

An Artist's Paintings, and His Complexities, on Display

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PURCHASE, N.Y. — The small but potent paintings of Forrest Bess respond to the art world's "either-ors" with a resounding "and." Without resorting to big stretches of canvas or

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brash gestures, they merge inner and outer worlds, abstraction and representation, and ideas of masculinity and femininity. To a market still intent on labeling "insiders" and "outsiders," they offer the conundrum of an artist who showed at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York in the 1950s, alongside Rothko and Pollock, but made his living as a bait fisherman in Bay City, Tex.

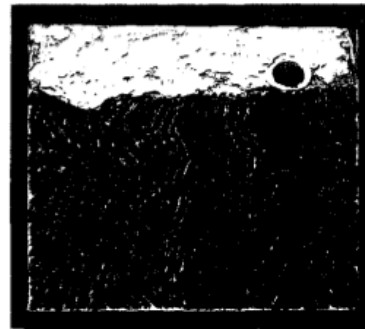
"Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible," at the Neuberger Museum of Art here, embraces his life and work in its sometimes messy totality. Building on a small exhibition of Bess's paintings and writings that was folded into the 2012 Whitney Biennial, it does not shy away from either the complexities of his art or the painful details of his biography.

This holistic show comes to the Neuberger from the Menil Collection in Houston, where it was seen last spring and summer. It has been organized by the Menil's assistant curator, Clare Elliott, in collaboration with the artist Robert Gober, who presented the mini-exhibition within the Biennial.

It can be difficult to look closely at the art without getting sidetracked by the extraordinary details of Bess's life. Bess (1911-77) was a visionary, and he realized his visions in his body as well as his art. After making countless paintings that explored gender through abstruse

"Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible" runs through May 18 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, N.Y.; 914-251-6100, neuberger.org.

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MENIL COLLECTION, HOUSTON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUTH FREDSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Forrest Bess works on display at the Neuberger Museum include, from left, "The Hermaphrodite," "Dedication to van Gogh," and "Untitled (The Crown)."

Forrest Bess
Seeing Things Invisible
Neuberger Museum of Art

symbolism, and compiling a medical and philosophical thesis about the unification of the male and female, he eventually performed a series of surgeries on himself in the hope of becoming a "pseudo-hermaphrodite."

He saw this process as a quest for enlightenment, even immortality. Confronting the photographic evidence, we are more likely to see it as mad self-mutilation à la van Gogh (or, as some have suggested, as a desperate response to a society intolerant of homosexuality).

The van Gogh association, at least, was one that Bess himself courted in his letters and in his early painting "Dedication to van Gogh" (1946), with its heavy blue sun above a field composed of zigzagging orange and green brush strokes. But it seems likely that both madness and trauma played roles in his

decision to perform self-surgery; he had had a terrible experience in the military, a brutal beating by a fellow enlistee who suspected him of being gay.

Photographs, letters and other ephemera detailing Bess's thesis and operations are all here, for anyone with the fortitude to examine them. But the show also includes 48 canvases, a group sizable enough to allow for total immersion in Bess's painting.

It encourages us to see Bess as both a lone genius and a card-carrying Abstract Expressionist. Some of his paintings, particularly those that contain glyphic symbols in individual cells, resemble Jungian works from the late 1940s and early '50s by other artists on Betty Parsons's roster, including Pollock, Rothko and Gottlieb.

Bess's champions included the eminent art historian and critic Meyer Schapiro, who praised "his wonderful black, of many nuances: granular, matte, shiny and rough." (All of those Reinhardt-esque variations on black exist simultaneously in paintings like "The Hermaphrodite," from 1957.)

And yet, in so many ways, Bess remains aloof from his peers. There's the matter of scale; while the Ab-Exers went on to work big, he continued to make paintings that were typically letter size or smaller (even when encased in his chunky, handmade wood frames).

His probing but controlled brushwork, which extends to his dexterous scrapes of the palette knife, often gently pulls you into paintings that might otherwise seem too arcane. In "Untitled (Meeting White Forms on Black)" (circa 1950), a close look at the central white passage reveals small figures sculpted out of the impasto.

His color sense has a similar effect. Minty greens, bloody reds and acidic yellows are accompanied by appropriately warm or cool grays, as in "Untitled (The Crown)" or "Untitled (No. 5)," both from 1949. You get the idea that Bess's visions appeared to him in color, even though he initially recorded them in black-and-white drawings.

There are many other ways into his paintings, including a "Primer of Basic Primordial Symbolism" created by Bess

himself. "Forrest Bess: Seeing the Invisible" encourages us to consider all of these options, including his thesis and his correspondence with experts such as the sex and gender researcher John Money.

That is probably how Bess would have wanted it. In a letter to Parsons that's on view, he proposes exhibiting the thesis alongside his paintings. "No matter what the relationship is between art and medicine, I would rather keep it purely on the aesthetic plain," she responds. "Why don't you show your paintings and the thesis in a medical hospital?"

It's only recently that the idea of showing both projects in a museum became palatable, as Ms. Elliott reminds us in her catalog essay. But we can now see them together as one big project, a precursor for the abstract canvases of Andrew Masullo or, just as likely, for the postgender characters of Matthew Barney. And we can appreciate that wherever others looked to isolate, classify and define, Bess made connections.