the artist's œuvre, an enterprise that will prove problematic for many reasons. By extension, it urges them to place his practice in an appropriate framework.⁸

What such a framework might be, I suggest, is a practice of world picturing, different from but coeval with that of other artists whose work rewards extended critical and art-historical consideration, whatever their training, and whatever their degree of participation in the institutionalized art world.

In addition to contributing to the dual sense of location and dislocation implied by the work discussed above, the incised rectangles play another role: they suggest doorways or windows, portals that are fixed in space but also offer the possibility of passage *through* space. I

⁷ Zoe Leonard, "James Castle: Inside Out," in *James Castle: Show and Store*, ed. Lynne Cooke (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011), 13.

⁸ Cooke, "Castle's Place," 110.

want to connect this potential for movement between spaces (or worlds) to another set of ideas proposed by Zoe Leonard in response to Castle's work. Leonard conceives of observation as a relational exchange, as she writes: "These drawings evoke the process of looking as a kind of passage. In them, looking is neither entirely active nor entirely passive, but rather a dynamic dialogue with the world."¹⁰ Here Leonard is no doubt drawing from her own experience as an artist, honing in on the process and practice of art making as a sustained exercise in looking, and one that is more than a self-referential enterprise, even if it takes place under conditions of relative solitude or isolation from others. She continues, "[m]aking, too, is a dialogue. It is a translation of an idea or a vision in our mind to a material object. A transfer. A transference. It is, for lack of a better word, a language. A way to make experience and sensation visible. To create, then, a new experience for the viewer."¹¹ This sense of communication between the artist and the world, between the artist and themselves, and between the artist and others (however abstractly conceived), is conveyed through Castle's practice, embodied by his work. Connections between looking, placemaking, representation, and communication play out across his oeuvre.

Castle's work frequently offers visual pathways for movement through space, specifically through doorways and windows. The drawing [*Interior with Doors*] (fig. 2), which depicts a series of spaces opening up onto one another through open doorways, pictures doorknobs prominently signaling such openings and doors standing ajar. Figure 3, meanwhile, provides four examples of constructions and construction-drawing hybrids together referred to as [*Doorways*], in which Castle has made use of the doorframe as a vehicle for metaphor, evoking alternative interpretations of looking, perspective, and point of view. In figure 4, what could begin as the

¹⁰ Zoe Leonard, "James Castle: Inside Out," 14.

¹¹ Ibid.

image of a coat hanging on a hook is transformed, as the coat, accentuated by its violet color, appears to stand upright, to inhabit a doorway, or to itself become a door or a portal, a possible connector between worlds.

Identifiable human figures who might inhabit these realms occasionally appear in Castle's spatial representations. Figure 5 shows the unmistakable image of a person, wearing coveralls and a hat, who can be seen standing in a doorway at the top of a set of stairs. The stairway bifurcates a building whose parallel windows and porches are visible on either side of the staircase. The palpable stillness of the figure is held in tension with the potential for movement implied by the figure's positioning at the top of the stairs. While the form of this figure is legibly drawn, with recognizable proportions and the suggestion of volumetric space, at other times the human figure takes on more geometric, abridged forms in Castle's work, illustrated by the row of figurative constructions seen in figure 6.

In still another permutation, multiple approaches to representation are combined in a single work, as in the case of a drawing that depicts an interior space (fig. 7). In this image, a figure who is portrayed using the same idiom employed in figure 5 can be seen standing in a doorway, establishing the far-right edge of the composition. Additional figurative entities are present, placed around the room as if staged. Two figures, both wearing hats and patterned clothing, are represented with paper-doll flatness, while to their right, an imposing mirrored wardrobe operates as a figural stand-in: all cast distinctive shadows onto the adjacent walls. On the plane in the foreground that reads as a floor, two coats appear, as does a tubular legged form: each of these seem to correspond spatially to the paper-doll figures and wardrobe behind them. Arguably, all of the figurative elements in this image operate as portals, as sites of passage between and through space. Counting the human and humanoid figures, and including the

wardrobe, the shadows, the suggested doorframe, and the three figures on the ground plane, the room is crowded with representational possibilities, with ways of occupying space and ways of being *in place* in the wider world.

The fact that Castle presents so many alternatives for dimensionality and figurative embodiment in this work alerts us that a commentary on representation is taking place. In turn, the staged quality of the scene and the dramatic use of light and shadow accentuate the presence and absence suggested not only by the figure-shadow pairs but also by the coats-missing-bodies and the tubular body-missing-parts on the floor. Castle is intently concerned with framing, positioning, and demonstrating ways of being *in space* and of being *in spatial relation* to other objects or figures. As the art historian Briony Fer remarks, in Castle's work, "[f]undamental concerns of all representation are laid out as an array of possible ways of picturing."¹² The world that Castle constructs is a conglomeration of spatial possibilities, depicting layered scenes within rooms, spaces embedded in landscapes, and myriad worlds within worlds.

