

## The New York Times

### A New Vision of a Visionary Fisherman



“Chinquapin, 1967” by Forrest Bess shows how he was influenced by his surroundings on the Gulf of Mexico. Credit...Christie’s Images, Ltd.

#### By **Roberta Smith**

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The art of Forrest Bess (1911-77), like that of Vincent van Gogh, may be in danger of being overtaken by his life story. Especially now, when the work of this eccentric visionary painter — who spent the bulk of his maturity as a fisherman on the Gulf of Mexico, living on a spit of Texas beach — is having an especially intense New York moment.

The current Whitney Biennial includes a show within a show of 11 Bess paintings, organized by the sculptor Robert Gober; it proffers Bess as a kind of foundational artist of our time. And an additional 40 of his paintings can be seen in “A Tribute to Forrest Bess,” an exhibition at Christie’s that is occasioned by a private sale of those works for a

single seller. (It makes for the rather uneasy sight of an auction house acting like a commercial gallery handling what is tantamount to an artist's estate.)

The facts of Bess's life are nothing if not sensational. They include isolation, poverty, recurring visions — Bess said that he merely copied motifs that had appeared to him in dreams since childhood — and even self-mutilation. In the late 1950s, convinced that uniting the male and female sides of his personality would guarantee immortality, Bess attempted to turn himself into what he called a “pseudo-hermaphrodite” through two acts of painful self-surgery that yielded a small vaginal-like opening at the base of his penis.

But as with van Gogh's work, Bess's small, intensely personal quasi abstractions seem designed to withstand the onslaught of biography. The best of them, made from 1946 to 1970, are initially unimposing yet can rivet the eye with their roiled surfaces, saturated colors and combinations of odd symbols or distilled evocations of the natural world.

Equally important is the way Bess's works reshape art history. Like Myron Stout, Steve Wheeler and Alice Trumbull Mason, who also favored small size and resonant forms, Bess expands our understanding of the ascendancy of American painting in the 1940s and '50s far beyond the wall-size canvases of the usual Abstract Expressionist suspects.

There has not been so much of Bess's work on view in New York since 1988, when Hirschl & Adler Modern mounted a show of 61 paintings. And both the Whitney and Christie's displays include fascinating, if sometimes unsettling, ancillary information.

At the Whitney, Mr. Goyer has juxtaposed the paintings with Bess's correspondence with New York art world figures like the art historian Meyer Schapiro and Betty Parsons, the leading dealer of the Abstract Expressionists. Parsons gave Bess six solo shows from 1951 to 1967, which demonstrates the extent to which this outsider was also very much an insider, as driven to exhibit his work as any painter in a downtown loft. There are also photographs of the self-surgery.

At Christie's “Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle,” a marvelous 48-minute film completed in 1998 by Chuck Smith, working with the photographer Ari Marcopoulos, is being screened continuously, if not to best effect, on a small monitor. In this film you hear from numerous affectionate and understanding friends and relatives who knew Bess intimately, as well as from interested New Yorkers. These include Schapiro, the Buddhist writer Robert Thurman and John Yau, a critic who wrote an essential essay for the catalog for the Hirschl & Adler Modern show.

Mr. Yau suggests, with possibly greater plausibility for non-Buddhists, that Bess's fervent searching, as well as his self-surgery — the idea came from studying rites performed by Australian aborigines — reflected an inability to accept his homosexuality and, more generally, his reaction to a culture with little tolerance for difference. Mr. Yau likens the scarred surfaces of Bess's paintings to the psychic and physical scars he endured.

While the film details Bess's life and personality, it is equally valuable for zeroing in at regular intervals on dozens of outstanding examples of his works that are over all stronger than many on view at Christie's. Bess is a kind of hit-or-miss artist, and the paintings at Christie's were not ones he sent to his dealer or sold to collectors, who included the likes of John and Dominique de Menil and Stanley Marcus of Houston. Rather they were given over the years to a couple, Harry Burkhart and Jim Wilford, friends who were ultimately caretakers of sorts.



Christie's Images, Ltd.

Mr. Wilford died in 2006 at the University of Texas M D Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, to which Mr. Burkhart bequeathed the paintings upon his death in 2009. The hospital is selling them through Christie's under a three-year agreement.

