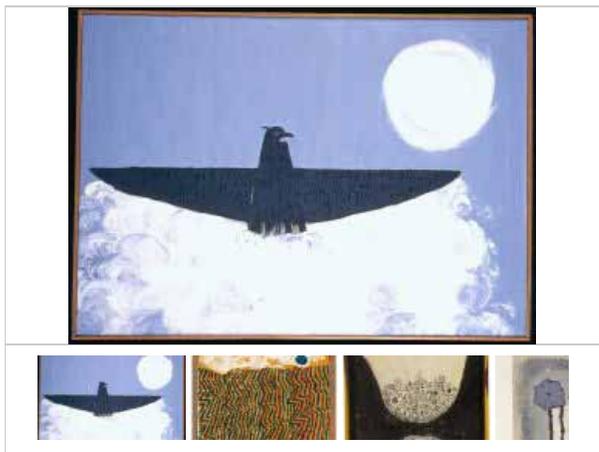


An artist's artist gains a wider following

The Menil Collection exhibit exposes the full story behind the enigmatic work of Forrest Bess

By Molly Glentzer | April 12, 2013 | Updated: April 14, 2013 12:49pm



Forrest Bess' "Thunderbird" (1965, Oil on canvas, 26 x 36, The Menil Collection, Houston) is among the works on display at the Menil Collection April 19-August 18 in "Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible." Photo: Paul Hester

Good timing can be everything in a career.

The artist **Forrest Bess**, who died in 1977, didn't have it in his lifetime, and he knew it.

"My painting is tomorrow's painting. Watch and see," he wrote to a friend.

With "Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible" opening Friday at the Menil Collection, the eccentric bait fisherman from Bay City seems finally to be getting his due in a meaningful way.

The first major museum survey of Bess' work in more than 20 years, the show features 48 paintings and a drawing made during his seminal years, from 1946 to 1970. It also acknowledges his dark side, with several vitrines of archival materials that expand on influential sculptor **Robert Gober**'s 2012 Whitney Biennial installation, "The Man That Got Away."

The Menil owns nine works by Bess, and curator **Clare Elliott** discovered them a few years ago when she was trolling the museum's holdings for project ideas.

"What a weirdo," she thought at first.

She didn't know much about the artist but found the images magnetic, especially

considering their size.

"They're very compact but very powerful," she said.

Elliott also likes the objectlike quality that results partly from the crude frames Bess made. His paintings have an authenticity that's unpretentious yet also mysterious, she said.

"Thunderbird," the largest painting in the exhibit and one that's owned by the Menil, is about 36 by 26 inches. It's dominated, as the title suggests, by a primitive-looking black bird - an American Indian symbol that trails smoke or puffy clouds as he soars into blue sky. The rays of a white, circular sun rotate counter-clockwise near the top of the canvas like the bands of a hurricane, with a central yin/yang symbol in pale yellow and white. (It was painted in 1965, four years after Bess lost his studio and meager possessions to Hurricane Carla.)

The smallest of the paintings that initially intrigued Elliott is about 3 inches by 5 inches. Painted in 1947, it features a pair of umbrellalike shapes that might also be interpreted as morning glory flowers or eyes peering from above a vertical field of black and white stripes. Even more strange are 1949's "Bodies of Little Dead Children," with a pair of brown boomerangs; 1950's "Sticks," with a pile of what looks like Popsicle sticks floating near what might be a black snake; an untitled work from 1951 with symbols that look vaguely Egyptian alongside smears of blood red and blue; and 1957's "The Hermaphrodite," with an elongated red-and-white oval over a rounded bell shape that's discernible in a highly textured black background.

Menil director **Josef Helfenstein** encouraged Elliott to learn more. They didn't know then that Gober, who curated "The Meat Wagon" at the Menil in 2005, was also digging into Bess' past. But that turned out to be fortuitous, and they shared information.

Christie's auction house was sitting on a private collection of Bess works that were donated to **M.D. Anderson Cancer Center**, and when word got out about Gober's project, they timed a major sale to coincide with the biennial opening.

