

A publication to accompany the exhibition:

*CASTLE IN CONTEXT*

at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery  
1616 Walnut Street, Suite 100  
Philadelphia, PA 19103  
October 10–December 7, 2008

Letters by Brendan Greaves and William Pym  
Designed by Claire Iltis  
Assembled by Amy Adams, Patrick Blake, Claire Iltis,  
John Ollman, and Heather Shoemaker, October 2008



James Castle, *Untitled (figure construction)*, n.d., found paper, string, color of unknown origin, 16 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches.

## FOREWORD

It hardly seems like ten years have passed since Fleisher/Ollman first mounted an exhibition of the profoundly moving artwork of James Castle. In the ensuing years, experiencing Castle's vision has opened up new understandings for me, not only of his artwork, but of art in general. Why his art affects me in this way is hard to quantify, but I know that with each new work I see, the addiction deepens. He has taught me about passion, invention, beauty and the voice of an artist. His art and his life are inseparable.

I like to imagine how Agnes Martin would have responded to Castle's abstractions, or Forest Bess to his emblematic drawings. I sense an underlying spirituality in the landscapes of Grant Wood, Charles Burchfield, Joseph Yoakum and James Castle which is uniquely American. The range of artists that use text as a subject is nearly unlimited in contemporary art, and I put Castle's text drawings on a par with any of them. These imagined dialogues and perceived connections between Castle and a diverse range of artists form the basis for this exhibition.

Jacqueline Crist of J Crist Gallery first introduced me to Castle's amazing art, and working with Jacque and the staff of her gallery has been a pleasure. Last year I had the chance to visit Boise, and I want to thank Jacque for taking the time to introduce me to the landscape that Castle loved so much. Our trip to the family cemetery proved to be one of the most moving experiences of my life, and it helped me understand a depth in Castle's work that I had not fully grasped before that trip. The gold-flecked rock I picked up from the old Castle farmstead sits on my desk as a reminder of that day. I also want to thank Ann Percy for her unwavering support of Castle's work, Marvin Bileck, who taught me how to look at drawings, and Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz for creating the Foundation for Self-taught Artists and choosing Castle as the subject of its first project: "James Castle: Portrait of an Artist."

In the last decade we've lost several important friends and proponents of James Castle and his work: Gerry Garrow, the artist's niece and keeper of the flame; Jay Tobler, curator of "James Castle: House Drawings," at The Drawing Center, NY; and, of course, our beloved Anne d'Harnoncourt, whose passion for art inspired us all. Lastly, it was Henry Feiwei who first revealed to me how seamlessly Castle's

art fit into a contemporary context, by installing a room in his collection of equal parts Castle drawings and Jasper Johns prints. I'm sure it's where the idea for this exhibition began. They are all sadly missed.

I wish to thank all the lenders to the exhibition: The Alexandre Gallery, J Crist Gallery, Betty Cunningham Gallery, Daniel Dietrich III, Patricia Feiwel, DC Moore Gallery, John Hill Antique Indian Arts, KS Art, Karen Lennox, Matthew Marks Gallery, Jonathan Novak Gallery, Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, Waqas Wajahat LTD, and several private collectors.

