James Castle, David Lynch, and Finding the Immensity in Small Spaces
Audio Transcript

Intro: Welcome to the James Castle House Community Chats. In this series of short recorded interviews, James Castle House residents engage in one-on-one conversations with members of our community.

Through our residency program, emerging and mid-career artists, scholars, and professionals are invited to live and work on site at the historic home of James Castle, taking inspiration from their experience to create a body of new works.

Our current resident, Eric Follett, is a writer and linguist who uses his work to explore the ways in which we, as communities and individuals, interact with our landscape. This week, in the first half of a two-part conversation, Eric chats with James Castle House architect Byron Folwell about James Castle, David Lynch, and finding the immensity in small spaces.

B: Good morning Eric, how are you today?

E: I'm doing good Byron, thanks.

B: Good. So, you're in the James Castle House residency program longer than anyone else in history and longer than the architect intended.

E: Yeah.

B: How are you feeling?

E: I'm feeling good. I'm over here setting an endurance record.

B: Awesome.

E: But, no. It's a very comfortable living space, as you well know.

B: Good.

E: I'm comfortable and happy here.

B: I kind of feel like you're one of my patients or something, so I just have to check in on your wellbeing.

E: Yeah, absolutely it's appreciated. No, it's a great space, as you well know a historic space that's sort of charged with its own energy. Kind of an easy place to, I don't know, kind of let myself be cocooned and kind of roll along with it. So yeah, it's been really great.

B: So Castle, of course you're probably aware, he spent so much of his time working on the family farm and when he wasn't doing that, he was living in a fairly confined space. Whether that was the shed or the trailer, either one of them were, you know, under 200 square feet or so. Do you feel any sort of connection with Castle's living situation, being in a tighter living arrangement?

E: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think this is definitely sort of the most—I mean, through college and stuff, I had plenty of little confined spaces that I lived in, as most of us probably have, you know, but never to the extent. Not that this is a confined living space, but just to sort of answer your question about kind of a smaller space and especially you know, entering into the stay at home and the quarantine and sort of even limiting the daily errand or two that I would run. Sort of really limiting my experience to really, you know, these three rooms and a small hallway.

B: Right.

E: But yeah, so I do think that it's sort of helped me to maybe experience or channel a little bit something Castle might have felt, or I don't know, taken as inspiration. It's pretty hard to kind of get inside his head or try to think what he might have been thinking or doing.

B: Sure.

E: But yeah, I certainly try to do that. It's been interesting, I don't know. A couple, not too long before the residency, I watched a documentary-- David Lynch, The Art Life.

B: Oh yeah, I'm well familiar with that one.

E: Yeah, it's great. I mean, he's a total gem. But there's this part, you know, he's talking about his childhood in Idaho actually. And he just talks about, you know, your world being limited to a block or two in either direction, and I think the phrase he uses is, you know, "Your world is small, but there's *everything* there."

B: Yeah.

E: And so that's kind of the mentality I've been trying to cultivate. You know, even though it's sort of a much smaller space, still kind of finding the ways that there still is everything here, and I think Castle is kind of the ultimate example of that in his art.

B: Yeah.

E: Really finding the immensity inside these kind of small spaces.

B: Yeah, when the body is sort of confined to in the smaller spaces, the mind can sort of probe inward and find more and more detail. More world, more space as it goes downward, and smaller and smaller. And yeah, that's certainly a Lynchian way of looking at the world. That certainly appeared in several of his films.

E: Right.

B: And I experienced that too, growing up in Boise. You have, before the days of video games, before the days of endless distractions and things like that, you had to sort of make your own fun. And the act of being bored, the act of being cooped up, those sorts of things start to inspire people. It certainly inspired me to kind of find those details that are often overlooked and find not only kind of mental spaces in the imagination, but also these little physical spaces between blades of grass and physical spaces in nooks and crannies of rooms and things like that.

E: Yeah, definitely.

B: Yeah, that's certainly a wonderful byproduct of being cooped up, I guess, is the opportunity to dive into things like that.

E: Yeah, absolutely. And yes, on my little daily walk, you know, it's been…I mean, I was doing the same little walk even before the quarantine started. So, at this point I have almost a daily record of what's been happening on Elmer Street, which is, you know, the little street behind the house here and you know, kind of watching the foothills disappear as the trees leaf between the house and the hills. And yeah, so there's been sort of all of these really beautiful little landmarks and kind of watching this one small space go through these huge changes.

B: Yeah.

E: It's almost like the smaller scale you look at the more, I guess monumental these changes are. From bare branch to flowers to fruits to leaves and all of that. So that's been a really sort of beautiful thing that I wasn't expecting to get out of my time here.

B: Oh yeah, I love that.

E: Yeah, and also kind of, you know, to that second point, another thing I've been spending a lot of time doing is sort of reliving my own childhood memories, especially the memories of the house I grew up in.

B: Yeah.

E: I grew up in Idaho Falls in a house that was built in the early 50's and had been built on to, so there was, you know, some kind of hodgepodge elements to it. And I was not expecting to sort of spend so much time in my memory and sort of linking my own experience with Castle's art. And, yeah, Castle kind of has been this like sort of central point of this vortex connecting my own memory and experience with the place from his memories and experiences. Yeah, just been a very, uh, a richer experience than I expected to have. And I came expecting quite a rich experience, so it's been great.

B: That's wonderful. Yeah, to your point about your daily walk and noticing what would otherwise be minute differences of day-to-day, that's definitely a Castle approach, as well. You know, he evaluated and studied and then reevaluated his environment, endlessly rendering and re-rendering the same scenes from slightly different perspectives. And that's something that I think pulls Castle apart from other artists working with outdoor environments, is just the seemingly endless fascination with the same views.