"Robert Gober is one of the most important artists in the country. He's brilliant," said Houston painter **Terrell James**, who participates Tuesday in a panel discussion about Bess. "It's like in 'The Lord of the Rings' when Frodo puts on the ring and that giant eye goes 'jhoop' - anything Gober looks at becomes of immense cultural interest."

Artists have respected and collected Bess' work with near-spiritual zeal for years. Most of what's known today about him derives from the letters Bess wrote to friends and supporters.

"There were reams and reams," James recalls. She knows because she organized every one of them, including loads of sordid photographs, a few years after Bess died. That work was part of a larger project at the **Museum of Fine Arts**, Houston to save Texas art history for the **Archives of American Art** at the **Smithsonian Institution**.

"There were times I'd have to leave the office and go upstairs and out into the daylight," James said. She's long been influenced by Bess' art. His work taught her that small paintings could hold a room, she said. Now she's consumed by thoughts of Bess again.

Her friend and art dealer, **Hiram Butler**, suggested, "With Forrest Bess, once you start, it's like it never leaves you."

In an age when artists hurt themselves and call it performance, people aren't easily shocked. But until recently, the full, uncensored story behind Bess' odd little paintings was only hinted at in exhibit catalogs.

His works almost mystically meld references to the natural world he absorbed and primordial symbols he claimed were taken straight from visions he experienced in near-sleep states.

Bess, a gay man who spent many years alone in a shack near a remote part of Matagorda Bay, related his visions to a thesis he developed about immortality based on hermaphroditism, a condition in which the body has both male and female organs.

He culled his esoteric ideas from intense personal study in mythology, alchemy, aboriginal rituals, Jungian philosophy and early sexuality research. He was so obsessed, he operated on himself, creating an opening on the underside of his penis, near the top. He documented the result in photographs and yearned for more surgery to improve upon it.

Before Gober started his research, he could identify a Bess painting but didn't know the story, either.

"His paintings were his art. But his theories about the joining of male and female were very consequential to the symbolism," Gober said. "He felt he was tapping into something ancient."

Elliott studied the same files, bringing them full circle, in a way. In the end, she put all that aside to "just look at the works," she said.

Bess' letters ramble, and they're heartbreaking, but they also show an extreme sensitivity to the landscape - the treeless, salt-grass prairie and coastal horizon that contributed to the magic of his paintings. That brutal natural world was as much a part of his psyche as his theories.

"What I have here is a canvas, and I am living in it," he wrote. "The painting fills the emptiness, uncontrolled - as wild at times as the Gulf and as fragile at times as a tiny wisp of pink cloud. Without it - I don't know what I would do."

Bess shared many of his deepest thoughts with avant garde art dealer **Betty Parsons**, who showed his work at her New York gallery from 1949 to 1967. Parsons - whom Gober said is also unjustifiably forgotten - helped introduce giants of abstract expressionism to the market, including **Mark Rothko**, **Barnett Newman**, **Jackson**

Pollock and Clyfford Still.

Bess wanted to succeed in New York but didn't like art speak or the big scene, referring to his rich contemporaries as "the concoctionists."

For him, life and art were inseparable. That's one of the reasons he's so inspiring to other artists.

Unfortunately, he couldn't sustain his way of life.

At home in Bay City, Bess was regarded as a fanatic who built good crab traps and kept a letter in his back pocket from some guy named **Carl Jung**.

Derailed by losing his studio to Hurricane Carla in 1961 and increasingly hobbled by alcoholism and skin cancer, Bess painted continuously until 1970. His habit of walking outside nude got him committed to a mental institution near the end of his life, and he died of a stroke in a nursing home. He was 66 but by some accounts looked 20 years older.

If his paintings hadn't been so good, Bess would surely have been dismissed as a crackpot and forgotten years ago.

Influential artists, collectors and curators in Houston always championed his work - even before Parsons. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston gave Bess solo shows in 1941 and 1951; as did **Andre Émmerich Gallery** in 1958, the Contemporary Arts Museum in 1961 and the New Arts, Houston in 1963.

But his experiments contained too much information.

"I think it's just as wrong to only focus on the back story as it is to completely ignore it," Butler said. But there was a time, he admitted, "when we consciously almost wouldn't acknowledge it, because we didn't want to get into that. ... The back story was not our interest. We thought these were great works of art.