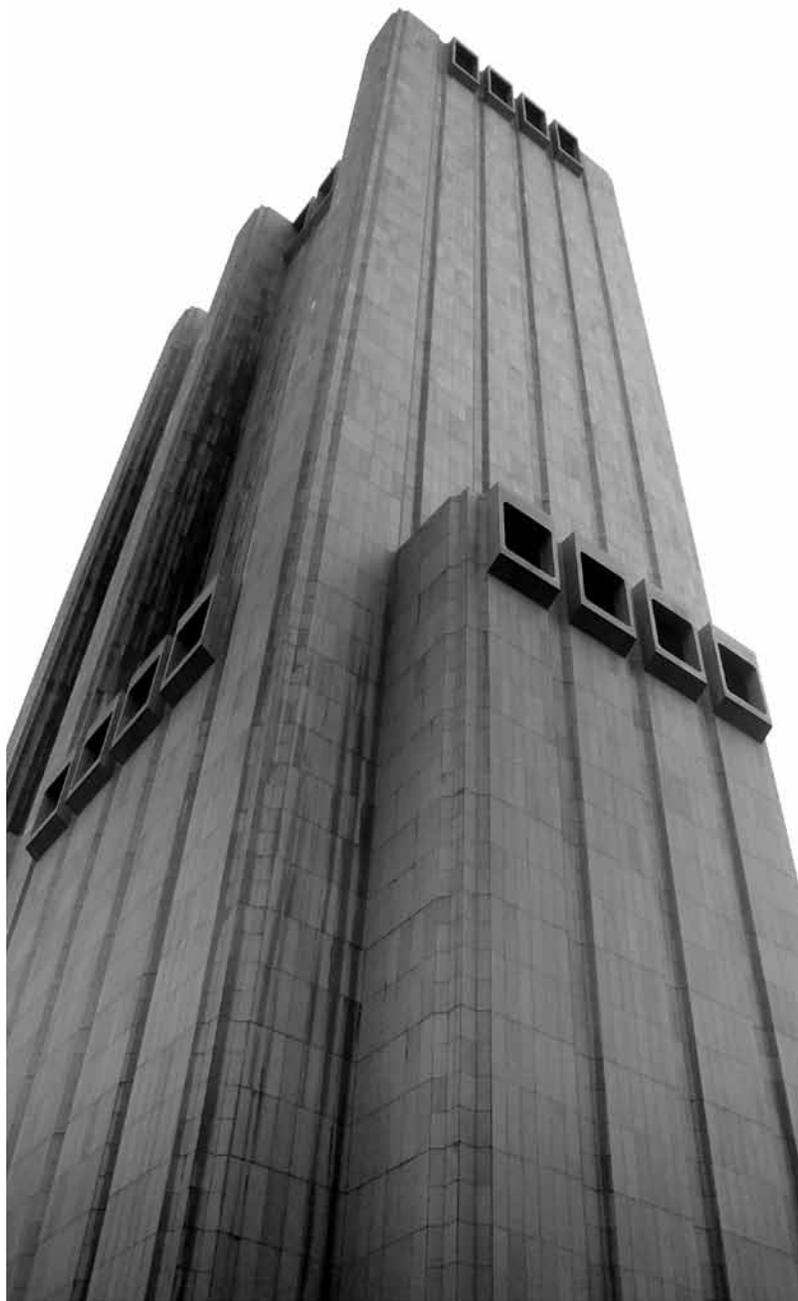
I thank everyone at the gallery: Amy Adams, our new director, who learns on the fly faster than the speed of light, Heather Shoemaker, who follows up on every detail, Patrick Blake, as nothing seems to faze him, Claire Iltis, designer par excellence who shapes the image of the gallery and made this publication happen, and, of course, Ann Ollman, who keeps me focused. I also thank William Pym and Brendan Greaves for their thought-provoking epistolary essay which provides further context for our ongoing examination of Castle's work and its relevance to the art world and its assorted practitioners today.

John Ollman  
October 2008



Opposite: Installation shots from *Castle in Context*. Works pictured are by James Castle, Grant Wood (top), James Castle (middle), Charles Burchfield, Forrest Bess, and Emily Nelligan (bottom). Photos: Claire Iltis.





AT&T Switching Building, New York City, August 14th 2008. Photo: WP.

Saturday, September 20th 2008

Dear and only Southern brother,

Been thinking about Castle here in the crazy lattice of New York, and thinking about you in your castle down there in the sticks. It gets too much for me here, sometimes. I think a lot about that Debord thing, psychogeography, where the constructed world, the natural world and the inner world collapse into one thing, one place, your place. You need to know your place in New York if you don't want to make bad art or be forgotten or never be remembered, but I'm finding that a healthy psychogeography is, unlike bagels or pornography, rather difficult to obtain here. You need a strategy. All I see sometimes are shortcuts, and sometimes it makes me miserable.

I see youngsters signing on to the mongrel diaspora scene to become a nimble, globally minded hobo. And this is dynamite for them. New York has ever embraced rootless people, and contemporary art currently embraces the polyglot, he who rejects the imperialism and unilateral elitism of art as it used to be. Art is being made all over the world now, and it's chic and socially proper to take a view with a wider ecology, and, most interestingly to the art industry, people all over the world are now buying expensive art, and more of it as each month passes. A multicultural position in New York is both right-on and canny.

I see youngsters hooking up to an established artistic lineage to become tribute spawn of someone who did it and flourished before. And this is gold every time too. Inventing a present that delights nostalgists and validates the work of historians is a fast track to popularity in New York, because it seems respectful and reverential, religious-type feelings that are canny to express in a city that's also a church to itself. Assuming a position in a continuum gives weight to a practice, and weight prevents momentum flagging.

