Discovering James Castle, World-Building, and the Vulnerability of Looking
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 future James Castle House Resident Nat Meade about discovering James Castle, world-building, and the vulnerability of looking.

Nat's residency was originally scheduled to begin May 20th, but has been postponed. He will now be joining us in the summer of 2021.

E: All right, Nat. Yeah, it's nice to meet you. Nice to talk with you a little bit. How are things over there on your end?

N: Um, I mean I'm fine, my family is fine. I'm in Brooklyn right now, came down just for a few days to get a few more things out of my studio to bring up. I'm up in western Massachusetts, a very kind of remote part of Massachusetts on the Vermont border.

E: Okay.

N: So yeah, we're fine. It seems like the world's not doing so well, but we're okay for now. Yeah, how are you? How are things? You get an extended stay. That's kind of a silver lining. That's nice.

E: Yeah, definitely. I try to, you know, be mindful of people who are going through terrible times right now. This is a very challenging time for the majority of people in the world. But

yeah, I mean, for me in this case, it has definitely worked out, worked out well in that sense. Yeah, definitely a silver lining.

N: Uh-huh.

E: And you know, I'm from Idaho. Not from Boise, but from Idaho Falls. And so I also kind of recognize the kind of special opportunity to be in such a historic place, in a residency with an Idaho artist, being from Idaho, in Idaho, you know, kind of experiencing this.

N: Yeah. I was reading one of your essays today about how you discovered James Castle's work at the Boise Art Museum, and it's interesting. I wrote my essay applying for the James Castle House residency, I mentioned--because I lived in Boise. I'm from Massachusetts originally, actually. Actually, I was born maybe 10-15 miles from where we are right now, and that's not by design.

E: Wow.

N: Which is a really kind of strange, reflective coincidence, I can't help but think about that.

E: Yeah, definitely.

N: I was born in Greenfield, Massachusetts. My parents worked at a boarding school called Northfield Mount Hermon. Up there it's just beautiful, rolling hills and maple trees. It's a very beautiful part of the world. But I went to Boise State University for three and a half years, and I discovered James Castle's work in much the same way. I was an art student there. I was also a football player there.

E: Right, yeah. Nice combination.

N: Yeah. And one of my refuges was to walk over to the Boise Art Museum, and I think that's where I first saw his work, and then have always been interested ever since, so that's an interesting parallel there.

E: Yeah, definitely. I actually also have a background in athletics.

N: Oh, yeah?

E: Yeah, I did track at Utah State.

N: Okay.

E: Yeah, I was a high jumper and then, a sort of similarly weird combination, I was on the track team and then I was studying classics. Like Greek and Latin, you know.

N: Interesting, yeah.

E: Kind of similar, definitely also veered toward the language and, you know, arts side. Kind of happily left athletics behind when the time came.

N: Yeah, me too. Me too. It's not, not a real contemplative place when you're nineteen or twenty.

E: Right.

N: I remember, is Utah State, is that in Ogden? Logan?

E: Logan.

N: Logan, yeah. I remember playing Utah State a long time ago, but I remember the trip up there.

E: Yeah, I mean, we would come here to Boise all the time for meets and stuff. And yeah, at that time, my family—so, I grew up in Idaho Falls, but my family moved to Boise in 2006.

N: Uh-huh.

E: So, they've been here for fifteen years, and so I've sort of come to Boise as the place to come visit my family and stuff but haven't really ever actually lived here. And so, yeah, you know, talking about your experience being so close to where you were born.

N: Uh-huh.

E: And you know, I'm sort of in that, kind of a similar place here, where I've got all my family here, and I'm here as well. And, so, there's a sense of home, but also a kind of strangeness to Boise, sort of getting to know it.

N: Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah, I never—I only lived in Massachusetts for a couple of years, and then my family moved to Oregon, mostly Portland, Oregon. So, I maybe have a couple of very faint memories, where you don't know if they are a memory of a dream.

E: Or someone told you.

N: Yeah, but I think I have a couple of memories of Massachusetts. But you know, it was always kind of—almost, you know, when it's something you've heard about and thought about, but you don't really know it as a place. You know, it kind of has a-- becomes a big presence in your own personal folklore, you know?

E: Yeah.

N: So, it's interesting to be here.

E: Yeah. I saw the video that, you know, the James Castle House put on. You know, you explained a little bit about your work and your little studio there. And I spent some time on your website the last couple of days, looking at your work. I hadn't seen too much of it, but I will say that the piece they put on the little social media announcement of the residencies last year of that face, with like, the tears, and you know, the shadows? I bet I've thought about that every single day.

N: Wow.

E: There's something about like the dimensionality and like sort of the angles on it, like the geometric elements of it. Like I don't necessarily, you know, I'm not really a visual arts guy. I wish I knew more and wish I had a better language to describe it. But yeah, it's a really impactful piece and I'm excited to kind of see what you get here and end up getting into.

