

## **Basements, Solitude, and the Impossibility of an Empty Room**

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 second half of a two-part conversation, Eric chats with James Castle House architect Byron Folwell about basements, solitude, and the impossibility of an empty room.*

B: Have you found any, um, I'm curious—there were a couple other things that I saw in your work that made me wonder if you're also finding ways of translating linguistics, letterforms, or maybe just the underlying structure into an experience of space. I'm just curious about your experience being in the residency space itself, and if that has been something that has led you to think about yourself as a creator of spaces or structures or anything like that.

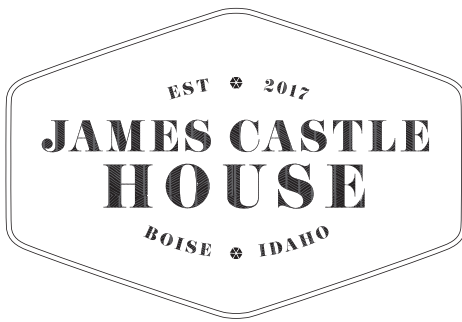
E: Yeah, I think so, yes. I'm not sure about in the linguistic sense, you know, because the linguistics work that I've been doing on his work is sort of conceptual and comparing kind of these broad structures and dynamics of language to the way he worked as well. But you know, then this whole other thing that I've been exploring pretty deeply, you know kind of just trying to work on these sort of essays about different ways that I personally have interacted with his work. And yeah, that's sort of become, as I mentioned earlier a bit, kind of this dominant metaphor in my understanding of Castle is, you know, the way that he structured his art and kind of, you know, these facets of these same buildings or these same places that I've kind of realized that my own memory is sort of structured in a similar way around my own experience.

B: Uh-huh.



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E: You know, my own childhood home, you know, that two or three blocks that were my whole world for the first, you know, six, seven, eight years of my life. And so I definitely have come to sort of understand my own mind and my own memory sort of as a reflection of the way that he worked, if that makes sense.

B: Definitely. What are your—if you can, speak to those memories that are coming back from your home in Idaho Falls. What do you—what are you remembering about those spaces specifically?

E: Yeah, so there's some very specific ones, actually, and I've been exploring them in a series of essays and the first one actually is already on the James Castle House website.

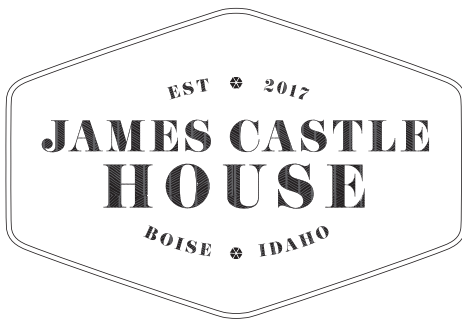
B: Awesome.

E: And the second part should be up pretty soon. I'm just polishing it up. But, you know, my bedroom for much of my childhood was in the basement of our house. And you know, walking down the stairs, the first thing you encounter on the right was a crawl space that I was always very scared of. And then the first door, you know, after the crawl space was another storage room where we kept, you know, just miscellaneous stuff, right? And then the third room you encounter off to the left was a cold storage room. So there are, sort of, realizing this experience between sort of the daylight family time of the upstairs, outside world, and the kind of bedroom, alone, isolation, whatever- of the basement, with these three storage rooms, you know, intervening. And each of these storage rooms I sort of had a particular fear of.

B: Hmm.

E: And so, this sort of crossing the boundary between alone time versus family time. There was always sort of this, this threshold of, you know, running past the storage rooms because I was afraid of, you know, whatever. And kind of even more specific than that, the thing I've been working on in these essays is, you know, when my mom was cooking and sent me to the cold storage room for some food item or whatever. Walking in, looking at these shelves, you know, the deep wooden shelves in the concrete walls, and the concrete floor, which is right under the front porch of the house and sort of never being able to find what I was sent to look for. And just being, just scared in that room and scared that if I said anything or if I moved in a particular way, you know, maybe it would sort of unlock this hidden, scary life that was in these things.





B: Hmm.

E: Yeah, sort of weird, kind of childish fears, you know? But when I saw Castle's work, I mean, it took me directly back to that place. Not that I find Castle's work scary. But there is this sort of element, you know, and it's been talked about with relation to his work, sort of this deep animacy where everything is alive or almost alive or coming to life.

B: Uh-huh.

E: And he has some beautiful, sort of transformation pieces that even, you know, show a house split into columns and sort of morphing into this row of girls.

B: Yeah.

E: And so, yeah, that's sort of the type of thing I've been exploring, and it's been very bizarre to me how specifically Castle fits into those deep memories that I've always kind of lived with, but just you know, really exploring them and bringing them out has been really unbelievable.

B: Yeah, very similar experience for myself, not only with Castle but with Lynch's work as well. Kind of an uncanny familiarity with a component of that, not necessarily a very specific, literal translation from say, a scene or a work into my own memory, but there's something there. There's something common, a common denominator there, or a common feeling. Definitely in the uncanny category.