I see youngsters selling off unvarnished morsels of their tarnished virgin essence, soul on sale in a pure form. Killer. With this transaction the hat is tipped to Manhattan and the dirtier spirit of rebellion and reinvention that thrives here, and something is exchanged that is rare and valuable. The buyer wins because the stock is strong, and the seller wins because they've found the perfect gig: fantastic pay for

acting without thinking. The young artist need not even remember what they've done or why they do it, for neon gas continues to light the way to their next work.

A proper atom-smashing collision of the many worlds you simultaneously inhabit in your daily environment, this psychogeography, is not easy, I know that, it's not as easy as just wanting to do it. It's a huge construction, and it's a construction that must be built strong enough to last your entire life. I can't beef with the folk taking shortcuts, since it's intimidating and expensive to live here and try and be an artist. But we shouldn't be taking these shortcuts, should we? Again, I've been thinking about Castle, and I've been thinking about you.

Please reply. Your friend,

Citymouth

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St. Marks Church, New York City, May 18, 2008, Photo: WP.

Monday, September 22, 2008: Autumnal Equinox

My dearest pal métropolitaine,

Another summer done gone today, another sneaky equinox, a mite meaningless down here in Carolina, where the weather will belch out the tedious dregs of sunshine and sweat for at least another month more. Even now a riot of thrushes crashes at oaks outside; sullen deer stare stupidly through the thick heat; blue-tailed lizards sun themselves on the porch. (Remember, on your last visit, the great barred owl that swooped over the picnic table, saw us, and hovered above for a few breathless seconds, stunned and flapping white, before peeling back into the woods?) Still, it's finally cooling off some, the light is mellowing toward autumnal, and human critters can now keep their windows open at night (thank God.) As I consider our letters moving between distant places, I am comforted by Melville's words to Hawthorne on June 29, 1851, a relieved account of summertime escape from the city, toward honest work and into a less cluttered life of the mind: "The 'Whale' is only half through the press; for, wearied with the long delay of the printers, and disgusted with the heat and dust of the babylonish brick-kiln of New York, I came back to the country to feel the grass—and end the book reclining on it, if I may."

He really knew what was up, that guy! Well, in certain respects, anyway. Although it's a notion foreign to the insular ferocity of your precocious youngsters, busy talkin' turkey in the "babylonish brick-kiln," lighting out for the territories to roam in workmanlike reverie, away from the madding crowds, will never go out of style. That taciturn, idealistic American move—redolent of Emerson, of Whitman, of Twain, of Dos Passos—cannot become antiquated and creaky, can it? Or has it already, astronomical gas prices (and literalism) aside? No chance of those dudes sauntering in right now to map our communal routes, no, that fictive moment of integrity and solidarity is gone again like summer, but hell, that's sort of what all these hippie revivalist youngsters are angling at, ain't it? But what are they making, anything useful to cultures beyond those of their own in-the-know ilk and those of speculative finance capitalism (i.e., the commercial art world)? Maybe... but as an "inside man" (solid Spike Lee joint, that one) you are better poised to answer that

question than me.

This much I know. Nothing is dire, brother—hope springs from swampside campsites, chubby breakfast hoagies, and clean, quiet workshops. Go outside, young woman, and go home, go away, young man, cheaply! Swallow your solipsism, and serve righteously. If we labor at harvesting our whales and share the ambergris, we can all “end the book reclining” on the grass together; yes, we may! If it’s unabashed romance you want—we two certainly stand guilty as charged on that count—do some research and reach out: a healthy grasp on history will inform your tactics and ethical interventions, especially during these warring days.

The appeal of James Castle, his relevance to every young artist today—regardless of whether you like the work; taste is a lame luxury and a hurdle, anyway—is his uncanny ability to o’erleap his own seemingly boundless interiority and communicate with others about home and horizon, the limits of self and language, with grace, good humor, and humble poetry. Castle lived in the territories—Idaho was only granted statehood in 1890, a mere nine years before his birth—and he made art that was about meticulously navigating that place, his space, intimate and immediate. We can meet him halfway, at least. He understood the power of restraining scale and scope, of positioning fresh worlds in interpenetrating dialogue, of daily hard work untethered to the expectation of social or monetary rewards. He understood the power of wandering locally, of conserving and recycling materials, of environmental tendresse oblige. His practice and his art speak plainly, but vastly, enigmatically, and yes, romantically.