Cooke contends that Castle's "highly conceptual approach to the construction of space, in material, illusionistic, and abstract terms; and the elusive nature of the relationships linking the constructions, drawings, and books" were issues of critical concern illuminated by the initial research for the *Show and Store* exhibition.¹³ Grounds for the issues raised by Cooke can be found in several drawings that appear to depict installations of numerous artworks in the context of a salon-style exhibition where all three formats that define Castle's working process—the drawings, books, and constructions—are represented together (figures 8-10). Figurative

¹² Briony Fer, "James Castle: Image World/Object World," in *James Castle: Show and Store*, ed. Lynne Cooke (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011), 158.

¹³ Lynne Cooke, "Castle's Place," 106.

constructions appear fixed to a wall in [*Interior*] (fig. 8), where a view through a doorway segments the drawing into two distinct spaces through which the "exhibition" can be seen to continue. In the secondary space, books of all sizes are pictured on the floor, referencing the varying scales of the artists' books Castle created. On the wall hang drawings: what might be the drawing from figure 5 of the person standing at the top of the staircase appears near the center of the top-right quadrant.

A potential viewer holds the same perspective on the space within the drawing that the artist would have held, if in fact he gathered and staged his works in this way and then drew from observation. One imagines Castle assembling his work and making curatorial decisions about how to relate works to one another and how to put groups of works into dialogue before setting out to picture, through drawing, a view into the space of his work that operates on multiple levels. Notably, a piece of string or twine has been secured at the top of the drawing, suggesting that this work was likely included in a similar exhibition to the one it depicts, where it could then operate as an exhibition within an exhibition.

The multiple perspectives offered in the exhibition drawings, or "installation views" as they might be called, are further enhanced by the fact that many of Castle's drawings contain images on both sides of their supports. Figures 9 and 10 present recto and verso images of the same work, both representing an interior view into a space where a selection of Castle's work again appears as if hanging in an exhibition. Headless figures, or alternatively, forms made by clothing without bodies, appear in the foreground (or threshold) of each image where they assist the operation of perspective in both drawings and give depth to the relationships between figure and ground that function in each work. These figurations act as surrogates for the artist and for us as viewers, providing an entranceway into the worlds encompassed by the drawings.

In figure 9, the figure-form aligns with the corner where two walls meet; meanwhile, the paper doll-like figures and the wardrobe from the dramatic scene depicted in figure 7 are clearly visible near the center of the composition. In figure 10, the figure-form's spatial orientation points directly to the center of the back wall, its shape echoed by a dark vertical rectangle and a ceiling beam above. The recto and verso images in figures 9 and 10 are not identical copies or mirror images, yet both delineate the parameters of a particular world, or worlds. By picturing the world through representation, Castle is also questioning the world, investigating its contours, limns, and passageways, and activating its structural planes and dimensions. He is exploring subtle variations on a shared theme, invoking a play between presence and absence while suggesting that the world is made up of multiple dimensions and inhabited by beings who take myriad forms. Scaffolded by the network of portals and passageways present in his work and the shape-shifting characteristics of his figures, Castle's world is a place where conventional limits on movement, existence, and perception—such as time, space, and the living physical body—are imbued with expansive possibility.

Cooke frames what she calls the "dynamic play" between recto and verso images in Castle's work as indicative of the artist's "conceptual grasp of the role of framing, premised on a knowing understanding of how visual language—how representation—works."¹⁴ Leonard suggests that there is a relational aspect to this interchange:

In these reverse drawings, Castle positioned himself and us, the viewers, in more than one place. This does something. We get a sense of dimension and volume. It creates a spatial experience rather than a scene, a tableau. The room is recovered as a space, a place, rather than just a subject in a drawing. It becomes a lived room, a space to be inhabited. It also does something else. It foregrounds the position of the maker, the artist, and shows us that his point of view is the fulcrum for all the work. By turning us around in one space, he makes us aware of his position.¹⁵

¹⁴ Cooke, "Castle's Place," 109.

¹⁵ Leonard, "James Castle: Inside Out," 13.

Through his mediations on place and space, Castle is situating himself at the same time as he is responding to and intervening into the world as he perceives it. As art historian Terry Smith theorizes, "the first step toward making a place is to picture a particular world, to make a place for ourselves *within* it..."¹⁶ Castle achieves this self-positioning through a responsive and relational approach to representation, which in turn allows the viewer access to his world view. This art making-through-connection holds significance as an index of the artist's agency. Castle asserts: "I was here, and through my processes of observation and representation, I entered into an exchange with the world."

