

Empathy, Humanity, and the Deceptive Simplicity of Language

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 future James Castle House Resident Nat Meade about empathy, humanity, and the deceptive simplicity of language. 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.

N: So, what—how do you feel like being there has—what have you been working on, and how do you feel like it's kind of changed what you've been doing, or influenced it?

E: So, I came with a couple of projects in mind. You know, specific projects that I proposed, and one of them was this series of erasure poems from Woodsmoke, you know, this book of poems and visual art by J. Reuben Appelman and Troy Passey. I figured I'd do maybe 15 or 20 of these, you know, sort of a little homage to Castle and the found work and the recycled work. And then I had a series of essays on linguistics topics, because one of my early experiences with Castle—and to be honest, I don't remember if I had this feeling before or after I learned about his biography, you know, when he didn't learn to read or write, didn't learn to sign, never spoke.

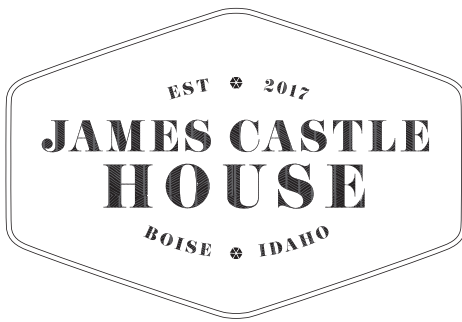
N: Yeah.

E: But I just had...like, more than any other artists I had ever seen, like his work just felt like language to me, you know?



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N: Huh.

E: Sort of like that deceptive simplicity, the repetition of forms, you know, kind of this endless variation within a small set of kind of building blocks. So, I've been exploring that and then working on a series of other like nonfiction essays, just kind of exploring me experience with Castle, sort of relating him to, you know, these two other artists that feel very similar to me, the Polish writer Bruno Schultz and the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. So, again, sort of just exploring my experience with them and why they feel so similar.

N: Huh.

E: So, these are the things I came to do, basically. And each one of them sort of just turned into a much, much bigger project than I had envisioned, so there was certainly a depth to what I already had that was added by being here.

N: Yeah.

E: Um, and then there's also been sort of these, like little offshoot projects, you know? I started writing some shorter fiction pieces, kind of just with little ideas and images that are kind of inescapable in, you know, looking at work as rich as Castle's.

N: Yeah.

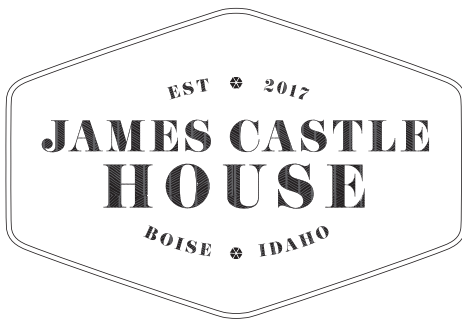
E: So, I would say, you know, for the most part, the sort of, just like the added depth of the ideas I already had about him has sort of been the biggest thing, and I sort of explored all of those topics much deeper than I figured I would.

N: And, you see his work as language in that that's how he kind of categorizes and digests and organizes the world around him, and that's his output right?

E: Right.

N: That's his expression.





E: Definitely, yeah. I mean, so I come from a linguistics background, you know, generative linguistics, generative grammar, biolinguistics, whatever. Like Noam Chomsky, you know, essentially, and his movement.

N: Uh-huh.

E: And so, one of the big, like revolutions of his ideas and the ideas of those in his group is that language is a biological system essentially, right, just like the visual system or the digestive system. There's something in like the human mind-brain that produces language and what it is, is this system of combining these meaning-bearing units into complex structures.

N: Yeah, yep.

E: And so, in that sense, the fact that Castle never learned language has nothing to do with his language capacity. He had just as much capacity for language as anybody else.

N: Right?

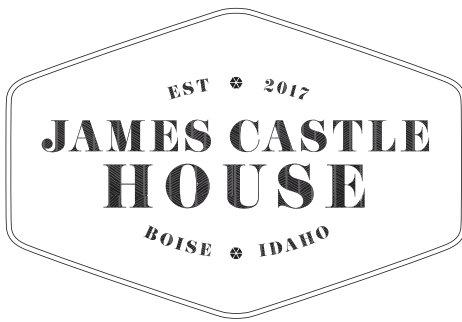
E: Right, and the fact that he didn't, you know, sort of fill that capacity with, you know, a traditional language, a traditional linguistic system shared by a community, sort of his unique experience. You know, he was a sickly child, apparently didn't walk until the age of four, and you know, so I sort of just imagine him laying in a room, essentially. You know, any one of these rooms that he could have, you know, drawn over and over again, and sort of acquiring the shapes and the spaces of this room, you know? And then the other important part of language acquisition is interaction.

N: Yes.

E: You know, children babble, and repeat forms, and they're constantly hearing language and there's sort of a playfulness to it, and you know Castle sort of fulfilled that role too. You know, his family related that sort of as soon as he could get up and grab a pencil, he started drawing. And so, I see sort of this constant drawing almost as this babbling, this exploration of the spaces.