So a few thoughts, vis-à-vis Mr. Castle, environment, ecology, and economy... You seem keen to discuss psychogeography and sense of place, and we know for sure how tiresome all these authenticity debates have become, so for today I’m keen to avoid rereading academic arguments about the vernacular, the modern, and the degree of the artist’s education, disability, and literacy, problematics which have been adequately covered elsewhere, and recently. Who was this Castle, and what can he possibly mean to us today? His contexts are manifold. Appropriationist, grammatogenist, domestic documentarian, conjurer of surrogates. Stylus virum arguit: Style betrays the man.

Castle saw a surplus, a mid-century excess of stuff, and he reversed it. His articulations of ecology and economy were entwined. To him, the “natural” (overdetermined) relations between things—environmental things, cultural things, word things—demanded a perspectival reconsideration, a reevaluation of every artifact, relic, or fossil as potentially gut-punch personal, containing a mine-able truth value and an emotional ore inside the dull, scavenged stone. What could be more political than that? What could be more punk? He retrofitted the obscure, cocksure language of commerce and classroom, a language probably mostly mysterious to him, into lovely private codes at once arcane and transparently poetic. Here’s an idea close to the hearts and minds of all those youngsters: coding,



Author Brendan Greaves in the Chattahoochee River, North Carolina-Georgia border, August 2008.  
Photo: WP.

the idea that what we do—what I do—is secret. OK, but make it matter to us; give us a map to how it means, or risk dissolving into belly-button wankery. Look at the Castles. Think collectively and privately; temper analysis with innervations (good Stevie Wonder record, that one.) Make things that change minds.

There is a bright memory I'd like to share about rumbling and rambling through Boise and Garden Valley, Idaho with a man I very much admire, and an idea I have about the B-movie horror director William Castle (no evident relation), but it will all have to wait until the next installment. I've rattled on too long already. I'm starving, and there are two hot dogs and a jar of okra pickles with my name on them in the refrigerator. I blame any purple archness herein on my empty belly. Of course, this business of critique and crafting manifestoes is deadly serious, but a man's got to eat, right? And it's a beautiful fall day outside.

Your brother in arms,

Countrymouse

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Site of Castle homestead, Garden Valley, Idaho, June 2007. Photo: BG.

Late Wednesday, September 24, beneath Manhattan

Dear creature,

I am sending word now from a New Jersey PATH train, keying my love to you through a mobile telephone. I should have been home 40 minutes ago for a late but accepted bedtime deadline, but the downtown platform was closed at 14th. Thus I have just left 33rd street after traveling in the wrong direction (is all was offered me) and am now heading back south and under the Hudson in a subway car with perhaps 2 dozen defeated immigrants and shriveling vampires slumped about me. What a rigamarole. Sobering up alone, sweat glazing my temples after a night of booze and brotherhood with our old friend GB. I write now, what better time? I'm understimulated by what I've been offered in one of those New York craters, the time between time that's neither asked for or ever anticipated. Can't find anything.

It's been a long time since I read prose so purple, pal, your letter warmed my heart. No stronger case could be made, with words sprouting from warm, fertile earth, for the way you live your life. It sounds like freedom to me. We don't even have to take drugs any more, my man, what a surprise that is, eh? Your message of found peace cements something I've believed for ages, shucks, something I've considered time after time since you took on country life. This place, this train, this city, is for the birds. And by the birds I mean nobody. The birds of course are plunging through your neck of the woods, and happily so.

I caught a remarkable whiff at a snatch of stuff in a collection of Yves Klein's writings today that corroborated your thought on Castle and the reversal of a surplus, the condensation of big into small, global into interpersonal into internal. Social philosopher and mid-Century Frankfurter Theodor Adorno (who I know nothing about) was thinking about 19<sup>th</sup>-Century poet Heinrich Heine (who I really know nothing about) and the pain he inflicted on the German Romantic spirit of the time. Heine apparently became enlightened and decided that his Romantic soul had flourished idly off the good fortune of autonomy to create art that was commodity, something easily and sincerely created becoming something easily and sincerely bought and sold. Thus he changed his mind about the romance of being a Romantic. Heine's Northern gloom is not massively different from mine as it was