As the art historian Suzanne Hudson observes in her essay "Imago Mundi": "Castle never took up an occupation other than making art, and despite his labeling as an 'outsider,' much of his work reflects on its status as pictures and incorporates such motifs as frames so as to better announce the fields they contain as representational."¹⁷ Castle is constantly negotiating a balance between the quotidian world of the everyday and what might be deemed the "other-worldly," or the "beyond the world as we usually conceive of it." His work operates between dimensions, and in the tensions between inside and outside, self and other, art and life. It is also significant that as viewers, we are not excluded from Castle's spatialized practice of placemaking. We, too, are enjoined to be *in place*, to inhabit and pass between and through spaces, to enter into a dynamic dialogue with the world, to experience the act of seeing as a relational exchange.

¹⁶ Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 199.

¹⁷ Suzanne Hudson, "Imago Mundi," in *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos*, ed. Lynne Cooke (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2012), 16.

The first public exhibition of Castle's work took place in Boise in 1963. Castle visited the show and made a drawing of the exhibition space ([*Boise Art Gallery*], fig. 11).¹⁸ Notably less detailed than the exhibition drawings discussed above, here Castle rendered his artworks as square and rectangular compositions in which unintelligible dark forms are suggested against lighter backgrounds, each one framed and hung at an equal height above the floor. Such an abbreviated treatment of his imagery suggests that Castle made this drawing from memory, as a relatively quick study made in situ, or by building on such an earlier mnemonic. Castle's focus emphasizes the space of the gallery—three walls are visible, as well as an arched ceiling and receding floor plane—as well as a conceptual representation of the artist's presence and the exhibition's locale. On a prominent rectangular form in the foreground, the words "Jim Castle" and "BOISE" appear as if inscribed on a plaque. Castle makes a direct connection between himself, his artwork, and the location of the exhibition in the state capital, underscoring, almost advertising, that his works, which he did not often sign, were on view in a world outside the place of their making. In other words, the artist, and his artworks, *existed*. While the drawing records the start of Castle's public recognition as an artist, by this time he had been making artwork for several decades.

Castle's art depicts perceptions and experiences of space and place, drawn from intimate observation and placemaking, and expanded into a relational language of representation that travels far beyond the limits of the artist's immediate surroundings or interior life. As Hudson suggests, contrary to many dominant histories of U.S. modernism, the purpose of art making is not limited to participation in an art world dialogue or the seeking of "pure" form disassociated

¹⁸ See Cooke, "Castle's Place," 107.

from lived experience.²⁰ Castle's work is, at its core, concerned with what Hudson calls "art making as an epistemology, as a way to understand one's relation to what lies beyond it." This essay argues that Castle's is an art of world picturing.²¹ This is not "art for art's sake," but an art about the practice of making art, about being an artist, about being a person, and, most fundamentally, about *being*. More than that, it is an art that asks questions about the world, an art that seeks to know the world through observation and connectedness-through-making.

In Castle's art, coats become doorways and wardrobes and shadows join in the ontological chorus, yet there is a decisive familiarity amidst these uncanny parameters. As viewers of Castle's work, our own perceptive experiences take on new dimensions. We are not limited to the present time, to our current location, or even to the realm of the living. We ask, with a sense of wonder, "what is the world, how is the world, and why is the world?" We are invited, both to find ourselves *in place*, and to traverse passageways that link the world we thought we knew with other worlds: worlds remembered, imagined, or otherwise pictured.

Bibliography

²⁰ Suzanne Hudson, "Personal Voyages," in *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, ed. Lynne Cooke (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 118.

²¹ *Ibid.*

- Cooke, Lynne, ed. *James Castle: Show and Store*, Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011.
- . *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2012.
- . *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018.
- Cooke, Lynne. "Castle's Place." In *James Castle: Show and Store*, edited by Lynne Cooke, 105-111. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011.
- . "Orthodoxies Undermined." In *"Great and Mighty Things": Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection*, edited by Ann Percy, 204-215. New Haven and London: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2013.
- . "Boundary Trouble: Navigating Margin and Mainstream." In *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, edited by Lynne Cooke, 2-29. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018.
- Fer, Briony. "James Castle: Image World/Object World." In *James Castle: Show and Store*, edited by Lynne Cooke, 153-58. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011.
- Hudson, Suzanne. "James Castle: An Art of Experience." In *James Castle: Show and Store*, edited by Lynne Cooke, 145-51. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011.
- . "Imago Mundi." In *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos*, edited by Lynne Cooke, 13-19. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2012.
- . "Personal Voyages." In *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, edited by Lynne Cooke, 116-27. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018.
- James Castle Collection and Archive. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://jamescastle.com/>.
- Leonard, Zoe. "James Castle: Inside Out." In *James Castle: Show and Store*, edited by Lynne Cooke, 9-15. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011.
- Percy, Ann, ed. *James Castle: A Retrospective*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2008.
- . *"Great and Mighty Things": Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection*. New Haven and London: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2013.
- Smith, Terry. *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019.