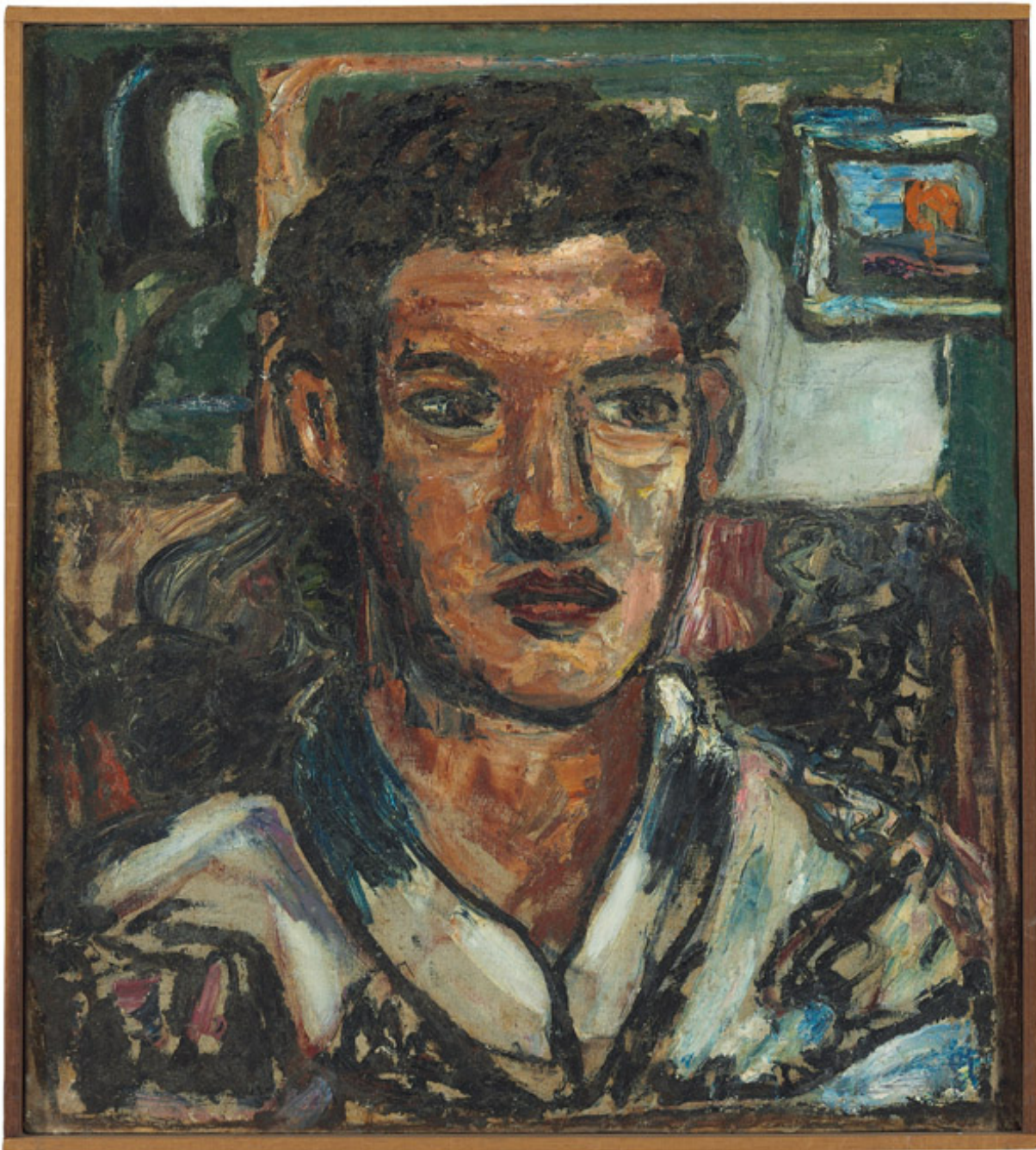


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HYPERALLERGIC

Without Elaboration

by John Yau March 18, 2012



Forrest Bess, "Mexican Boy" (1938) (all images © Christie's Images)

Forrest Bess was born in Bay City, Texas on October 5, 1911, one year before Agnes Martin (1912-2004) and Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) joined him on this planet. Martin's entry point was Macklin, Saskatchewan; Pollock's was Cody, Wyoming. Martin and Pollock moved to New York in order to study, and left in order to preserve themselves. Both made the paintings by which they became famous after leaving New York.

