

parrasch heijnen

HYPERALLERGIC

The Unadulterated Sincerity of Forrest Bess

by [Sarah Zabrodski](#) December 2, 2013



Forrest Bess, "Bodies of Little Dead Children" (1949), oil on canvas, 6 x 7-5/8 inches. The Menil Collection, Houston. (photo by Paul Hester, all images courtesy Hammer Museum unless otherwise noted)

LOS ANGELES — Along with many people, my first introduction to Forrest Bess (1911–1977) occurred at the 2012 Whitney Biennial. Artist Robert Gober curated a one room show of Bess’s small-scale paintings alongside photographs and documents detailing his theories of pseudo-hermaphroditic transcendence and corresponding self-surgery.

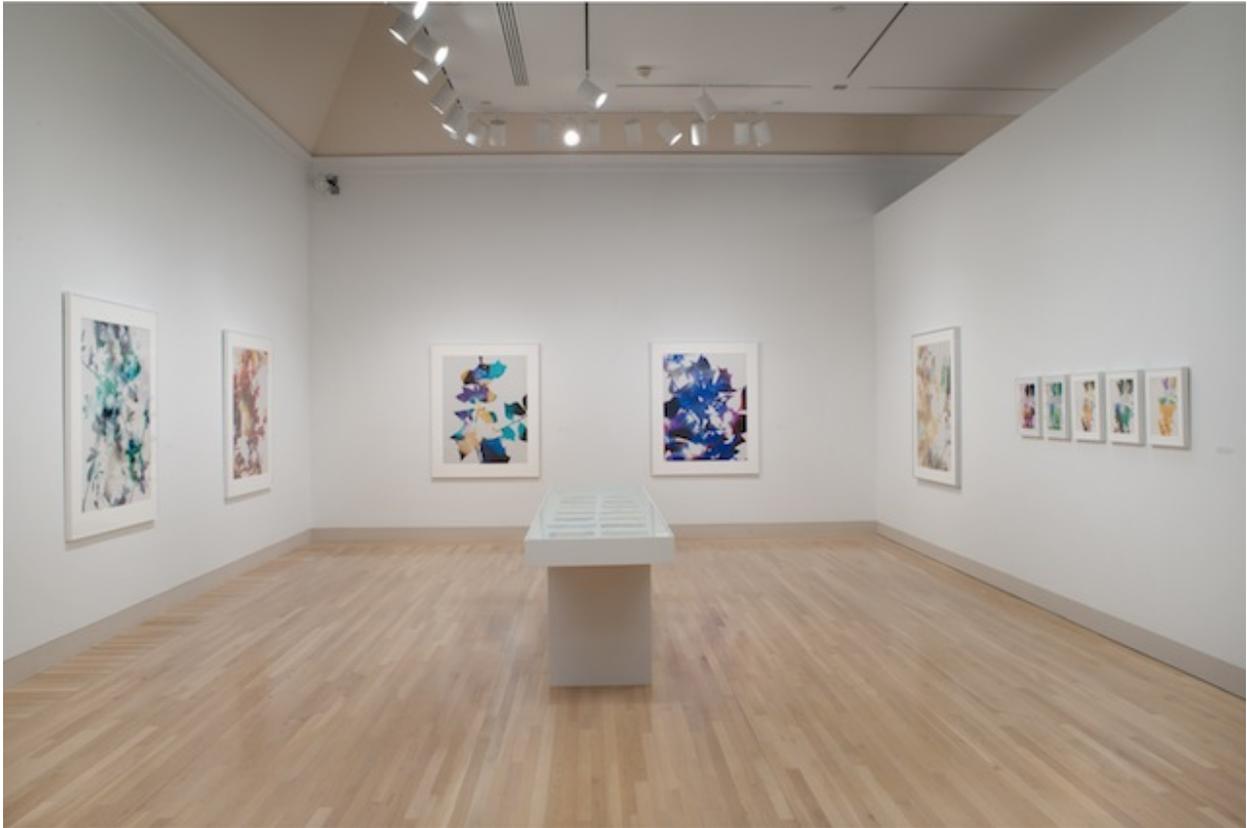
I may have been the only person in New York who wasn’t enthralled. (Thomas Micchelli wrote about his positive impressions for Hyperallergic, while John Yau published an excellent two part series detailing the history of Bess.) For me, the sensationalism of the surgical procedure loomed too large in that tiny space and swallowed up everything around it. It made me wonder what part of Bess’s posthumous celebrity is due to his art and what part to his eccentric character, extreme even by artist standards.



Installation image of Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible. Photo by Brian Forrest.

Bess spent the vast majority of his life in the Gulf Coast area of his birth, Bay City, Texas. He lived on a remote strip of land, accessible only by boat, and earned a fairly impoverished living as a fisherman and bait catcher. While he spent much of his daily life in isolation, he maintained prolific correspondences with his New York gallerist, Betty Parsons; his friends Sidney and Rosalie Berkowitz; and the art historian Meyer Schapiro.

