

## James Castle Recombined

A retrospective reveals a new side of this enigmatic artist

by Lyle Rexer

"These signs must be thought of as the letters of a new alphabet."  
—Marcel Duchamp

James Castle fashioned the letters of a new alphabet throughout all of his artistic creation. And yet despite the presence today of a vast retrospective, a film documentary (by Jeffrey Wolf), and a catalog (replete with hagiographical instruments and an analysis of saliva and soot)—all courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art—Castle himself remains a magnificent cipher, an abecedarium without a dictionary, an open book that cannot be read.

O Duchamp, thou should'st be living at this hour! The arch-Dadaist would be ecstatic to contemplate this work, especially Castle's books, and in the same museum housing his *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. He would surely say that here was a pure manifestation of one of Dada's most cherished goals, to reconvene language under a visual and poetic mandate, to open it up to association and liberate it from the chains of signification. Castle's book works reveal a master of recombinatory games; he regarded all of visual reality as a found object. And as for the relationship of the artist to his work, Marcel Duchamp would have celebrated the exposure of the biographical fallacy, the tendency to interpret the



Top left: SCRAP BOOK book cover, commercially printed paper, with string (10 1/2 x 7 1/2 in.). All images this page courtesy J. Crist Gallery, Boise, Idaho

Top right: [PA]UL JONES [CI]GARETTES book cover, beige found paper with blue stick-applied lines, wax crayon, string (3 1/4 x 3 in.)

Above: LUCKY STRIKE "It's Toasted", Lucky Strike cigarette pack with string (3 x 3 in.)



Chair, cardboard, paper, cloth, string, wiped soot wash

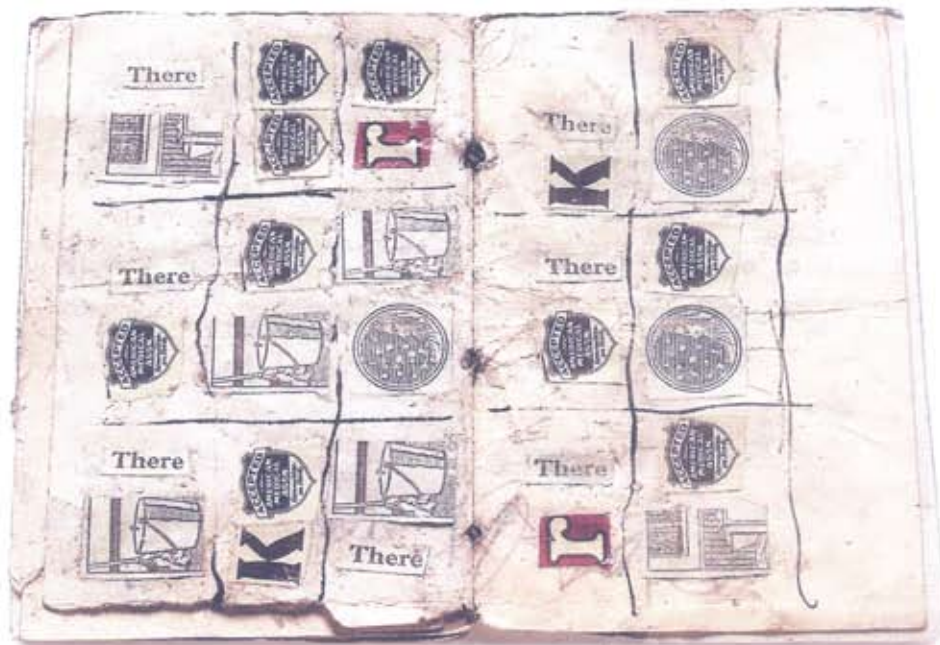
art from the life and vice versa. For this artist neither wrote nor spoke.

By virtue of his deafness and muteness on the one hand and his autodidactic production on the other, James Castle (1899–1977) has been inducted as the newest member into the pantheon of outsider artists that includes Martin Ramirez, Henry Darger, and Adolf Wölfli. Never mind that these artists share only one attribute—they taught themselves how to make art. Castle lived his entire life in rural Idaho, near Boise. His family moved several times and with each relocation consigned a mass of his work to oblivion. Nevertheless, a great deal still exists, under the control of the family and dealer Jacqueline Crist, who has released it to the market very slowly and has never organized a comprehensive exhibition until now.

The controversy about Castle, if there is one, centers around self-awareness and intentionality. He attended a school for the deaf for several years but either could not learn to sign or chose not to. Did he know enough about language to recognize that his recombinatory text pieces look like plays on the codes of communication?



Bundles and boxes fashioned by James Castle to store his work.  
Courtesy  
J Crist Gallery,  
Boise, Idaho



Opposite top and above: Wessux Laid Weave book cover and spread. (cover: 4 3/4 x 3 in.). Both images courtesy J Crist Gallery, Boise, Idaho.