N: Yeah, thanks. That's kind of a one-off piece for me, or maybe not, but in that like the whole, almost the whole rectangle was the face.

E: Yeah, right.

N: Uh, yeah. I mean, I'd be interested in hearing more, kind of why that's resonant to you.

E: I guess I'll back up and maybe give you a little more back story too.

N: Sure.

E: So, when I discovered Castle at the Boise Art Museum, it was in September of 2018, so pretty recently.

N: Yeah.

E: And the show that was going on at the same time was a collection of European, like, constructionists. You know, again, I don't know that much, so I don't know what I'm talking about when I talk about this stuff. But I guess one of the early, sort of like abstraction groups, like circle and square.

N: Uh-huh.

E: You know, there's like some Fernand Léger, there's like one Kandinsky there.

N: Yep.

E: Yeah, sort of like the geometric elements and just like the way that those artists were experimenting as I saw it, with like planes and sort of like causality and the way that maybe light played a role in the work that it doesn't in the real world, I guess. And I don't know, I was just really interested in a lot of those pieces and near the end of that exhibition is when I came upon Castle's work.

N: Yeah.

E: And there was a pretty big show going on, I mean a big exhibition of his stuff. I think it was actually coinciding with the James Castle House, I found out later. But like that, sort of the immediate context of when I discovered Castle's work.

N: Yeah.

E: And so, I think when I saw your piece, like it resonated on both of those levels, right? Because there is like a bit of that abstraction and sort of, you know, kind of—again, I don't know how to talk about this very well, but sort of like a nonsense element where, like the tears being cried by the face you know, were given these massive shadows, right? And so, like you sort of—even though it wasn't present in the work, you got the sense that these tears had volume.

N: Yes. Right.

E: And so, like that again, you know, was sort of the type of thing that I was interested in in those early abstract pieces. And like that's where Castle came from for me.

N: Gotcha. I would imagine in a show like that I would find Castle's works such a relief.

E: Yeah.

N: I feel like it's, um, just because it's not cerebral.

E: Right.

N: It's, instead of kind of opening up to the world, it's looking in.

E: Right.

N: I, yeah, I often like the little work that you find, like, on the way to the bathroom at a museum, or you know, in an atrium.

E: Yeah.

N: I feel like that's—you can find some real treasures, kind of, that were probably important at one time, and then, you know, for whatever reason, they're kind of an afterthought for whoever decided to put them there. But I love finding those pieces.

E: Yeah.

N: In terms of that piece, in my own work, I really try to, uh, well there's a humorous aspect, I think, like to having such dramatic lighting. Well, I'm interested in, like, I always like work where it's like the world—it's where the artist is able to create, like, a painted world.

E: Yeah.

N: You know, where it makes sense within that picture and there's volume and light, but it's kind of, it's not adhering to—you get to kind of figure out how light affects things in that world, and what's the, you know, like, what's the weight of tears in this world?

E: Yeah.

N: And I also think it's both kind of exposed, like it's a real—it's both like a send up of this crying figure and then it's also like a pretty sad painting, I guess.

E: Yeah, no, that—yeah, there's definitely, I get that sense for sure and I like that idea. Sort of, you know, the building of a world inside of like a single painting.

N: Yeah.

E: And I get that sense too, from like the books that I read that become really important to me. There's always this element to, like, what to me is a good book, where you have to let the book teach you how to read it, you know?

N: Yeah.

E: And so, there's like thirty, forty, fifty pages of sort of, like, confusion maybe? Or just not really getting it, and all of a sudden, like you kind of get into the world that the book wants you in.

N: Right.

E: So that's kind of the sense I get from what you're saying is, you've got to spend a second with the painting and, like, let it tell you about itself almost, or kind of like teach you how to look at it, teach you about its world.

N: Right. And then things become very much more, I think much more meaningful in that moment. You know, you kind of see where things are coming from, I guess. The vantage point reveals itself.

E: Yeah, and like, the vulnerability, too, of like, looking at something and not imposing your own viewpoint, but sort of opening yourself and letting, kind of, the painting or the book or whatever, kind of tell you about itself, right? So you're almost becoming, like, the object that's being viewed as much as the painting.

N: Yeah.

E: Yeah, which is cool. Like, that's definitely another sense I get from Castle's work as well, you know, is it almost feels like it's the active element, like when it's getting looked at, you know, rather than me. And especially the more time I spend with it and the more of his work that I've seen, and sort of being constantly amazed at the amount of work he did, but also like, such different types of work.

N: Yeah, yep.

E: Yeah, I think that sense that it's an entire world, and he wasn't making, like, drawings, he was sort of describing this world that he experienced.

