Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

LECTURE

Wednesday, May 29, 8:00 p.m.

Poet, fiction writer, and art critic John John speaks about the life and work of Forrest Bess.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Robert Gober

Clare Elliott, with a contribution by Jenni Sorkin.

Primer of Basic Primordial Symbolism

A selection of ideograms from Forrest Bess’s visions and the meanings he assigned.

- leg
- to-muddle
- moon
- cranes
- bone
- above land, trees
- stars, sun, male
- moon, female
- eye, other, either, either
- haircut, either
- ball
- balloon, section of muffin
- balloonantennae
- stone, textile (or in the basket of rock)
- bell glass pane
- to cut deep, like a rock
- to stretch, hide, skin
- the circle, hole
- hermaphroditic, feather design, dark of wheat, bulbocavernous, inner penis
- moon, man, sun, to cut sharp, like a rock
- he took the hole, the hole is dark male and female
- bell-
- moon, moon set, hermaphrodite, the shaft of wheat,
- 3 craters
- 3 baskets
- 3 waves
- 3 legs
- 3 trees
- 3 cracked bell, phallic, showing mes-
- 3 stones, testicles (as in the Basket of Isis)
- 3 bulbocavernous
- 3 bulbous section of urethra

FORREST BESS

Seeing Things Invisible

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not explicitly link the two events, it seems probable that the physical and psychological trauma resulting from his military service have contributed to this psychotic break. The army psychiatrist who treated him encouraged him to paint his visions as a form of therapy; a practice he continued for the next twenty-plus years.

Although he painted realistic carcasses from time to time throughout his life, Bess is best known for these mostly small-scale visionary paintings, which he began to produce in earnest after his discharge from the Army. He initially set up a studio in San Antonio, but soon moved to live full-time at a family’s bait fishing camp outside of Bay City, right on the water. Bess found that the isometric shapes and abstracted landscapes of his visions, “a form of cultivated seeing into the darkness,” usually occurred just before going to sleep, as he moved between consciousness and unconsciousness, or immediately upon waking. He kept a notebook by his bedside and would make a simple black-and-white sketch immediately following a vision, which allowed him to recall what he had seen in its entirety. Without the sketch, a vision was lost, but with it he could access it again with such specificity that he could return to a drawing years afterward in order to produce the painting. This method allowed him to record the compositions quickly, yet paint them very carefully.

Bess’s technique, while untutored, was both original and varied. He used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently used a palette knife frequently to enliven his surfaces and mixed sand into his paint to create texture. Areas of matte and shiny paints are frequently
Parsons Gallery, describing “his wonderful black, of many nuances: commented upon in the preface to Bess’s 1962 exhibition at the Betty staid composition. But it was his blacks that art historian Meyer Schapiro placed inexplicably in the lower-right corner enliven an otherwise repeated. In Untitled (No. 11), 1958, three smudges of peach-orange pigments, Bess employed striking combinations that he rarely juxtaposed, such as passages of thick and thin paint. Using primarily his whites, including areas of raw canvas that he sometimes allowed to granular, matt, shiny and rough.” The same observations can be made of their crude handmade frames, are their most compelling qualities. and utter unpretentiousness of Bess’s successful canvases, reinforced by one of the simple shapes and colors Bess painted fall outside of the literalness of the lexicon. This curious assemblage is nonetheless useful as it succeeds in communicating, in a radically straightforward way no less. Bess’s primary concerns—the body, nature, androgyny and universal truths. By studying these abstract, mythic images, he hoped to accept another penis, and that this would be a transcendental experience, a way to gain full access to the world of the unconscious and its truths. Bess held a deep and sincere belief that this surgery and the balancing of the male and female within himself was the key to regeneration and eternal life. He sent his thesis to the prominent sex researcher Dr. John Money as well as to universities and possible publishers, and even wrote to President Eisenhower to ask him to fulfill his wish.

Adapted from Clare Elliott’s text in the exhibition catalogue

Curated by Clare Elliott with an installation by Robert Gober

 Raises the question of how the artist’s work was received by others. After studying the writings of psychologist Carl Jung, Bess came to believe that the symbols that appeared in his visions were clues to ancient and universal truths. By studying these abstract, mythic images, he hoped to reveal the “collective unconscious” of memories and experiences that reside in humanity’s subconscious. (His inquiry also led him to the strange and universal truths. By studying these abstract, mythic images, he hoped to reveal the “collective unconscious” of memories and experiences that reside in humanity’s subconscious. (His inquiry also led him to the strange and universal truths. Bess came to believe that the symbols that appeared in his visions were clues to ancient and universal truths. By studying these abstract, mythic images, he hoped to reveal the “collective unconscious” of memories and experiences that reside in humanity’s subconscious. (His inquiry also led him to the strange and universal truths. Bess held a deep and sincere belief that this surgery and the balancing of the male and female within himself was the key to regeneration and eternal life. He sent his thesis to the prominent sex researcher Dr. John Money as well as to universities and possible publishers, and even wrote to President Eisenhower to ask him to fulfill his wish.

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The Man That Got Away

As Bess became more immersed in his exploration of symbolism, he also became increasingly preoccupied with the idea of using the body to express the soul. He compiled his theories into a scrapbook, now presumed lost, that he called his “thesis,” a record of his ideas and thoughts, sketches, and historical research, as well as clippings from books and medical texts. Bess’s long-term obsession with his thesis and the ideas therein convinced him that the male and female could in fact be united, and in the mid-1950s he made the decision to use his own body to prove it.

To perform this transformation, Bess created an incision in the underside of his penis just above the scrotum. He believed that this new opening would allow the bulbous section of the urethra to accept another penis, and that this would be a transcendental experience, a way to gain full access to the world of the unconscious and its truths. Bess held a deep and sincere belief that this surgery and the balancing of the male and female within himself was the key to regeneration and eternal life. He sent his thesis to the prominent sex researcher Dr. John Money as well as to universities and possible publishers, and even wrote to President Eisenhower to ask him to consider his case.

During his lifetime, Bess longed to show his paintings and his medical thesis side by side, asking Betty Parsons to exhibit them together. Parsons politely declined his requests, and Bess’s dream was never realized. This project, compiling photographs, writings, and some of the books from Bess’s large and diverse library, aims to honor and remember his unique legacy.

About the Exhibit

This exhibition is generously supported by The John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; The Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation; and others. The Barrett Collection

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Hurricane Carla marked the beginning of the artist’s decline. In 1961 the storm destroyed Bess’s home and studio and an unknown number of paintings. Although he tried to rebuild, he was forced to move back to Bay City. He continued to paint until around 1970, but his declining health, both mental and physical, took its toll, and he was hospitalized in 1974. Bess died in 1977, ten years after his last major exhibition and largely forgotten outside of Houston and Bay City. His work has been periodically rediscovered in the decades since, but has quickly faded into obscurity each time. The recent surge of interest in Bess’s art affords an opportunity to reflect upon the life, art, and legacy of this unique painter. His tough little abstract canvases beckon interpretation, yet resist an easy resolution. Their apparent matters-of-factness belies a complex imagination. Bess’s extraordinary body of work continues to intrigue and offers a powerful argument in favor of art as a way of seeking.

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