N: Yeah.





E: And so, it's sort of, yeah. I mean, I don't have any illusions about like translating Castle's work, or sort of understanding any sort of meaning behind his work, but it's just sort of that he interacted with his art in the same way that we experience language from a very young age. I mean, all these words that we're saying, they're words that we learned as very small children.

N: You know, this is all really interesting to me. I don't know, I have a son who is eight years old, and he's nonverbal.

E: Okay, yeah?

N: He can hear-- he has a rare neurogenetic disorder called Angelman Syndrome.

E: Okay.

N: And you're right, the thing with the way kids form languages at an early age through babble, basically trying out different combinations of sound and trying out language and mimicking and all that. If you're nonverbal, you never get that developmental stage.

E: Right.

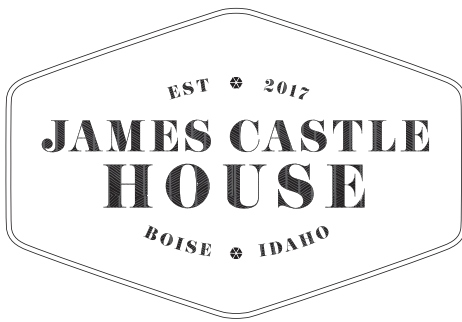
N: And so, what my son uses is an AAC device. You know, kids with Angelman Syndrome didn't have that option until very recently, because it relies on touch screen technology, but it's Augmentative Alternative Communication. And it's just a device with folders and symbols, when you touch them, they say what you're thinking about.

E: Yeah, wow.

N: And it's, you know, if you were to take the things he says on his device every day, I think it's really interesting. And, the repetition, and...I'm hesitant to be too analytical about it just because it's my son and it's his language, but it is interesting to think about like what words he goes back to because on his device, you can look at the history at the end of the day if he came back from school, and see everything he said that day.

E: Wow, that's incredible.





N: And the things that are important to him and the patterns that he formed. And so, that's another—not only, I've been, you know, James Castle's work has been important to me for years, but then there's also this added element of him being nonverbal.

E: Yeah, wow.

N: Him not having a verbal language and my son also not having that, so it's interesting. It just is another fascinating thing that I hope I can learn more about and then it will help me kind of have a better understanding of, you know, just who my son is and the way he thinks about the world.

E: Yeah, that's really, that's an incredible sort of relationship to be able to have, you know, to Castle's work.

N: Yeah, for sure.

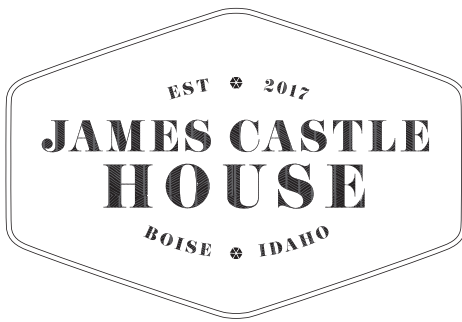
E: And sort of to, to experience, you know, the way your son interacts with the world. And I mean, to me it's just so fascinating, because from a very early age, like most of us, you know, we're all just constantly using language, whether it's communicating or whether it's just sort of interior monologue. I've always been a big reader since I was very young, and so like in very explicit ways, like language has always been the very central part of my experience.

N: Yeah.

E: And so, for someone like Castle or your son, I guess like to sort of understand like the depth and richness of their experience, sort of without this thing that for me is absolutely the most important part.

N: Yeah it is, I mean, communication is the most important thing, and I think there's a – you, without even thinking about it, you have an empathetic standpoint when you're looking at Castle's work, because you're appreciating his unique way of navigating the world. And you, the more time you give it, the more you look at the work, the more you kind of...because like we talked about earlier, you get a better understanding of that world. There's an empathetic





standpoint, and I feel like that's something everyone needs is like that, kind of being able to open up and experience something from a very unique and different standpoint.

E: Yeah, definitely. And realizing, you know, because one of the things with Castle, and this is something that ties him in my mind to Bruno Schulz and Dmitri Shostakovich, you know, Castle has this very unique biography, that it's sort of easy to—you can give a couple of sentences and like it sort of feels like it sums up his work.

N: Yes, totally. Yes.

E: Right?

N: Just like the soot and spit, I feel like that's what everybody knows.

E: Yeah, absolutely.

N: Yeah.

E: Or you know, like born congenitally deaf, like never learned to read or write, you know?

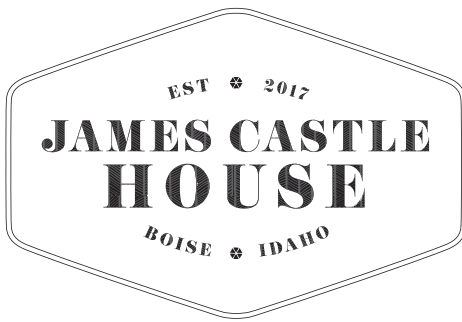
N: Yes, that's right.

E: And that's true, and it's unavoidably part of his experience and his art, but at the same time, if you're willing to look at the art, you realize that it is totally self-contained, like it absolutely speaks for itself.