"People forget that Forrest Bess was not some local yokel. He was very much a part of the cultural intelligentsia," he added.

Butler hired James to help curate a show of 25 Bess paintings in 1986. He timed that exhibit to coincide with the opening of the Menil Collection, knowing the international art world would be here.

"Boy, were we dumb," Butler said.

Hirschl & Adler Modern, a controversial New York gallery that's no longer in business, swooped in and bought out his show. Then they hired James to find more works by Bess, eventually amassing about 60 paintings that toured internationally in an odd marriage between the commercial and nonprofit art worlds.

James and Butler love telling the story of how they knocked on doors around Bay City, where Bess traded paintings for groceries and gas, and those with money often commissioned Bess to paint portraits and landscapes. (Bess said he collected about \$200 a year from sales of his art.) Butler wasn't interested in those figurative works, but after 1986, the New Yorkers were offering \$10,000 apiece for the visionary paintings. They now sell for upwards of \$200,000, although they're rarely on the market.

Many of the paintings Butler showed in 1986 reappear in the Menil's exhibit, now borrowed from private collectors.

About 100 Bess paintings are documented, although James thinks another 100 exist, perhaps owned by people who don't know their value.

Just last week, Butler heard from a friend who'd retrieved one of Bess' handmade frames that was discarded, ignorantly, by a Houston framer.

Filmmaker **Chuck Smith** has also studied Bess' story for years. His 1999 documentary "Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle" will screen during the Menil exhibit's run. A book of the same title, with more information, will be published in June.

Smith posits that while Bess never hid his thesis - and in fact tried to promote it everywhere he went - dealers avoided it because they thought it would hinder sales.

"Now we're ready to accept that side of him," Smith said. "People love stories behind art. ... We all have female sides and male sides. He made some mistakes, but he was onto something."

Smith often hears from art students who have seen his film. The paintings inspire them because they're simplistic at first glance, he suggested. "But it's not entirely primitive. It's the timeless thing in his images I

respond to. Our best art is always timeless."

Elliott has grouped the Menil exhibit's paintings aesthetically rather than chronologically so visitors will see the variety of symbols Bess conveyed. They don't fall into a neat art historical order, she said.

One of the paintings can be hung vertically or horizontally, and the title changes depending on the orientation. When it's vertical it's called "The Tree of Life," but she's decided to hang it horizontally, acknowledging it as "The Sign of the Hermaphrodite."

She's happy to have Gober's vitrines in the gallery. Bess wanted his paintings to be understood that way, and they evolved with the theories, she said.

"I feel like we shouldn't ignore it. On the other hand, the paintings are arresting by themselves."

In the exhibit catalog, she's included a primer to the code behind 46 symbols, but she sees them merely as a "doorway" into the paintings.

"I don't think they give you the final answer. The paintings are to be contemplated," she said.

Gober packed a lot of material (including a page from an article by sex researcher Dr. John Money that shows Polaroids Bess took of his genitals) into the vitrines for the Whitney Biennial and will have more here.

Whitney docents asked him, "Do people have to look at this stuff?"

His answer: No. He simply wanted to honor Bess' long unfulfilled wish to have his "research" shown with his art. He leaves it up to viewers to make up their own minds.

"It's a very open-ended story. We're not making any conclusions, just trying to present his art and his story in all its complexity," Gober said. "How much do you believe about what any artist says about their work? They're not the most reliable source."

Butler said a change in the cultural climate has made it acceptable now to tell Bess' whole story. He and James are happy to see interest in the work revived.

Still, James was appalled by the reaction to Gober's installation in New York.

"People were like, 'David Byrne was here this morning.' It was all so hip. That just killed me. It excluded the real purpose - kind of like when people remember Van Gogh for cutting off his ear instead of the work," James said.

It's not a random analogy. Bess identified strongly with van Gogh, and the exhibit includes an homage to the troubled Impressionist - an interpretation of one of his wheat-field paintings as if filtered through the eyes of an aboriginal artist.

Elliott hopes the exhibit inspires people to learn more. "We have not finished asking questions we need to ask about Bess," she said.



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