A self-described “visionary artist,” Bess’s works are direct representations of the images he saw upon closing his eyes each night. He would sketch these visions upon waking in the morning, fish during the day, and then transfer the sketches into painted forms in the evening. Bess himself questioned his sanity, and he was eventually diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia before being institutionalized and dying of skin cancer at age 66.



“James Welling: Monograph” installation view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. September 29, 2013–January 12, 2014. (photo by Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy Hammer Museum)

Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible, organized by the Menil Collection, Houston and currently on view at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, initially did little to alter my apprehension regarding Bess’s legacy. The real moment of revelation arrived only *after* I left the Bess galleries and wandered into another exhibition across the Hammer courtyard: *James Welling: Monograph*. I can’t say whether I would have liked this show had I seen it before *Seeing Things Invisible*, but it made an unflattering comparison in the aftermath. Welling’s photographic works are large, slick, and shiny; they exude a cool and calculated professional sheen.

parrasch heijnen

In the glow of these glossy surfaces, I found myself yearning for the rough, wooden frames and laboriously textured surfaces of Bess's paintings. If nothing else, they are the deeply personal manifestation of man utterly devoted to his visions and ideas about the world. Whereas Welling is all about technical conceits and artifice, Bess's sincerity is heart wrenchingly palpable. As his writings attest, he believed in the literal power of art "to release pent up tensions and actually bring about a higher level of consciousness."



Forrest Bess. Untitled, 1957. Oil on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Adam Kimmel. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art, NY/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Like the Abstract Expressionists (Bess's chronological contemporaries), Bess regarded the painted canvas as a bearer of universal truths, but he derided what he perceived as the Ab-Ex artists' "art-for-art's-sake" mentality. The enormous financial success of many of these artists eventually became proof of their disingenuous intentions. For Bess, who had an obsessive fixation on immortality, art was no less than "the search for truth so death will end." Now that's a powerful belief.

His paintings are small windows into worlds that occupy the territory between awake and dreaming. "Untitled (No. 31)" (1951) harkens most explicitly to this idea, with many tiny sheep-like creatures set against an ominous grey sky alongside an abstract, black structure. In all of Bess's work, paint is manipulated to elicit a range of textures — from the thin layers through which raw canvas peaks out, to the course gritty surfaces of works like "Untitled (The Spider)" (1970) — lending each imaginative vision a sense of materiality and weight. The mysterious, yet vaguely familiar, forms of "Before Man" (1952-53) illustrate Bess's interest in primordial symbols; one further manifestation of the artist's belief in the unifying and universal forces of art.



parrasch heijnen

Forrest Bess, "Before Man" (1952–53), oil on canvas, 8-3/4 x 22-3/4 inches, collection Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College. State University of New York, Gift of Roy R. Neuberger. (photo by Jim Frank, courtesy Hammer Museum)

There is a magnetism to the exquisite surfaces and surreal forms of this art, and it's felt in the distinct sense of engagement that arises when puzzling over the metaphorically loaded shapes, symbols, and colors of Bess's visual language. The sheer variety of the paintings is impressive in and of itself; no two canvases look even remotely alike. The size and curation of the show also does Bess many favors. It's large enough to get a sense of the variety, but small enough to mimic the intimate feel of the paintings, lending them a cherished, relic-like aura.



Installation photo by Brian Forrest.

Not all of Bess's work is of the same quality. No amount of context or thoughtful explanation will ever make me appreciate "The Noble Carbunckle" (1960), a large canvas (by Bess standards) featuring a roughly shaped unicorn, lion, red carbuncle, and gold paint aplenty. It comes across as tawdry and, quite frankly, rather garish. (It bears mentioning that it is one of the few paintings Bess did not create from a vision, but instead concocted as a commission.)

Forrest Bess, "The Hermaphrodite" (1957), oil on canvas. 8 x 11-1/4 inches, The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of John Wilcox in memory of Frank Owen Wilson. (photo by Hickey-Robertson, Houston, image courtesy Hammer Museum)

