

Primer of Basic Primordial Symbolism

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

	= legs		= bulbous section of urethra
	= to straddle		= bulbocavernous
	= waves		= stones, testicles (as in the Basket of Isis)
	= craters		= bell-glans penis
	= tree		= to cut sharp, like a rock
	= above land, trees		= to stretch, hide, skin
	= young woman		= the circle, hole
	= man, sun, male		= herringbone, feather design, shaft of wheat, bulbocavernous, inner penis
	= moon, female		= moon, moon set, hermaphrodite, the hole is both male and female
	= eye = orifice, either vulva or subincision		

Forrest Bess

Seeing Things Invisible

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

PANEL DISCUSSION

Wednesday, April 24, 8:00 p.m.

Exhibition curator Clare Elliott moderates this panel discussion with artists David Aylsworth and Terrell James and art historians Susie Kalil and Jenni Sorokin.

LECTURE

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

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

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Clare Elliott, with a contribution by Robert Gober
112 pp., 70 color illustrations
Hardcover \$60

Available at the Menil Bookstore

cover:

Untitled (No. 40), 1949 (detail). Oil on canvas, 9" x 12" inches (23 x 30.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Betty Parsons. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art, NY/ Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

All illustrated works by Forrest Bess

THE MENIL COLLECTION

1533 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400 menil.org

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Self-described visionary artist Forrest Bess (1911–1977) spent most of his career in relative isolation in a fishing camp accessible only by boat on the Texas Gulf Coast. By day he eked out a meager living fishing, crabbing, and selling bait, but by night and during the off-season, he read, wrote, and painted prolifically. He experienced intense hallucinations and visions (Bess drew a distinction between the two) throughout his life and began to incorporate images from them into his paintings in the mid-1940s, developing an abstract vocabulary that was mysterious even to him. Despite his remote location, Bess's strange, powerful, little paintings captured the attention of a number of his contemporaries, and several solo exhibitions of his work were held at the prominent Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City. Since the late 1960s, however, with the exception of occasional brief rediscoveries by the art world, his work has largely faded from the public eye. The first museum retrospective in over twenty years, *Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible* brings to a new generation nearly fifty carefully selected paintings by this compelling but under-recognized artist.

Born in Bay City, Texas, a small town eighty miles southwest of Houston, Bess and his parents moved frequently among the oil fields of East Texas where his father worked as a roughneck performing skilled manual labor on the drilling rigs. He took a few basic art lessons from a neighbor as a child, but largely taught himself to paint, copying illustrations from books and magazines. After graduating from high school, he wanted to pursue his interest in art; his rather conservative parents, however, regarded it as a feminine pursuit. As a compromise, he enrolled as an architecture student at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now Texas A&M University), transferring to the University of Texas two years later. Although he failed to finish a degree at either school, both provided access to large and diverse libraries in which Bess immersed himself, developing interests in a variety of fields, including literature, mythology, mathematics, philosophy and psychology. These university days were predictive of Bess's later life, in which a profound curiosity and desire for knowledge would lead him to investigate any number of disciplines in order to better understand himself and his painting.

After leaving UT, Bess spent several years working in the oil fields before moving to Houston. When the United States entered the Second World War, however, Bess enlisted in the military. He was assigned to design camouflage patterns, and then put in charge of training African American recruits. Bess did not see combat, but the war was nonetheless a traumatic time for him. One evening Bess revealed his homosexuality and was beaten by a fellow enlistee, which resulted in a serious head injury. He subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown. Though Bess did



The Hermaphrodite, 1957. Oil on canvas, 8 x 11¼ inches (20.2 x 28.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of John Wilcox in memory of Frank Owen Wilson. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

not explicitly link the two events, it seems probable that the physical and psychological trauma of the beating may 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-odd years.

Although he painted realistic canvases 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 his family's bait fishing camp outside of Bay City, right on the water. Bess found that the biomorphic shapes and abstracted landscapes of his visions, "a form of cultivated seeing into the darkness,"¹ 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

