

## ART

# Images From a Life of Silence

BY KAREN WILKIN

A riddle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma"—Winston Churchill's famous description of Russia—could easily apply to the fascinating, self-taught artist James Castle (1899-1977). Born in a small, remote Idaho farming community and profoundly deaf from birth, Castle was unimaginably isolated, in every way. Although he spent five years at a school for the deaf, he neither acquired language nor, for practical purposes, learned to read. (Teaching the deaf at the time emphasized lip reading, nearly impossible for someone who had never heard.) He left school without any way of communicating or of supporting himself in the hearing world.

If Castle was trapped in silence, at least one other sense—his sight—seemed to become more acute. Making images was his way—his only way—of coming to terms with both the world around him and his inner life, a means of discovery, possession and communication. His family made it possible for Castle to spend his time obsessively making art. (Farm chores, according to family members, were never his strong suit.) The result? An enormous and astonishingly inventive body of work—drawings, paintings, assemblages, collages, text-based works, and handmade books—that offers a glimpse into a private world and remains, ultimately, unknowable and inexplicable.

First brought to the attention of the public in the early 1960s, Castle has become something of a cult figure, acquiring a growing number of admirers in the ensuing decades without becoming any less puzzling or surprising. New Yorkers probably know him best from his solo exhibitions, beginning in 2000, at The Drawing Center and Knoedler Gallery, and his inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's "The Raw and the Cooked," among other group shows, all of which were helpful introductions but, as it turns out, revealed only a small part of

what Castle is about.

His full achievement is currently celebrated by "James Castle: A Retrospective," at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through Jan. 4, an impeccably selected show organized by Ann Percy (who notes, after devoting more than three years to the project, that material still awaits investigation). The range and subtlety of the work on view is staggering, from suavely executed, brooding drawings and radiant little paintings to slapdash, glued and stitched-together cardboard figures and birds. There are orderly collages assembled from advertising images, carefully assembled miniature books, pages of real and invented alphabets, and more. Castle's efforts are formally sophisticated, innocent but far from childlike, spatially complex and schematic, refined and expedient, sometimes all at once. Out of both necessity and choice, he preferred to work with a homemade medium of soot and saliva, applied with sticks and crumpled paper to cardboard scavenged from boxes, the backs of letters and bills, and the like; for color, he extracted "paints" from colored paper soaked in water and from ordinary household supplies. The variety and richness of tones, marks and lines that Castle elicited from his unlikely materials, and his haunting imagery, place him among the giants of modern draftsmanship.

The farm on which Castle spent his first 23 years seems to have been his recurring subject, with the farmyard often depicted with strange "totems" towering above the meticulously rendered farmhouses, barns and outbuildings. There are barn interiors that turn the complexities of beams, siding and stalls into near-Cubist geometry; bedroom interiors that itemize wallpaper patterns and details of furniture; as well as rooms populated with stylized figures who may be real people or may be images of Castle's constructed cardboard figures. (Figures are always flattened and stylized, in contrast to the elegantly detailed, complex landscapes and interiors, as if

people were less real to him than places and things.)

The retrospective enlarges our understanding of Castle's work, but unanswerable questions remain. The farm landscapes and interiors are rendered as coherent three-dimensional spaces. How does a man who cannot hear or speak, with no art training, whose "visual culture," in the current phrase, consisted exclusively of magazines and newspapers, comic strips and advertising art, master perspective on his own?

Castle appears not to have been able to read or write—he could sign his name and seemed to grasp a connection between himself and the word "Jimmy"—yet he covered sheets with alphabets and words, treating letters as "abstract" forms but occasionally deploying words in ways that seem to make meaning or sound significant. The family was hardly bookish, yet Castle made countless cardboard-covered books, with sewn-in pages filled with illustrations and scribbled "text." And there are the hand-drawn "photo albums," with neat rows of "pictures," some obviously copied from photos and comics, others invented, all translated into Castle's expressive tonal language; many images recur in other albums, arranged in new sequences, like picture writing. Most puzzling is the way that Castle's work seems to recapitulate modernist, especially Surrealist, characteristics and even some Post-Modernist ideas about "appropriated text."

There are no answers to these questions, but finally it doesn't matter. Even more than Castle's moving story, the moody poetry of his work commands our attention.

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**JAMES CASTLE; closes on Saturday.**

One of the geniuses of 20th-century outsider art is represented here by his subtle grisaille drawings of his family farm rendered in soot mixed with spit; his more rudimentary images created from brightly colored paper pulp (also self-made); and his relatively jarring constructions of folded paper and cardboard tied together with string (exemplified here by a magnificent black pram). All have markedly different effects. The cardboard pieces suggest that in his understanding of structure, moving parts and the abbreviation of familiar forms, Castle used cardboard as brilliantly as Alexander Calder used wire, but with more corners. Ameringer Yohe Fine Art, 20 West 57th Street, (212) 445-0102, [ameringer-yohe.com](http://ameringer-yohe.com). (Smith)