

Recently Discovered Forrest Bess Paintings

It is one thing to be a visionary and another to be one whose work holds your attention for a sustained period of time.

by John Yau 2021 December 2

MONTAUK, New York — Everything about the painter Forrest Bess's life was implausible, from recording his glimpses of immortality in paint, while living in a bait camp in Chinquapin, Texas, to having an extensive correspondence with the art historian Meyer Schapiro, to showing with Betty Parsons and meeting Buddhism scholar Robert Thurman, who was 19 at the time, to having his work shown in a refurbished barn in Montauk. Visionaries live in a universe that might resemble ours, but only in the flimsiest of ways, and the fantastical quality of that exalted domain can sometimes leak into ours, causing incredulity.

No one knows how many visionary paintings Bess made in his life (many people estimate around 150) or where they will surface next. Recently, I saw one being appraised on an episode of Antiques Roadshow filmed in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 2011. It seems that he had given it to his neighbor, who had held onto it since 1962.

A group of his paintings last showed up at a private sales exhibition, "My painting is tomorrow's painting. Watch and see." Forrest Bess – Including works from the Harry Burkhart Collection at Christies (March 1–April 11, 2012). Bess aficionados know that he had given Burkhart many paintings over the years, though the exact number is unknown. Those in the sale only came to light after Burkhart had died and willed them to the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, which had taken care of his longtime partner, Jim Wilford. Not knowing what it had, the center contacted Christies.

This is why I was immediately interested when Chuck Smith — who made the documentary, *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle* (1999) — contacted me about a cache of unknown Bess paintings that had recently come to light. According to Smith, they were first brought to the respected Dallas art dealer Kirk Hopper by a man who worked for Burkhart. Hopper, who knows Bess's work well, thought they were authentic, as did Smith. For this reason I traveled from New York City to see the exhibition *Forrest Bess: I Can Close My Eyes in a Dark Room at The Ranch* (November 12–December 18, 2021) at the end of Long Island.

The exhibition includes 14 paintings, a number of which have been pretty badly damaged. The only titled work, "Mandala of the Tent" (1954), has been previously exhibited. Another, "Untitled" (oil on canvas, 7 by 7 inches, n.d.), has a discolored area in the lower right corner of an original frame, where his dealer, Betty Parsons, often placed a label to identify the work.

According to the gallery press release, the paintings came from a man who "began working for Harry Burkhart on Burkhart Ranch in Markham, Texas, in October of 1975. I was 19 years old at the time and remained working for Harry on the ranch for almost thirty-six years." Knowing of Bess's relationship with Burkhart and Wilford, and the fact that Burkhart was casual about their storage, I was not surprised to learn that these had been discovered in a shed on his property. They could have deteriorated there or been damaged when they were in Bess's possession; others had been because of hurricanes. This is why none of the letters Shapiro wrote to Bess have survived.

The first thing that struck me about the paintings was that none of them looked familiar. If I had thought that they were variations on Bess's paintings, I would have become suspicious. There were recognizable Bessian symbols, like the "tree of life," and colors he had used in other works, such as gray and dark green, but they did not echo known paintings. Even for someone like myself, who knows Bess's work and has written about it on numerous occasions, starting in the 1980s, these felt fresh and unexpected.

This leads me to my second point. Some of the symbols were completely new to me— for instance, the head of penis painted in black in the lower right-hand corner of an untitled red painting measuring less than 10 by 10 inches. Another work, a pinkish-orange and turquoise blue painting measuring 4 ½ by 6 inches, depicts two rows of familiar symbols (two circles, a triangle, a square, and an equal and multiplication sign) that surely meant something deeply important to this enigmatic artist. The third takeaway is that even the badly damaged paintings, some of which had a part missing, were compelling. This is Bess's gift. It is one thing to be a visionary who fervently believed that becoming a hermaphrodite was the key to attaining immortality and another to be one whose work holds your attention for a sustained period of time.

Bess, who once described himself as feeling “like a pelican in a church,” is an American anomaly, like Albert Pinkham Ryder or Joseph Cornell. Yet whereas Ryder and Cornell belabored their works, Bess's intimately scaled paintings seem to “have come,” as I said in Smith's documentary, “directly from his eyes — closed or open — down through his hands and onto the canvas ... you don't feel him discovering the image through the process of painting.” Remembering Bess's self-description, I thought — as inclusive as the art world seems to have become in the last few years, at least on the face of it — we definitely need more pelicans.