In 1946, while living in San Antonio, Bess began doing the paintings that would gain him attention. There, he met the painter Rosalie Berkowitz, whose husband Sidney was part owner of Frost Bros., the leading fashion specialty department store chain of South Texas. From my conversations with Rosalie (I talked with her at least two times in 1988-89), I suspect that it was she who encouraged Bess to bring his paintings to New York.

In 1948, Bess took a bus from Bay City to New York to find a gallery that would exhibit the strange little paintings that were based on his dreams. To finance his trip, he had a show in Bay City where he sold paintings done in an earlier, more conventional style — what he called his "Post-Impressionist" period — for ten dollars each. He raised four hundred dollars.

In 1948, less than two years after Bess began painting the symbols, patterns, and colors that appeared to him before he fell asleep, Betty Parsons offered him an exhibition, which she scheduled for December.

Not having enough money to go back to Bay City and make the return trip to New York for the show, Bess spent the fall with Sidney and Rosalie, who had a farm in Woodstock, New York. During this time, he sent a letter to the art historian, Meyer Schapiro, whose statements he had read in *Life* magazine. Bess was a chronic letter writer who wrote many letters to Schapiro, tirelessly illuminating his theory of immortality and the research he was doing to support it. He sometimes wrote two or more letters in a day. Gertrude Stein's description of Ezra Pound fits Bess to a T: "He was a village explainer, excellent if you were a village, but if you were not, not."

Schapiro, Parsons, the Berkowitz's and a few neighbors in Bay City constituted Bess' rather tiny village. Of all the people in New York, Schapiro was the one who remained the most steadfast. His friends in Texas readily admitted that they thought he was eccentric, but despite that, "loved him" as a middle-aged woman from Bay City told me the night of Bess's opening at Hirschl & Adler in 1988, a decade after he died. Everyone acknowledged that Bess could be overbearing at times, which isn't surprising given that he was besieged by visions.

Although there are no copies of Schapiro's correspondence with Bess, it is clear from Bess's letters that Schapiro was never patronizing or shocked. He responded to them with a sympathy and equanimity that remains remarkable.

I remember reading a letter that Bess sent to Schapiro in which he states that he has decided not to castrate himself after all because of a Greek play that Schapiro had sent him in which the hero dies after he is castrated. Bess had apparently written Schapiro about castration as a possible option in a previous letter.

Knowing that Bess was a literalist who wouldn't heed his or anyone else's advice, Schapiro chose a literary text that might dissuade him, which it did.

(I sometimes wonder if I dreamed this up. Bess has had that kind of effect on me ever since I first saw his work in 1981 and began writing about it).

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Forrest Bess, "Untitled (Indian Dancers)"

Bay City was a farming, fishing, and petrochemical community on the Gulf Coast of Texas. In 1977, at the age of 66, Bess died of skin cancer and other ailments in a Bay City nursing home, having not painted the last few years of his life. If we listen to Bess, it is apparent that he knew he was different from the beginning.

At the age of four, as he later described, Bess had his first vision. It took place on Easter Morning and "the vision has always been brilliant in [his] mind." At the age of seven, he began drawing by copying from an encyclopedia. In 1934, he established a studio in Bay City, and took commissions, painting portraits, dogs, and houses in a style that he later describes as Post-Impressionist. He also began paintings that were based directly on sketches of his dreams.