a few days ago when the best I could think of was to write to you, but I took heart here, man! Considering the generosity of spirit, the playfulness, the exploration and the economy in Castle's oeuvre (laid out so eloquently in your last letter), I do not see a jot of evidence that the man ever took his autonomy for granted, and grew casual with it. Castle's gifts were given without goals in a marketplace, for his was a sort of autonomy that did not churn towards a signature style, a certain location in a collector's home, and a pricing structure. His autonomy begot not a product, but a prism. His autonomous romantic existence did not set him free (it takes more than that, buddy, as we well know from disappointing months and years in our shared pasts) but it did allow him to build a very large framework that could contain everything he saw, from all the angles he saw it, and from which he could start piecing together the dense psychogeography this autonomy had afforded him. As I wailed at you about New York the other day, confronting one's psychogeography is not a small or a swift undertaking, and there are ways to skirt it, but Castle always did it, and never didn't. There's a lesson and something for the youngsters to work for, I reckon. 'If you see something, say something,' suggests a bit of Transit Authority paranoia propaganda facing me on this blasted fucking train that refuses to take me home. Too right, whispers Castle's ghost.

This ain't much of a message beyond, perhaps, say it all. James Castle has allowed me that tonight. Would you believe it I'm finally home. There's a 24-hour McDonald's outside the train station 90 seconds away, I wonder what 2 dollars can do at 2 in the morning. No need to reply, this is real stuff but hardly a response, it's just that I miss you. This letters on the telephone thing feels interesting, not quite swimming with your boots on but something like it... Painting with the curtains closed? I shall ascend and hit send and put this in the hands of satellite carrier pigeons. Send a kiss to the Mrs. and sweet dreams. More anon.

Streetrat

Sent from my Verizon Wireless BlackBerry

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James Castle, *Untitled (exterior with house labeled "Jim")*, n.d., found paper, soot & spit, 8 3/8 x 10 7/8 inches

September 26, 2008

Dear Boss Bones:

Still where you left me, at my kitchen desk, with two Castles hanging just above my forehead, a donkey and an “ASHLEY.” Yesterday’s tropical storm is finally clearing—sodden dead branches are still bombarding our tin roof periodically—and I’m recovering from a late breakfast of cornmeal hotcakes. Found a homemade wooden bathhouse at the dump yesterday, basically a birdhouse for bats, which I took home with me. It’s smaller than a briefcase, but purports to shelter 25 bats! Got to whip up some cocktail concoction for a party this evening at BF’s tonight—I’m thinking a jug of mint juleps maybe. But best not to consider that too much yet, as it’s only noon now. I was delighted to receive your letter this morning, and I smiled to picture you enjoying a few twilight McDonald’s double cheasers on the night in question. But I was devastated to discover recently that they have been expunged from the dollar value menu—ouch, the rising price of cheese!

Speaking of fast food, I hear your words about commodity and the end of romance, and I hold onto them. How can we claw our way out of commoditization? Castle’s works command high prices, and as such, they have irrevocably escaped the milieu of their making. Adorno can be useful for buttressing anxieties about product, marketplace, and spectacle, but as much as I respect some of his writing, I find it hard to forgive the grim Teutonic rigor that undercut his own ideas about freedom. Theo notoriously hated jazz with a vehemence that approached racism, blathering on about its “regressive” and licentious decadence, its mechanical and fascist (!) features, and the narcotic stupor of all dance and popular music. Granted, the historical and theoretical contexts of his analysis profoundly differ from ours, but I like to imagine him meeting Charlie Mingus in a dark L.A. alley—they both lived there for much of the 1940s—and getting his ass kicked.

Anyway, context is the keyword for the occasion of this exhibition. To be fair, I get Adorno’s worries about the danger of staging an ersatz democracy, a concern that might corral Castle enthusiasts as well. After all, I have yet to find an essay or biography on the man’s art that doesn’t include a prominent disclaimer about his deafness and his plucky bootstrapper’s capacity to transcend his



A Castle cartoon appropriation and text drawing in the author’s kitchen. Photo: BG.

communicative restrictions, usually voiced right up front with paternalistic glee. That biographical detail is certainly relevant to his art, especially the text work, but its patronizing emphasis tends to ghettoize Castle’s art into a category apart, an imaginary world of naives, innocents, and noble idiots. The fact is that too many Castle investigations present only a blinkered pseudo-democratic context for the appraisal of his work, as if home and deafness constituted his lived totality. His relative isolation and lack of education belie a thoroughly modernist practice conducted along a vernacular axis. When it comes to insisting on Castle’s supposed seclusion from normative human experience, methinks the hearing critic doth protest too much.