Timing being everything, the Christie's show's overlap with the Biennial is hardly accidental. It is accompanied by a lavish catalog with illuminating essays by Robert Storr, the writer, curator and dean of the Yale School of Art, and the cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum. Mr. Koestenbaum provides a very close reading of Bess's surfaces, especially his use of the palette knife and the visual vibrancy created by his quite careful



trowelings. (Mr. Koestenbaum's larger points about the way the perusal of paintings can slow vision and stops time make his essay valuable for anyone interested in the medium, especially its abstract branch.)

The Christie's news release refers to the Bess paintings on view as "master works," but, as if in tacit acknowledgement of the slightness of some of them, they have been supplemented by three canvases borrowed from museums that are quite a bit better than almost everything else here. One is dedicated to van Gogh, another to Albert Pinkham Ryder, and their motifs are appropriate to their inspirations.

Still, there is plenty to look at and think about at Christie's. The display includes more early works than have ever been exhibited in New York: a group of thick-surfaced figurative canvases and portraits from the late 1930s and early '40s that show Bess learning from van Gogh, Gauguin and Marsden Hartley.

A three-quarters portrait of a dark-haired youth with a subtly flushed neck is especially intriguing. And a large undated work, "Untitled (Indian Dancer)," shows him teetering clumsily and endearingly on the brink of his simpler, more concentrated later paintings. It features bright biomorphic shapes suggestive of both internal organs and footprints, and has intimations of crude maps, tire tracks and surf.

In the end this exhibition may unsettle the notions of Bess as an isolated genius, which is not such a bad thing. Whatever he saw in his dreams, he was clearly influenced by his surroundings, especially the seas and skies of the gulf and even its creatures, as indicated by a painting of a bright blue crab.

There are also moments when you sense an astute awareness of other art, including possibly Max Ernst (whose work Mr. Storr reproduces in his catalog essay), Color Field painting and Pop Art, evident in a bright postcardlike Alpine vista.

For all his talk of simply copying visions without adjustment, Bess's best efforts evince a sophisticated grasp of the physicality of paint and bare canvas that puts him very much in step with the Abstract Expressionists and other artists of his time. A galaxy surrounding a red star and a speckled multicolored planet is, if you look closely, simply raw canvas carefully mottled with different densities of black, an ingenious bit of economy.

One of my favorite works, shunted to the end of a long wall as if not quite part of the show, is a late one, from 1967: a strange four-part palisade outlined in black on raw canvas with a vivid blue sky overhead. With each bluff of canvas highlighted by vigorous, overlapping vertical pulls of magenta, orange and brown, it has a combination of rawness and fluidity that makes you wonder what Bess might have done if his health had held up.

By 1967 he had endured the destruction of his beachside shack at Chinquapin by Hurricane Carla and moved some 20 miles inland to Bay City, Tex., his birthplace. In Mr. Smith's film one of Bess's friends says that he sometimes spoke of committing

suicide, which he said he intended to accomplish by drinking. But before he could do that, he was partly incapacitated by a stroke and ultimately died of skin cancer.

It is possible to imagine other ways than an auction house exhibition for the Burkhart collection to reach public view, most obviously through a commercial gallery with some experience in Bess's work. But the Anderson Center's fiduciary responsibility is to get as much money from its windfall as possible, which Christie's is likely to pull off.

The most recent Bess to be sold at auction went for \$112,000 at Sotheby's in New York last fall. The paintings at Christie's are priced from \$100,000 to \$300,000 each, with most in the \$200,000-to-\$250,000 range. This sounds like a bit of a markup, but it is probably small potatoes when you consider some of the absurd prices paid for new works by contemporary artists.

Amy Cappellazzo, who is overseeing the Bess exhibition and sales, said that the paintings are being carefully placed, and that several institutions have expressed interest. As with art dealers, we can only take her at her word and hope to see some of these works again soon under less profit-driven circumstances.

"A Tribute to Forrest Bess" is on view through April 11 at Christie's, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, at 49th Street; (212) 636-2000. The Whitney Biennial 2012 runs through May 27 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; [whitney.org](http://whitney.org).