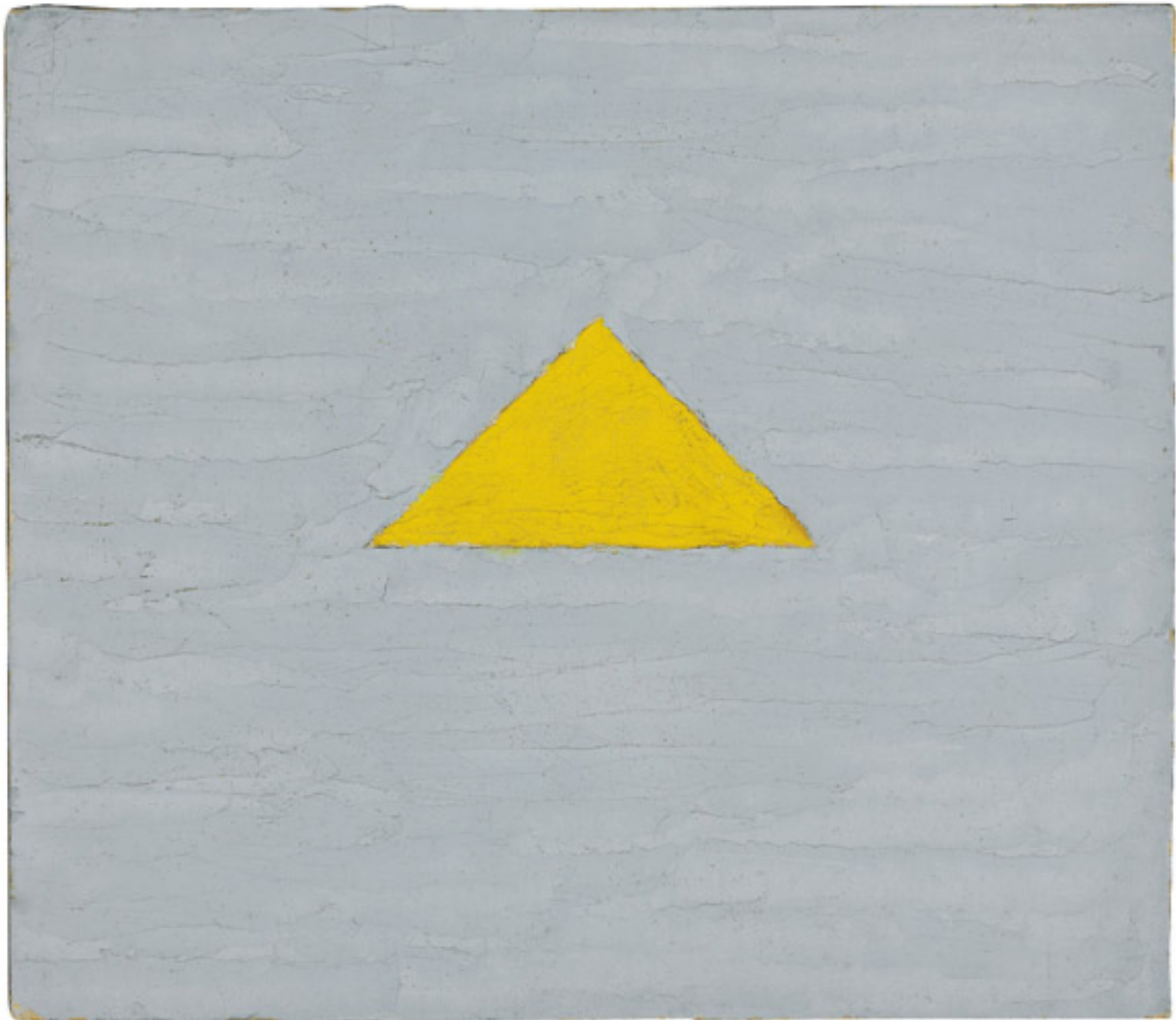
Between 1948 and 1967, Bess had seven exhibitions at Betty Parsons, who also exhibited Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin, as well as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly and Robert Rauschenberg. In contrast to Parson's other artists, Bess worked on a small scale, and was completely disinterested in making the large canvases that we associate with the Abstract Expressionists. He didn't make what Clement Greenberg called "American-type painting."

