

"Looking Anew at Forrest Bess' Art"

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From a total life's production of approximately 100 canvases, the Whitney Museum of American Art is exhibiting some 25 of Forrest Bess' paintings done between the mid 1930's and late 1950's through Dec. 13.

Bess was born in Bay City, Texas, in 1911. Until his death in 1977, he led a life which ranged from roughnecking and fishing for shrimp for his bait camp, to intense investigation of metaphysical and psychological symbols he later translated into his canvases.

His first show was in a hotel lobby in Bay City in 1936 followed by a one-man exhibition at the Witte Memorial Museum in San Antonio in 1938. Ten years later he was selling his paintings for \$10 in order to travel to New York and see Betty Parsons. She gave him his first show at her gallery in 1949.

Group and solo shows in museums and galleries across the country including a one-man at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts in 1951, the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, 1962, and a second one at the Witte in 1967, established his reputation. But despite the number of exhibitions and quality of the work, Bess received little notice during his lifetime. He became increasingly eccentric and withdrawn, and after his last one-man show with Betty Parsons in 1967, his reputation was virtually eclipsed.

Throughout his life Bess was preoccupied with symbolism and psychology. He maintained voluminous correspondence with Parsons, his dealer until his death, explaining what he saw as two conflicting tendencies in his personality: the practical-sensible-aggressive side and the artistic-sensitive-introspective one. He also corresponded with Jung, detailing his theories to which Jung responded that they were not unique but "are rediscovered every century."

In the notebook he kept by him starting in 1958 (lost 10 years later), Bess faithfully recorded his dreams, made sketches, and collected quotations from mythology, psychoanalysis, Jungian mysticism, etc., in an attempt to support his theory that the key to eternal life was the hermaphrodite. He circulated his notebook to medical doctors and anthropologists and on one occasion, his ideas were included in an article for the *Journal of Sex Research* in 1976.

More than a decade since his last show, the legacy of this painter from Texas is being rediscovered. Barbara Haskell, curator of the exhibition at the Whitney, says: "Despite the specificity of his iconography, the impact of Bess' paintings does not depend on deciphering his pictorial vocabulary. Their directness and authenticity speak to the art of today. Creating an idiosyncratic symbolism which is simultaneously personal and universal, and exploiting expressive paint surfaces are pictorial achievements shared by many of today's artists. Indeed, this painter's direct, almost primitive images, loaded with symbolic meaning and emotional content, are finding echoes in the so-called New Image painters. It may be that the show at the Whitney is the first step toward readdressing the import of his work.