N: Absolutely. It's so intense and insular, and so much about his curiosity. Yeah, I like that too, and I like, I just like the way—the mood. The mood of it. And then you get more and more out of it. I--you really get a sense, you know, of his interiors, and his landscapes, both because of the found materials that he used—I was listening to one of the previous Community Chats that you did and there was, just talking about Castle's link to Idaho, and you know, there's something about—especially in like the winter or late fall, how things get so whitewashed in

Idaho. I think about like the Boise River, there's a real kind of, yeah, I think it is kind of vulnerable, it's kind of bleak. He just really captures, there's a certain kind of, there's a lonely quality to his work, and there's kind of an empty…I don't know how to describe it, but I really get a sense of kind of that, just the way the kind of dry, windswept…beautiful, too, but there's a…yeah. I don't know how to describe it.

E: Yeah.

N: But I just get such a sense of place from his work.

E: Yeah, definitely. I like that sort of, that idea, you know. I mean, so there's this folk singer who grew up in northern Idaho, Josh Ritter, maybe you've heard of him, I don't know.

N: I've heard of him, yeah.

E: But I saw this interview with him once and they asked him, you know, something unique, like, where he grew up, and something unique that he gathered from growing up there, and I thought his answer was so beautiful. He said, I grew up in Idaho, and what's unique about it there is the sky is so big, and most of the time, it's empty.

N: Uh-huh.

E: You know, and like that big sky element I for sure get. But like that last little bit, you know, most of the time it's empty, like to me that relates pretty easily to Castle's work, 'cause he never like, really depicted the seasons, didn't ever really draw snow, you know, didn't draw, like, usually, the sun or the moon.

N: Yeah.

E: And so, like there is sort of that emptiness in his work that, you know is also to me is definitely a part of this Idaho landscape.

N: Yeah.

E: And so, I hadn't really thought of it in those terms, but I do like that. That rings true to me.

N: Yeah. I think of it, even, it's also so small, it's just kind of the surroundings. His surroundings at the house, the shelter, the structures on his property, the weird trees.

E: Yeah.

N: And so, it's just a very kind of insular contemplative reflection of a very, kind of intimate, it's not grandiose, it's not heroic. This very kind of intimate space. This very self-contained space, and, I don't know, I really love that about art, I think. I'm interested in kind of an anti-heroic quality in painting.

E: Yeah.

N: And I do think it's similar to poetry in the role that it fills at this moment, and not just because not that many people care about it right now. But, um, because it's quiet, it's slow. I tend to work small, and I tend to be drawn to smaller works that are, you kind of, there's more of like an ownership kind of, looking into it. You have to be closer to the work to kind of get it.

E: Right.

N: So, all those things are all really, you know, they're all very interesting to me.

E: Yeah. And you know, I went, like I said, I went on your website and just sort of clicked through all of your work there a couple of times, and I definitely got a sense of Castle's methodology there, you know, some of them there it was like a very small image, but with a very small change.

N: Yep.

E: You know, like a tear and then not a tear, or the hand in a slightly different position, you know?

N: Yep.

E: And, Castle, you know, especially if you look at like his—the same subject that he painted or drew or constructed or whatever, it's just sort of these minute changes that give like this sense of movement, but not of progression.

N: Yeah.

E: Which add sort of to like the daily or intimate aspect of it and to me, I also find that unbelievably refreshing and especially, you know, not to, I'm not like a cultural critic or whatever, you know, but in this sort of superhero culture that we have now and where sort of a lot of public policy even, sort of almost requires someone to be heroic in order to like, get their needs met. Yeah, sort of the like very small poetic artistic moments are such a nice antidote to that feeling that everyone needs to be a hero, when you know, you don't.

N: Yeah, and also that he never lost the itch. It was interesting to him. He kept doing it because it was still, he was still curious about it. It wasn't out of his system. He was still very interested in whatever, the aesthetic thing or the mood or whatever he was shooting for in that, in that interaction. It wasn't out of his system and he found it still interesting. I don't know if you know the artist Giorgio Morandi, um, I mean he spent a lifetime painting these very contained still lifes of bottles and vessels and they're some of, to me, they're some of the best paintings. I will always stop at a Morandi painting just because I find them—formally, they're so amazing. And there's just such a nice, there's something about the repetition and the curiosity, and I find that interesting. And I feel the same way with my own work. It's like I can come up with an idea and then I try it and I feel like it's not quite out of my system and I have to, I have to try again, you know, to just to keep at it.

E: Yeah, I can relate to that. Definitely sort of, you know, just you know, the kind of these little moments of being inspired or finding an image, or finding like a turn of phrase that I just like kind of, you know, can't get out of my head until when, whether it turns into a poem or a story or whatever, like you kind of have to go until you find its right form.

N: Uh-huh.

E: You know, it's sort of like this little exorcism.