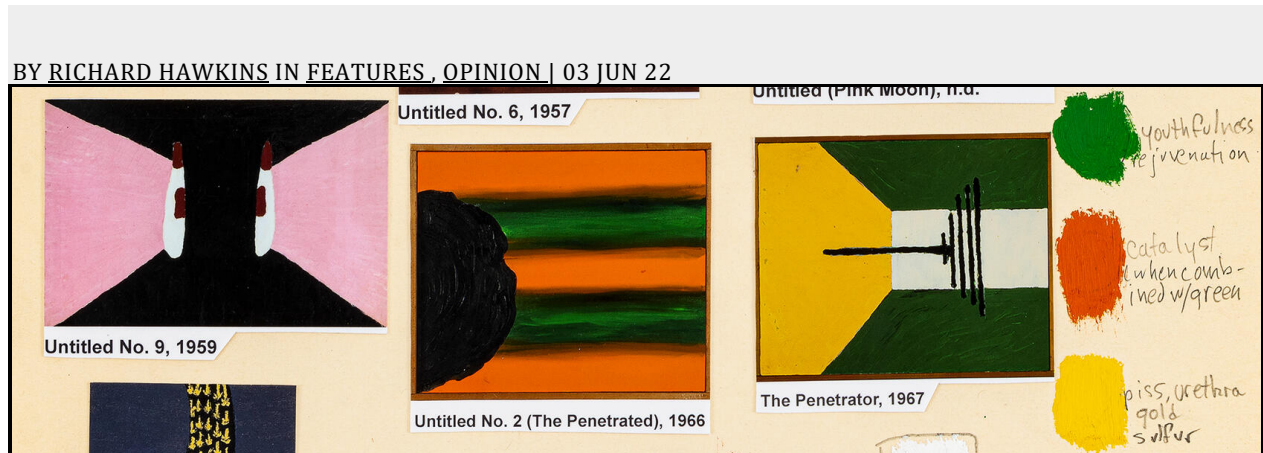


When Forrest Bess Wrote to Carl Jung

Richard Hawkins on the crucial correspondence between the artist and the psychoanalyst



'I should like very much to introduce myself to you and present you with my problem,' Forrest Bess writes in his first letter to Carl Jung on 11 March 1952. Compared to the more fragmentary details later offered to gallerist Betty Parsons and art historian Meyer Schapiro, this letter may be the most concise explanation in the artist's own words of his journey from envisioning symbols to experimenting with genital modification.

The letter pre-empts the English translations of Jung's *Collected Works*. When Bess corresponded with the famous psychoanalyst, only the introductory book on dreams and the methods of psychotherapy and its relationship to spirituality, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), had been available. *Psychology and Alchemy* – the work most cited in current writings on Bess, and from which he eventually drew inspiration himself, was first printed for the American public in 1953.



Richard Hawkins, *The Penetration*, 2022, oil on canvas on board and artist's frame, 104 × 79 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph: Zeeshan Ahmed

‘I am an American artist, painting symbols from the unconscious mind [...],’ writes Bess, ‘and have recently started integrating the work [...]. The source of my work comes from the vision which has occurred right before I go to sleep.’

Bess’s description of pre-dream visions is noteworthy. The artist may have been partially influenced by the writings of Jung’s colleague, Herbert Silberer, whose *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism* (published in English in 1917) mentions self-induced hypnagogia as a means for tapping into the latent content of the psyche. From the letter we can see that Bess has already moved beyond the suggestions provided by Silberer and has taken his visions seriously enough to treat them as more than daydream autosymbolism; they are now guides for spiritual advice waiting to be sought out.

Jung also experimented with waking dreams and accepted the guidance of figures from his unconscious in the process he called Active Imagination. Fearing damage to his professional reputation, however, the truth of how important these imaginings were to his practice was suppressed during his lifetime and would only be revealed in 2009 with the publication of *The Red Book*.



Forrest Bess, *The Penetrator*, 1967, oil on canvas, 61 × 46 cm. Courtesy: the artist and documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, Kassel; photograph: Andrea Rossetti

The 1952 letter is also the first of Bess's writings to mention his self-operated genital modification surgery. He writes to Jung that 'the unconscious took over completely and the glans penis was opened' and 'between the anus and the scrotum [...] the incision was made'. Two months later Jung responded, 'What you have found is not new. [...] Let us return to the safe basis of facts' – indicating that the doctor may have been distancing himself from a subject so urgently seeking to legitimize what would at the time be understood as self-harm. Additionally, Jung might have noted Bess's intuitive understanding of

working with the unconscious, but he had ultimately missed the point of self-analysis: that integrations and transformations occur primarily intrapsychically.

Bess continues, 'The incision was made in perfect consciousness that Christ had attempted the same thing but he died.' This is echoed in a letter to Schapiro from the following year when the artist, in relating how he collapsed with razor blade in hand and watched as both blood and urine seeped from the cut, remembered thinking, 'This is how Christ died.' An unusual statement, since Bess almost never refers to religion in the rest of his extant letters. But both instances allude to John 19:34: 'One of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.' Other letters indicate Bess was considering the position of the wound on the side of the body of Christ as related to the rebirth of Dionysus from the thigh (alternately theorized to be the scrotum) of Zeus. To Bess, this was the location for the body to be transformed into spirit, a hermaphrodizing orifice, and it lay on that other side, the underside of the perineum, and literally the realm of the artist's 'Shadow' – Jung's term for everything outside the light of conscious awareness.

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'Forrest Bess' will be on view at Camden Arts Centre, London, from 30 September until 23 December 2022.

Main image: Richard Hawkins, Legend, 2022, collage, oil and pencil on paper, 37 × 32 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph: Zeeshan Ahmed