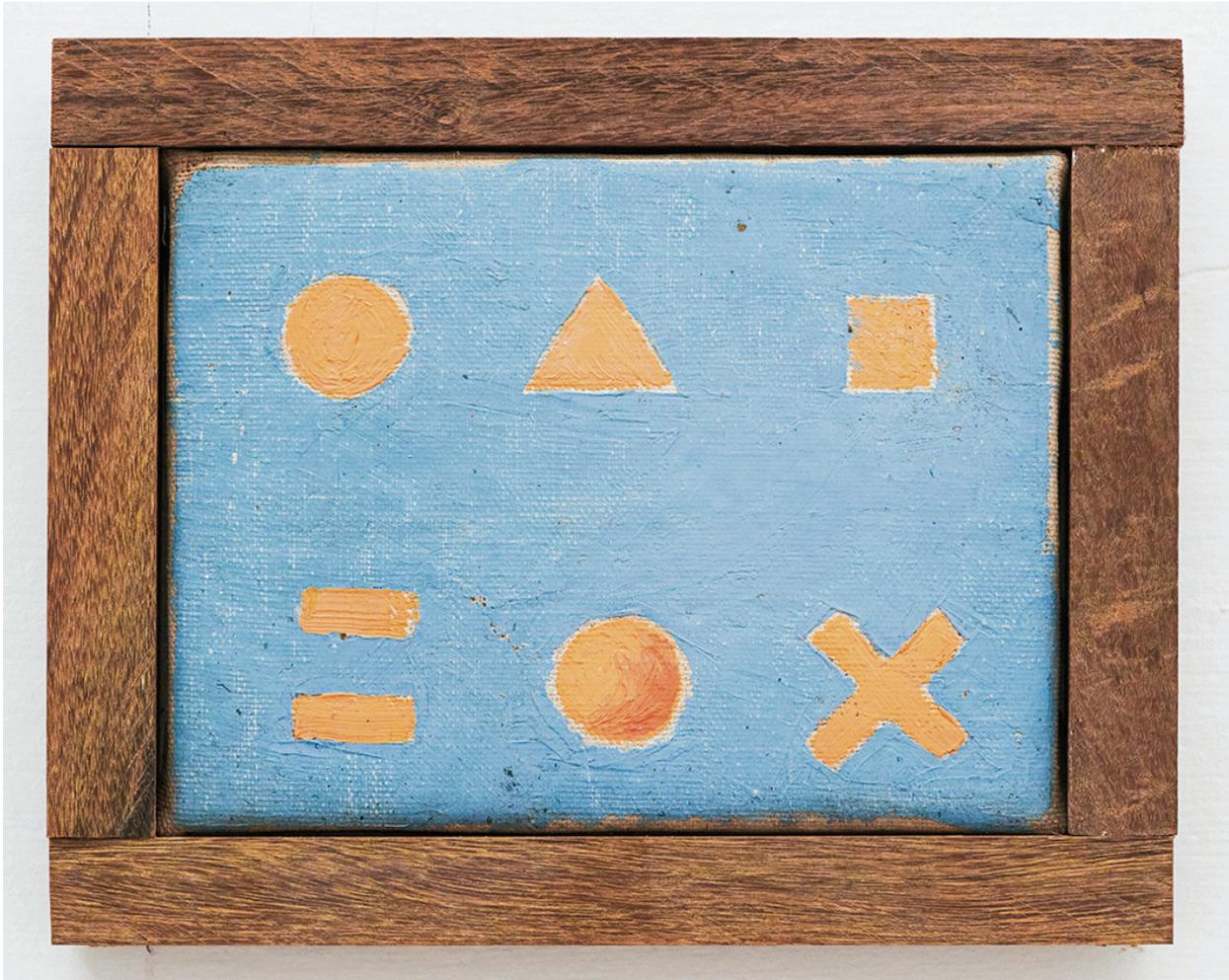


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ARTFORUM



Forrest Bess, untitled, date unknown, oil on canvas, 4 1/2 x 6".

Forrest Bess

THE RANCH

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Even now, more than forty years after his death and some seventy years after his first exhibition at New York's Betty Parsons Gallery, no one really knows what to make of Forrest Bess. The alluring legend of the visionary fisherman painter from Bay City, Texas, always threatens to overshadow his intense and

quite inward art. Consider his Wikipedia entry: The section on “Painting” is barely half the length of the one titled “Surgery”—referring, of course, to his painful efforts toward becoming a pseudo-hermaphrodite, which he hoped would lead to immortality. It would be tempting to put the ostensibly crackpot philosophy on the back burner and just contemplate the paintings. But for Bess, his thinking (an amalgamation of Carl Jung’s teachings, Kundalini, and Australian Aboriginal beliefs, among other far-flung systems) was the substance of the paintings.

The recent unearthing of a previously undocumented batch of Bess paintings made for a good opportunity to see and consider his art afresh. The fourteen canvases had been found, we were told, in boxes salvaged years ago during the clear-out of a disused house that belonged to one of Bess’s close friends. And a couple of the works, most of which were undated and untitled, suffered grievous damage. Yet even those retain their power, which resides above all in the blunt factuality with which his symbols impose themselves on the canvas. There is nothing misty or elusive about these apparitions: They arrive with the implacability of unexpected truth. Or at least most do. A couple of the pieces in this show were more figurative than one would have expected—perhaps representing an earlier phase of his artistic journey—and feel less immediate, though they, too, are fascinating. I find Bess most convincing when he gets closest to a kind of small-*m* minimalism—for instance, in one work, a golden-yellow circle, triangle, and square were tidily aligned above another row consisting of an equal sign, a second circle, and an X, all on a baby-blue ground. Luminously, something very basic is being communicated here. And what that is remains tantalizingly ungraspable.

Not that Bess didn’t assign specific meanings to the symbols in his paintings—but since there is no syntax to relate them to one another, their relationships can only be visual, not semantic. In one piece, a somber-gray field was sown with a multitude of glyphs resembling two-pronged forks. According to the undated “Primer of Basic Primordial Symbolism” that Bess drew up, these must be trees. Fine. But then what’s that flurry of pink and white paint dabs that floats above them, just left of center? Unsymbolic pigmented matter, if you ask me. Anyway, we should take seriously Bess’s assertion that he was merely transcribing what he saw when he closed his eyes—which is to say, his works are not statements of his ideas; rather, his ideas were merely attempts to interpret the forms, colors, and patterns he’d seen or, rather, experienced. In this, Bess is much like his close contemporary Agnes Martin, another member of the Parsons stable who likewise painted, as directly as she knew how, the inspirations that appeared to her inner eye. I was tickled to learn,

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from a statement in the gallery's press release by Chuck Smith—director of the 1999 documentary film *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle*—that Martin took Bess to buy a jacket for one of his New York openings. The two artists shared a glimpse of something promising, as she put it, “more perfection than is possible in the world.”

— Barry Schwabsky