This nasty residue evokes another death match: James Castle vs. William Castle, a contemporaneous schlock-shock B-movie filmmaker of no relation whose gimmicky 1959 thriller *The Tingler* pits megalomaniacal, LSD-dropping scientist Vincent Price against the eponymous monster, a parasitic (rubber) worm that sleeps in everyone’s spine until awakened by paralyzing fear. The film’s first theatrical run featured “Percepto!”, vibrating buzzers installed beneath select seats in the audience that encouraged viewers to let loose bloodcurdling screams on cue, the only way to destroy the Tingler. An otherwise sympathetic “deaf-mute” character in the film is doomed by her inability to scream, much like James Castle has been condemned (until recently) to a singularity and exceptionalism that sometimes feels more condescending and confused than reverent. “Castle in



Still from William Castle's "The Tingler," 1959.

Context” knocks William Castle’s dumb conceit on its ass. This show unbridles Castle from his surroundings by thoughtfully placing his art in dialogue with a number of other artists whose idiosyncratic idioms examine natural mystery, domesticity, and the passage of time in likeminded ways, both cryptic and palpable. The esoteric, the byzantine, and the furtive can coexist here with the everyday, the earthy, and the earnest. It’s a helluva grip. Pay attention, youngers! This one’s for you.

Well, the rain seems to have stopped for good now, so I have just one more tale to tell before I nail my pinebox bathhouse to a tall pine at the edge of our backyard and head off to the liquor store. Two summers ago I visited Boise and its outerlying hamlets to try to absorb something of Castle’s genius through osmosis or sympathetic respiration or vibe-hunting or whatever... Maybe I inhaled some gold dust. Parts of downtown Boise today resemble Disneyworld’s Frontierland, a baldly glitzy simulacrum of its rugged outlander history. But the areas surrounding Garden Valley, where Castle was born, are completely alien to that commercial impulse, a lunar landscape of hot springs, ghost towns, and miners’ graveyards. My wonderful and engaging guide CC drove me leisurely through the high Idaho sagebrush desert; we spoke about the mining-ravaged hills, about altruism as an evolved evolutionary trait, about how he broke both his legs in a mountain climbing accident and couldn’t walk for four years (he took up kayaking instead, and friends carried him to the water), about how when he was in grad school at UCLA he used to swim laps with Chris Burden (who was known as “Tubby” at the time), how Vito Acconci used to leave voicemails for him. On the way back we

stopped in Idaho City, a weird ex-con and longhair frontier outpost, to buy two comedy-sized cans of Foster’s.

What struck me most that day, charged by affable companionship and stimulating conversation, was the evidence everywhere of gold and other goodies wrung and ripped from the earth: oceanic swells of tailings, drifts of sediment, mounds of dynamited rock. Since then I’ve explored similarly undone and overgrown landscapes on the Yukon in Alaska, ramshackle, rust-blooming monuments to human industry and sheer willpower. If we can momentarily set aside our justified environmentalist objections, perhaps these technologies of diligent, undaunted control over one’s surroundings can serve as an apt metaphor for Castle’s achievement and the mandate his art imposes for contemporary artists. He translated his daily world, an environment ripe with challenges and unanswered questions, into an eloquent visual practice that simultaneously elevated his experience into the ether and rooted it in universal affect. Wherever you call home, whether Citymouth or Countrymouse, the way to avoid backsliding is to dig in deep. You mention those “New York craters” as traps, but maybe the best way to navigate those holes is to tunnel between them and to keep digging, subterranean. Here’s hoping that young artists who visit 1616 Walnut St. over the next month or two will emerge inspired by the perennial relevance of Castle’s example, spades in hand.

Cheers,

Baldhead Growler



The authors in a New York hotel room, April 2006.

ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION: Forrest Bess  
Marvin Bileck  
Pearl Blauvelt  
Oscar Bluemner  
Charles Burchfield  
Anthony Campuzano  
James Castle  
Native American (Hopi)  
Alfred Jensen  
Jasper Johns  
Jimmy Koots  
Tristin Lowe  
Agnes Martin  
Emily Nelligan  
Jim Nutt  
Christina Ramberg  
Ann Ryan  
David Smith  
Donald Sultan  
John Walker  
Terry Winters  
Grant Wood  
Joseph Yoakum

Front & back covers: James Castle, *Untitled diptych (red coat with buttons/polka dot dress)*, c. 1925, soot, spit, string, ribbon, color of unknown origin, 9 1/2 x 5 3/4 inches (coat), 10 1/8 x 5 5/8 inches (dress). Verso: James Castle, *Untitled (head)*, n.d., found paper, soot, string, color of unknown origin, 7 5/8 x 7 3/4 inches.