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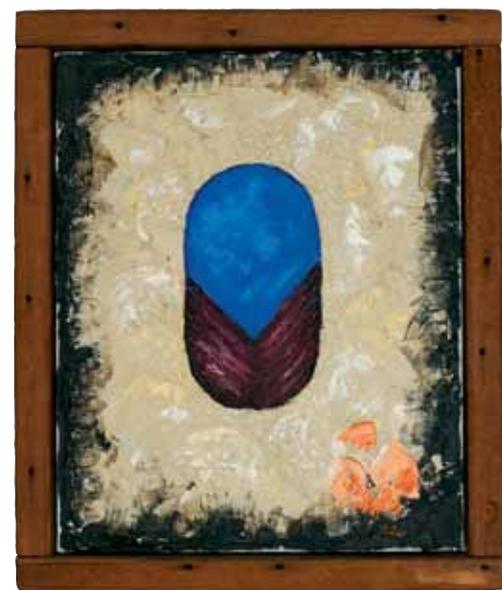
Drawings, 1957. Oil on canvas, 8 x 28 inches (20.3 x 71.1 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Betty Parsons. Photo: Sheldon C. Collins, courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY

juxtaposed, as are passages of thick and thin paint. Using primarily unmixed paints, Bess employed striking combinations that he rarely repeated. In *Untitled (No. 11)*, 1958, three smudges of peach-orange pigment placed inexplicably in the lower-right corner enliven an otherwise staid composition. But it was his blacks that art historian Meyer Schapiro commented upon in the preface to Bess's 1962 exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, describing "his wonderful black, of many nuances:

granular, matt, shiny and rough." The same observations can be made of his whites, including areas of raw canvas that he sometimes allowed to show through, as in *Untitled (The Void II)*, 1952. The unselfconsciousness and utter unpretentiousness of Bess's successful canvases, reinforced by their crude handmade frames, are their most compelling qualities.

A number of motifs recurred in Bess's visions, and therefore in his paintings: a white or black wishbone shape (sometimes a trident), a flattened flower or primitive hand shape, and various ovoid vessels, among 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 but sincere conclusion that the key to immortality lay in transforming the body to become a hermaphrodite, an aspect of his life and work explored in Robert Gober's installation *The Man That Got Away* in this exhibition.)

He seems to have begun assigning meanings to some of the symbols in the early 1960s, having only articulated, or possibly having only discovered, them in some cases years after the paintings were made. One quickly finds his charts of these symbols limited. Any number, if not most, of the simple shapes and colors Bess painted fall outside of the brief schema, and it does not directly address one of Bess's most frequently depicted images, the landscape. None of the five abstractions contained in *Drawings*, 1957, for instance, can readily be identified, and at times the titles of the paintings seem to contradict, or at least complicate, the literalness of the lexicon. This curious assemblage is nonetheless



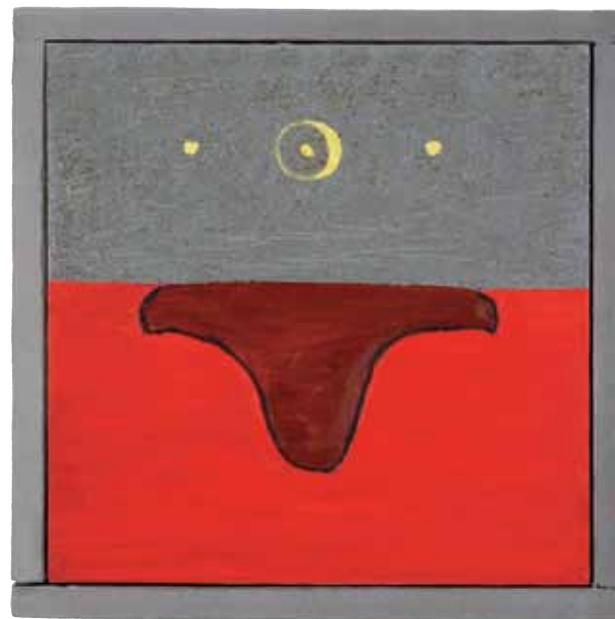
Untitled (No. 11), 1950. Oil on canvas, 11 x 9 3/4 inches (28 x 24.8 cm). The Cartin Collection. Photo: Steve Holmes

useful as it succeeds in communicating, in a radically straightforward way no less, Bess's primary concerns—the body, nature, androgyny and hermaphroditism, and the union of opposites.

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 matter-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.

Adapted from Clare Elliott's text in the exhibition catalogue

1. Forrest Bess to Meyer Schapiro, ca. 1950, Schapiro Papers, Archive of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, reel 3458, frame 26.



Untitled, 1970. Oil and sand on canvas, 14 x 14 inches (35.6 x 35.6 cm). Dallas Museum of Art, The Barrett Collection

The Man That Got Away

As Bess became more immersed in his exploration of symbolism, he also became increasingly preoccupied with the idea of uniting the male and female within himself. 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 discovery.

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 fulfill his wish.

Adapted from Robert Gober's text in the exhibition catalogue

Curated by Clare Elliott with an installation by Robert Gober

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