Or was he an anthropologist on Mars, in Oliver Sacks' famous phrase, immersed in a compelling but utterly mysterious phenomenon. Did he understand to a greater degree what was at stake when people exchanged their strange glyphs? Was he, in spirit, a Dadaist?

In their different ways, the authors of the retrospective's catalog argue strenuously for Castle's full intentionality and more than limited awareness. In the keynote essay, Brendan Greaves comes close to enfranchising Castle as a modern artist, discussing him in relationship to the ultimate linguistic game player, Argentine fictionist Jorge Luis Borges. But Greaves' writing is alternately illuminating, misleading, and tendentious. Like so many who seek to grant such artists their due and rendition them from the outsider art ghetto, Greaves attempts to assimilate Castle's work to academic art-historical discourse, situating it within a lineage that includes Raoul Hausmann and the Russian Futurists. Castle's work does not belong there. Not that it is beyond analysis—as we will see—but the only productive way of thinking about Castle in relation to modern and contemporary art is to use the insights of Duchamp, the concrete poets of the 1960s, and others to sensitize us to his work, not to embed it in concepts with which it does not engage.

We need to table the issue of Castle's self-consciousness and look instead at



A cherry cordial candy box used by Castle to store wads of crepe paper, thin tissue, or cotton that he used to apply color to his drawings. Both images this page courtesy J. Crist Gallery, Boise, Idaho

what he made, especially at his books. When we do, we see that the language-based work that is usually treated as a world unto itself looks much like the representational drawings and paper constructions; I do not believe they can be separated. Castle apparently began drawing at a young age, and right from the start he had, as they say, mad skills. His memory was vivid and his mastery of perspective impressive. He created a visual catalog of the rural world around him, a world that included places, objects, and representations (cartoons, ads, photographs, and the graphic design on cigarette packs and commercial products). He worked primarily in black "ink," which he made by mixing saliva, soot, and water. Most importantly, his family ran the local post office out of their home. Verbal/visual communication—in the form of catalogs, manuals, advertisements, newspapers, and handwritten letters—was all around him, and he gathered, sorted, and bundled his visual reference material, engaging the essentially archival nature of the book. His book works mimic not only calendars and comic books but also alphabet books, photo albums, and learn-to-draw manuals with their repetitious templates. The design of



Red door with white knob, corrugated cardboard and paper tied with thin blue string, red wash, black wax crayon

the Philadelphia museum exhibition underscored this. The first thing on view was a video in which several of the books are paged through revealing the inspirations and boundaries of Castle's investigations. He often reassembled fragments of pages from found books into new books. In the "photo albums" as in the astonishing "calendars"—with their uniting of date grids and glyphlike pictures—he seems involved with the paradox of same-but-different. Book formats are a source of his fascination, I believe, because they foster expectation through repetition, spread to spread, image to image, letter to letter. The manuals contain pages of postage-stamp-size faces, all indistinct, all the same, none identical. The imagery of the so-called Man of Signs book clearly has antecedent sources, but as with the creation of his faux Greek and Roman alphabet books, Castle was not content to copy. He transposed and transformed. His work gives the deeply unsettling feeling that the whole universe



Below: "Photo album" soot and spit on flattened envelopes (10 1/4 x 8 1/2 in.)

Above: Holly berries wrapping paper, book cover, cardboard, paper, and commercially printed wrapping paper with string (2 x 2 1/2 in.). Courtesy J Crist Gallery, Boise, Idaho





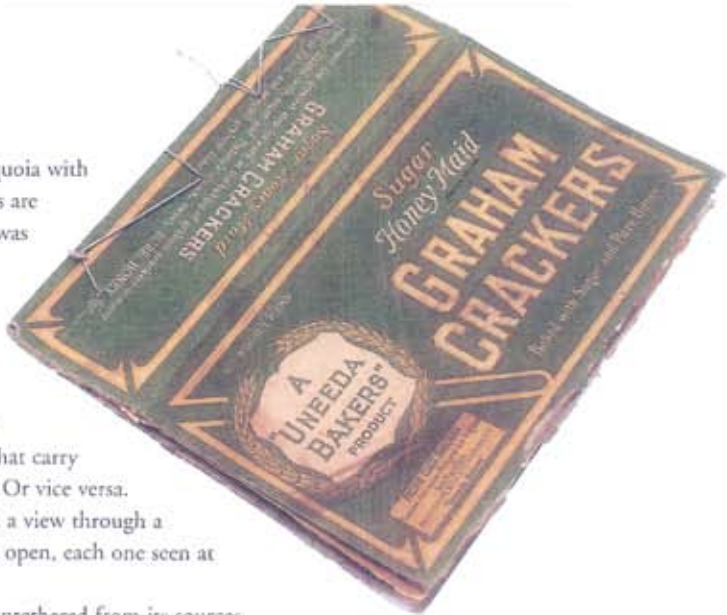
Above: Modified alphabet letters; commercially printed advertisement with ice cream recipes; soot-and-spl drawings with stick-applied lines and wiped soot wash on existing pages; stab sewn with white string

of human signification is arbitrary.