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E: Right.

B: And these charted views that he returns back to and we don't know how many times he did that. We don't know how many days passed between those similar views, between rendering those, but that's a really fascinating part of Castle's artistic legacy, I think.

E: Yeah, yeah definitely. I've not seen—my history or knowledge of art and the visual arts is fairly limited. It was sort of a new interest for me when I discovered Castle, and so he's sort of been at the center of, kind of my understanding of all of these things. Yeah, thinking about that lately, you know, comparing or kind of thinking of him in relation to like, Edward Munch, you know, who produced kind of the same visual images of his sister in her sick bed, I believe it was.

B: Right.

E: And, yeah, there's something about Castle that definitely feels more, you know, I don't have the language really to describe or to talk about this kind of thing, but it feels more constructed. You know, it feels like he really had this world in his head and he would revisit it in different ways from different angles, you know. But it was always the same world, it wasn't variations, you know.

B: Hm.

E: I don't know, like he had access to this different realm or something.

B: Yeah, it's hard to say. I think the open ended-ness of his work and our inability to be able to go to the primary source and ask him questions about what he was doing is part of the really great mystery behind that work.

E: Definitely.

B: It's hard to tell if it's meditative or he's studying analytically these spaces. It's very hard to tell.

E: Right.

B: How does that, I guess, translate into your work, then, having the opportunity and also the unforeseen opportunity to spend even more solitary time in your work?

E: Yeah, that's a really good question. One that I'm not sure I'm going to find a good answer for.

B: Well I mean, did you struggle, I guess, when you were first aware that you were going to be in quarantine? Or was that something that you welcomed?

E: It was something that I welcomed.

B: Oh.

E: I, you know, when I came here I came with a couple of projects in mind, and sort of got to work on those. There's a couple of poetry projects and you know, a long series of essays. My background is in linguistics and so I was kind of looking at Castle's art in the way that a linguist light look at some of the structural properties of language. And so, I came in with some sort of big ideas I was trying to explore, and along the way, as is inevitable, kind of different ideas or different interests kind of popped up, you know? So when the quarantine order came, and it looked like I was going to get more time here, to me it was sort of just, you know, a godsend.

B: Hm.

E: This extra time to explore kind of these offshoots. Different interests or different sort of ideas about Castle that I didn't have when I came in. And you know, maybe might have had trouble finding time to explore after the residency ended.

B: Sure.

E: So I definitely welcomed it.

B: That's great. Yeah, I saw in your Creators, Makers and Doers interview that some of your work is kind of breaching into the visual arts world.

E: Yeah.

B: And I'm not familiar enough with what you've done in the past to know if that's new to you, or if it's something that you always sort of done with linguistics.

E: No, the visual art stuff is totally new.

B: Great.

E: You know, and one of the things, you know, one of the big projects I came in with was a series of erasure poems from Woodsmoke, this book by J. Reuben Appelman and Troy Passey. Which you also wrote a foreword for, I believe.

B: Yeah.

E: And yeah, so my idea there was kind of to create these sort of visual experiences first, and then sort of have this poem that I pulled out of the text kind of be an afterthought. That was, I guess, my way of paying homage to Castle, you know, and his sort of ostensibly languageless life. But language has always been my medium and I think always will be, and so I can't get away from it. But I could kind of hide it a little bit. And that project turned out to be much bigger than I thought. You know, I came upon Woodsmoke at the 8th Street Rediscovered Books not long after I discovered Castle at the end of 2018. And it's just very beautifully written, this beautiful little book, and just something about it just made me want to sort of pull more poems out of it, you know?

B: Uh-huh.

E: And you know that kind of turned into also another little homage to Castle who worked with found and recycled materials.

B: Yeah.

E: Sort of limiting the language that was already there. You know, this sort of found essence. Yeah, it just proved to be so rich, you know, because they're already short, very beautiful, sort of essential poems that J. Reuben Appelman wrote.

B: Uh-huh.

E: And so it was kind of interesting. That's just kind of how much kept coming out of them.

B: That's great.

E: Yeah, all of that was very new working style for me. So that was a very fun project.

B: Oh, yeah, and also just giving, um, giving a translation or translating language into that physical form, which is something Castle did.

E: Right.

B: Into the letterforms and the exquisite nature of rendering those letterforms, enlarging and pulling them from sources you know, some sources we can find, and others we have no idea where they came from.

E: Right.

B: And putting those letterforms into these larger structures, these grids, these lines and these phrases that are completely obtuse and, you know, mysterious. Fun to try to translate those. Another aspect of Castle that I think is really wonderful, because a residency built around his place of art creation really can move broadly art form to art form, specialty to specialty, and someone like you can find your place in that. Which is, I think, often overlooked. When looking at Castle's work, especially folks that are unfamiliar with how to read art and aren't necessarily—don't have the tools to read what he was doing with his work. I think it's great to see a variety of artists and especially yourself kind of find something in that work to extract and then reinvent yourself.

E: Yeah, I appreciate that. And I think, more than anything, to me it speaks of Castle himself and like the depth of the art and sort of the depth of the genius that he had, you know.

B: Uh-huh.

E: To quote Lynch again, right? I mean, he never left Idaho, right? Lived this kind of seemingly very small life, you know. But there's *everything* in his art.

B: Yeah.

E: And so, you know, anyone who's kind of willing to look at and spend time with it is going to find a unique relationship to it.

B: Yeah.

E: Yeah, I know I certainly have, and sort of feel uniquely prepared to interact with his work in a specific way, but I think that's true of everybody. And that's what's so special about Castle and his work.