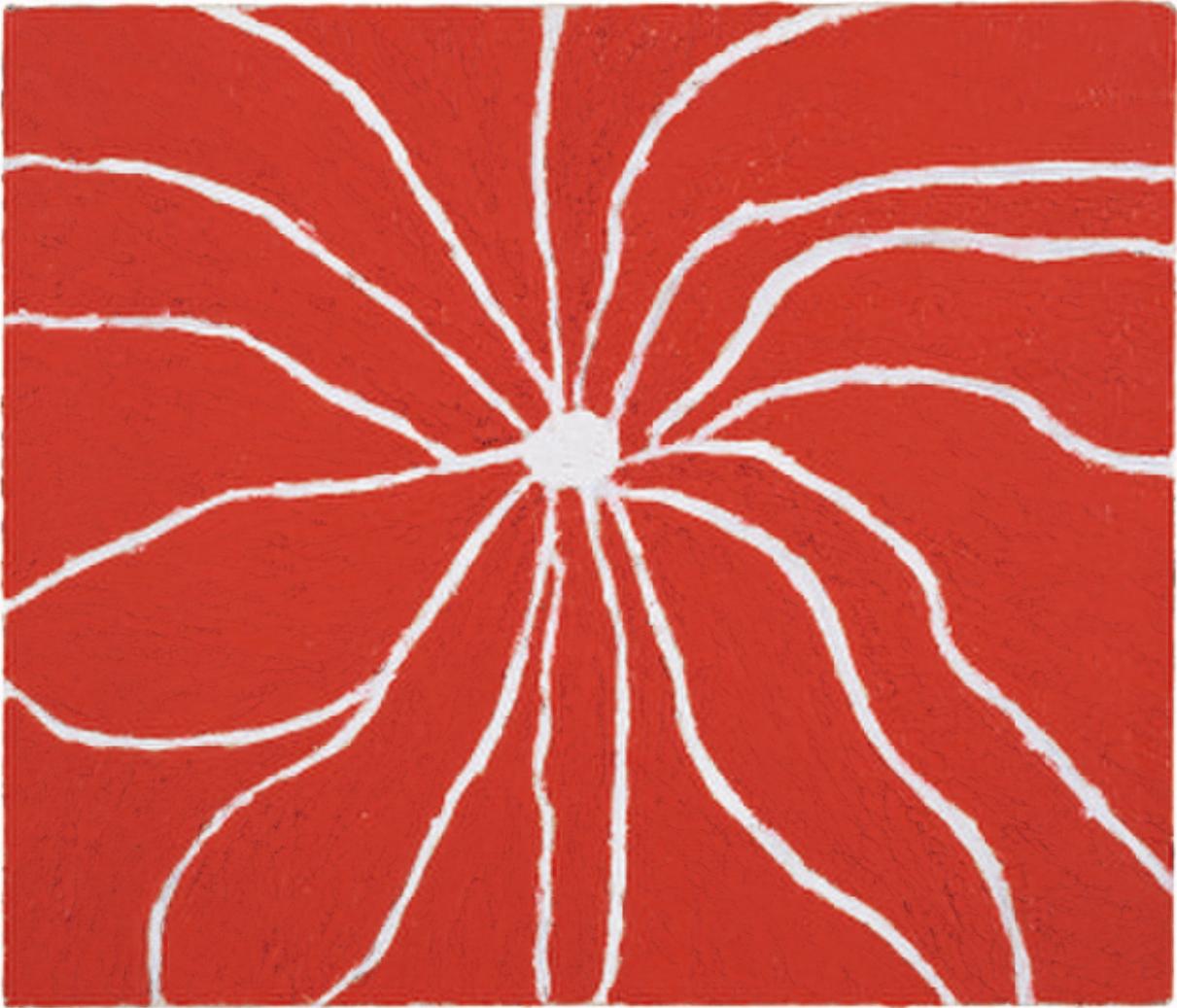
My original distaste for the highlighting of Bess's self-surgery was also tempered by *Seeing Things Invisible*. Bess believed that the unification of the two sexes within one body was the means through which one could reunify the conscious and unconscious minds and achieve eternal life. In 1960 Bess cut an opening at the base of his penis near the scrotum and created an incision in the urethra with the intent of fulfilling this theory. Bess desperately wanted to publicly display his medical studies and the documentation of this self-experiment alongside his art. One exhibition vitrine contains letters by Bess to Betty Parsons, begging her to exhibit his work as such. (Parsons politely, but firmly declined.) This section of the gallery therefore pays homage to his wishes. If Bess considered this aspect an essential part of his work, then perhaps we should too.

Bess wrote about “Untitled (No. 11A)” (1958), saying it requires thirty minutes of focused energy spent gazing upon the canvas in a darkened room:

“Tests prove that it will cause the viewers to have the vision, very dimly lit of the earth, white granite with pits — wind — and the feeling of very great loneliness. I have even had dragline operators cry over it. Farmers cried.”

This level of dedicated attention is indeed a boon to appreciating Bess’s work, even in isolation of his personal history. The two hours I spent in the intimate galleries of *Seeing Things Invisible* were certainly enough for me to garner a newfound reverence for both Bess and his densely meaningful paintings.

parrasch heijnen



Forrest Bess. Untitled (The Spider), 1970. Oil on canvas. 13-3/4 x 16-1/8 inches. Collection of Christian Zacharias.

Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible is on view at the Hammer Museum (10899 Wilshire Boulevard, Westwood, Los Angeles) through January 5, 2014.