Bess, it should be noted, wasn't the only one to go against the grain during 1950s and '60s. Charles Seliger (1926- 2009), the youngest of the Abstract Expressionists, Myron Stout (1908-1987), and Mark Tobey (1890 – 1976) also worked on an intimate scale.

Bess's "Untitled (Indian Dancers)," although undated, was probably done in 1946, and has affinities with the works being made during the same period by Seliger, Gerome Kamrowski (1914 – 2004), William Baziotis (1912 – 1963) and other American painters influenced by Surrealism. "Untitled (Indian Dancers)" is 22 x 24 inches, which is slightly larger than the scale (16 x 20 inches) that Thomas Nozkowski worked in for many years.

The point, however, is to discern the differences, rather than focus on the similarities. Starting in 1946-47, and lasting at least until 1970, Bess made the difference between his work and that of others more apparent.

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Forrest Bess, "Untitled" (1952)

In 1946, Bess began transcribing his visions into paint. In an article he published in a Bay City newspaper in 1951, he wrote: "I term myself a visionary artist for lack of a better word. Something seen otherwise than by ordinary sight. I can close my eyes in a dark room and if there is no outside noise or attraction, plus, if there is no conscious effort on my part — then I can see color, lines, patterns, and forms that make up my canvases. I have always copied these arrangements without elaboration."

In a letter to Schapiro, explaining why he painted the way he did, as well as why he was critical of many of the Abstract Expressionists, he wrote that he was loath to lift "vision up to aesthetics."

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“I am just a copiest [sic],” he wrote to Berkowitz. “Elaboration and concoction are not my assets.”

He sent a letter to Betty Parsons diagramming his symbols. A triangle meant “to cut.” He went on to demonstrate the symbols for the deep cut, shallow cut, and stretching the cut to create a hole.

Bess, who survived as a bait fisherman, lived on a strip of land that was accessible only by boat. In another letter to Schapiro, he revealed why he chose to live in such extreme conditions: “I try to tell myself that only by breaking completely away from society can I arrive at a reasonable existence.” Even in his nature abstractions, Bess is usually thinking of the body, with the silhouette of two hills being the buttocks of a male lying down, and viewed from down low.

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Forrest Bess, "Untitled" (nd)

In scale, the paintings are about as wide and tall as the viewer's field of vision when they are staring at something just in front of them. Bess's eyes were closed. He would paint what he saw on the backs of his eyelids. The scale might be intimate, but the space in the painting, as in our dreams, could evoke a disquieting vastness, as in "Night Flight" (1959), in which eyes with wings seem to emerge out of the black paint.

Some of Bess's paintings can be understood as nature abstractions; others contain mandalas and various archaic symbols, which Bess used to help him understand his sexual differences. In a letter to Schapiro he summed it up this way: "The scrotum is the doorway to heaven." He was not being metaphorical or poetic.

Bess believed that the hermaphrodite was the universal symbol for the complete, self-generating, immortal human — one who could impregnate himself — and he set out to achieve this state in 1960 by cutting an incision at the base of his scrotum. Bess was always literal when it came to symbols and alchemy. He read *Psychology and Alchemy* by C. G. Jung as a primary source.

Willem de Kooning believed "flesh was the reason oil paint was invented." It seems that Bess, who used a palette knife in his work, believed in the alchemical power of oil paint: it was a mortal body that could achieve immortality if one followed the correct steps toward transformation (radical alteration). This is why there is a pink sun suspended in a red sky just above where the two black hills meet in "Untitled" (n.d.). It has not yet set into the crevice formed by their meeting.