N: Yeah, that's right. It's a huge simplification of a very kind of complicated and meaningful life. Yeah.

E: Yeah, and so, kind of speaking to that, that empathy, you know, of sort of just such a simple, simple but you know, deep object lesson, I guess. You know, someone isn't summed up by their experience, you know, there's always much more inside somebody and you know, there's people like Castle who spent every day of their life sort of producing this massive body of work to prove that, you know.





N: Yep,

E: It's true of him, and it's true of everybody.

N: Right.

E: He just showed us.

N: Right, definitely. And he's really, I kind of bristle at the term Outsider Artist for anyone, but it certainly being applied to him because, you know, I work in an art school, you know. And I went through art school, and what I found is that you learn these things and they inform your work. And it's not that they're not important, you know, draftsmanship and understanding of context and critical context and all these things. But then to be an artist, you have to, you have to really, like search your way. You have to figure out what's meaningful for you and then really try to find your way into something unique and not necessarily tied to these learned concepts.

E: Right.

N: And so I feel like in a way, he's much further down the road as an artist than someone who's fresh out of graduate school.

E: Yeah, definitely. I mean, yeah, to me the thing, you know, if I had to give a sentence or two about Castle's work, and sort of where I've come to is, it is just so unbelievably human.

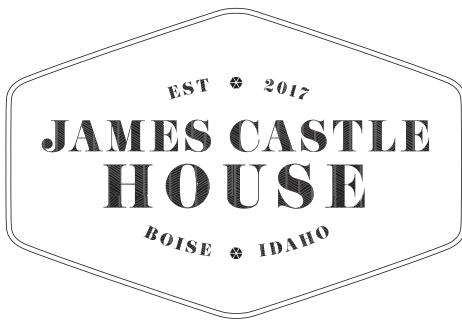
N: Uh-huh.

E: You know, he's just someone who like really seems to have reached, you know, deep, deep, deep into the depths of humanity for all of his work.

N: Yep.

E: And, you know, sort of in a way that might be a bit strange, like superficially, you know, he did a lot of landscapes, and a lot of architecture, and the human figures that he drew were sort of blocky and mask-like, and almost barely human, but I don't know, at the same time...





N: Yeah, but you're right. The humanity part is just that, well, it's that it kind of invokes kind of these human traits upon all these things, right?

E: Right, absolutely.

N: Like that's what it is, is that you get such a sense of how he's relating to these things and how they are meaningful through scale and through the way he handles the human form. It's very weird. His human figures, they're in color and they're blocky, but yes, that's the humanity is that then it becomes not about some sort of observed experience, and much more about a felt experience, and that's where humanity comes in.

E: Yeah, absolutely. And you know, there's this one, you know, it's in the Philadelphia Retrospective book, but it just shows like so clearly, this house and then the house split into columns and then the columns growing arms and then the columns becoming this row of girls, but it still has like sort of the forms of the roof in it.

N: Yeah.

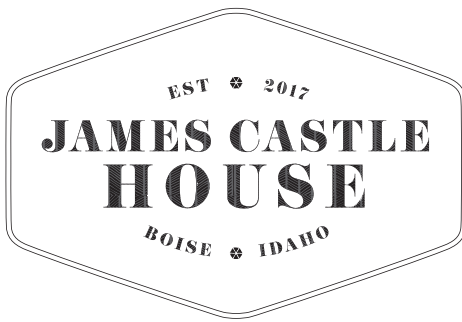
E: And that sort of, and this is something that's been pointed out before, and something that I've been trying to explore here as well, is that one of the aspects of humanity in his work, as you sort of pointed out too, is that everything is alive. There's sort of this blurring of the boundaries of human versus object.

N: Yeah, I love that.

E: Yeah, you just really get the sense of how, sort of, he interacted with the world and just sort of was privy to some truth about the world that most of us are not, you know, and that is that everything is alive.

N: Yeah, I really am interested in that in my own work is that the characters, right, the props, whatever within that scene, or the thing or whatever material you want them to be, so light can have a real presence. Light, and cast shadows can take on a like a very important, like solid form and light can also have that—James Ensor talked about allegorical use of light. That really resonates with me, so it's like a puzzle you're putting together, just like Jacob Lawrence paintings, how everything kind of has like an equal weight and it's like a puzzle piece where the





figures and the objects are all kind of imposing on each other. And then you get to make them kind of equally important.

E: Right.

N: That's very meaningful, where all the different parts are like props that you can play with. And I guess that's what I mean about like a painted world, or you're creating your own reality, is that you have the freedom to kind of invoke an emphasis in meaning to all the different parts.

E: Yeah, and I mean everything you're saying there, like Castle just seems like the epitome, you know?

N: Yeah, for sure.

E: I don't know, I've been here long enough now and sort of, you know, I discovered Castle right at the beginning of my interest in visual arts and stuff, and so you know, maybe I'm sort of a bit romantically skewing everything in Castle's favor, but he really does seem like he got to the bottom of it, you know?

N: Yeah, absolutely, yeah. I mean, what a body of work. What a life.