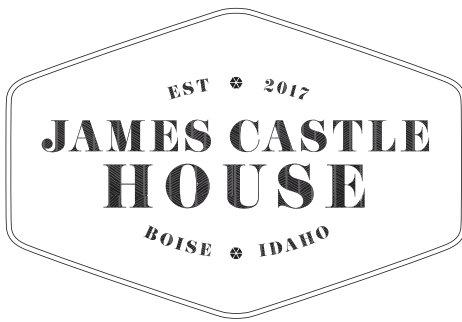
E: Right?

B: And I'm a former basement dweller myself too. I loved having a bedroom in the basement, and I think it had a lot more to do with personal temperature regulation than anything else.

E: I can relate to that too.

B: But I did enjoy the isolation too, which, it wasn't really isolation, I think it was just really the opportunity to be solitary and find time to devote to whatever project I was working on or film I was watching, or whatever, you know, whatever I was doing. That was nice as well.





E: Definitely, yeah.

B: It does seem impossible—and this is something that definitely was stronger when I was younger, but it never really went away—it does seem impossible that rooms can ever really be empty or devoid of some kind of life. And I know that that’s where we kind of pull these ideas about ghosts and things like that from that same sense. And I think, you know, it probably has a lot to do with how—that little bit of narcissism that we have, that we just can’t imagine a world existing without us or a truly empty space that doesn’t involve some type of human life right?

E: Right.

B: But, that is kind of a really interesting and strange connection with Castle’s work because he doesn’t—even his empty rooms have this kind of pull toward life having just been there and just poofed out, or life just about to enter the room.

E: Right.

B: So, yeah, those empty basement rooms. Love my memories of those as well. There was always a strange noise or something there to remind you or to help you keep that myth rolling that indeed there was something there, no matter what.

E: Right, yeah?

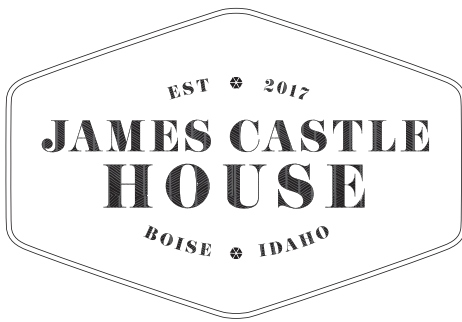
B: It was never truly empty.

E: Yeah, absolutely. And it’s sort of those little vacuums, you know, that maybe are empty but don’t seem empty. Or maybe they are not empty but they do seem empty, you know?

B: Uh-huh.

E: I think that’s sort of one of the real places that, you know, creativity in his art comes from. And again, Castle is kind of the ultimate—kind of this epitome of that, you know, even in the rooms that he drew. You know, these empty rooms that he probably never, from my





understanding, from what I've read about him, he probably never saw those rooms empty. You know, they always would have had furniture or always would have been lived in. So even his depiction of these empty rooms that are still sort of pregnant with these presences that would have been there and were only removed, you know, in his memory or in his art, or you know, however it would have worked.

B: Hmm.

E: And so, yeah, there's definitely a power in that contradiction, I think, between empty, but not really.

B: Oh, definitely. And you see that a lot, he rendered his—in the shed space that he lived in in Boise, there's that little attic space that's just above where the rafters meet up above where his bed would have been.

E: Yeah.

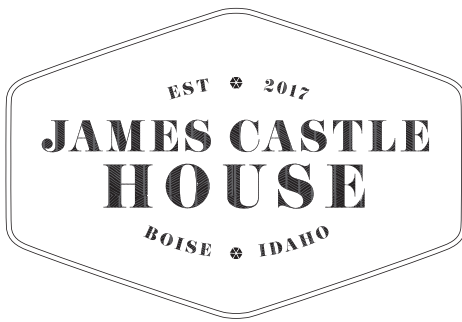
B: He drew that space several times. And many times that he drew that space he would place his friends or his person creations, paper creations up in that space and then draw them in that space as if he is making every empty void in his living space full of life, full of people, full of...you know, an avoidance of a truly empty space.

E: Yeah.

B: I've always loved that when I was working in the shed and spending hours and hours in there cleaning and documenting, you know, every nook and cranny. It does start to...my mind, I think, was really trying to push the walls out. And the more time I spent in that small space, which is only about 120 square feet or so, after a while, after a few hours in that space, it almost seems to double. Or at least you know, one and a half times as big as it really is, because you become so familiar with those spaces, the attic space, the little corner where the wood stove was, those spaces. Because of your familiarity with them, and because your brain's mapped them already, they get pushed out, or at least that was my experience.

E: Yeah, that's awesome.





B: Yeah, and I never really felt that except for when I was younger and had a big basement bedroom and the longer I would spend in that room, the larger the room would seem.

E: Right, yeah, that's really beautiful. Yeah, it sounds like we've definitely sort of had similar kind of experiences of Castle kind of digging his way into your memory and your perception and kind of popping everything out. You know, kind of making a pop-up book of the memory.

B: Uh-huh.

E: Yeah, it's a beautiful experience.



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