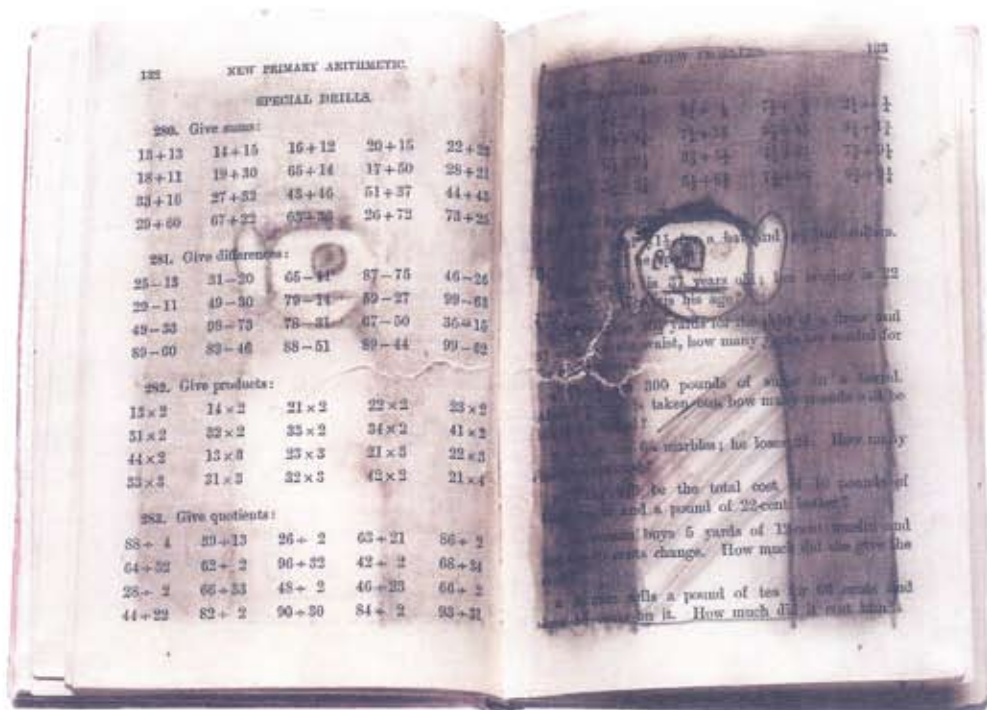
Castle treated language combinatorially. More intensely than any other artist I can think of, including the Dadaists, Castle analyzed the minute variations of letters, especially printed letters—their structures, serifs, line weights, and thicknesses. He tried them out in combinations and repeated them with slight variations. His letter books are loaded with paired combinations—IS, IE, IA, EO. Perhaps these works contained messages; that is, they were symbolic, hermetic. I tend to doubt it, just as I doubt any of the books told stories. The visual play is too compulsive, too free. Unlike the Dadaists, Castle's language was never burdened by the inevitable gap between reality and representation. Language was never a prison, it was a carnival.

Most commentators tend to view Castle's drawings as if they were memorial-like photographs—tied to the passing reality of an isolated American place, but the books warn us that his works have no pathos. Their evocations are utterly fabricated out of a sensibility that treated memories, funny papers, and photographs all the same. In many of his celebrated rural landscapes, Castle imports preposterous ele-

ments from postcards, such as a giant sequoia with a carved tunnel. His interior architectures are brilliant geometrical suites, reprised. He was fascinated with doorways, probably because they framed space and complicated perspective, and he played with every conceivable combination of two-dimensional and three-dimensional representation, from Richard Tuttle-like constructions to double-sided drawings that carry you in on one side and out on the other. Or vice versa. They culminate for me in a single image, a view through a series of doorways, all the doors standing open, each one seen at a different angle.



It is a virtuoso turn, a construction untethered from its sources, created not to fix a memory or express nostalgia but to push a personal visual limit. In crediting that, we acknowledge not simply that Castle was a certain kind of artist but that life and art are two completely different things, that life—deafness, isolation, words without meaning—is always confining, and imagination—words and pictures in their silent splendor—is always sovereign.



top: Sugar Honey-Maid Graham Crackers book cover, box with string (10 x 8 in.)

bottom: One-eyed, armless figure with "carmuff" ears, graphite and colored chalk in Walsh's *New Primary Arithmetic* textbook (7 1/2 x 5 in.)