

FORREST BESS

KEY TO THE RIDDLE

BY Chuck Smith

FOREWORD BY Robert Thurman

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Forrest Bess

KEY TO THE RIDDLE

By Chuck Smith

FOREWORD

I was 19 years old and on my way to Mexico. I was visiting my former wife's parents in Houston and I guess it was early summer. I somehow heard about Forrest Bess's interest in esoteric, alchemical things. I didn't go to see him out of an interest in art, although my ex's family were art collectors (Jean and Dominique de Menil). I knew he was a painter, but that's not what drew me to him. I wanted to see him because he supposedly had some very interesting theories about alchemical integration and the symbolism of alchemy, and at the time I was in the early phases of my "quest" for deeper truths and higher realities that I was discovering as an undergraduate at Harvard. I was down there and they said there is this very interesting, weird sage who lives out in a shack reachable only by boat.

When we got there, we met this very gentle and pleasant man and we had a very long and interesting talk about his whole theory and I remember particularly that he was into this idea of becoming a hermaphrodite—that the androgyne was the answer to everything. And to really do it, you had to physically practice this on your own body—you had to open up a vagina on a male body (he never discussed what you should do to a female body), and then you'd have both a penis and a vagina and then you'd unite them in some way. He didn't make a big deal about the fact that he had done something to himself, but he indicated that he felt it was necessary. I was quite interested with all this, although I remember that I was dubious—and told him I was—that you had to physically do that. I thought there might be a way through visualization or mental imagery that you could link up your male and female sides in a more internal, energy flow thing. I remember I was concerned for him and maybe because of that he didn't actually give us the graphic details of his own operation—he just talked about it as a theory. And then, as we were leaving, he gave me his "Thesis" which was like a big book with one of those black binder covers and it had type-written stuff by him with illustrations and drawings of his, and also clippings from books, diagrams from alchemical tracts, sun-moon symbolism, and lots of male-female stuff. I was going to Paris that summer, and I said I would discuss it with people there—and Bess mentioned Gaston Bachelard who he said I should go and talk with as well.

Though I didn't know anything yet about Tibetan Yoga or Tibetan Buddhism, his thesis fit with me—with its references to Jung, and Reich, and Kundalini yoga—and I felt like he was on to something certainly, and since then my Tibetan studies have confirmed that he was quite correct, except for the physical operation part. You can unite male and female in your body according to Tibetan Yoga, and in fact that is the definition of enlightenment. In Tibetan Yoga the right channel is the female and the left channel is the male. There are three central channels and the union means integrating those energies of the left and right channels into the central channel in an ecstatic process that may or may not involve sexual union with another person. And so I think Bess was quite right. And, I think, the fact that he was on to it indicated that he was—from a Buddhist perspective—someone who had been a Yogi in a former life and had experienced some of the yogas involved in this issue of union of male and female. However, reborn where he was, in the culture and era that he was, he didn't have the

knowledge and the fellowship with people who could have understood his ideas. Still, he wanted to do something real, he was a devotee, he was someone who would give his life for something, give his body for something. And so he wanted to practice his ideas on his own body. He was a Yogi in that sense—"yogi" means to yoke your body and being to your view of life—you try it out, you experiment on yourself. And in that sense I think Forrest Bess was a very brave and courageous soul.

He believed that the whole realm of art is the expression of deeper instincts for integration and enlightenment in the mind—coming up with images that lead one to one's quest, so to speak. That's what his paintings are: they're not entertainment, or superficial aestheticism, or adornment; they're a deeper inner voyage. And the highest art therefore—and this is very anticipatory of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhist theory—is transforming the self into enlightened being. As with the Alchemists, it's the art of taking the base elements of the stained and polluted world and refining them in the crucible of wisdom and then coming up with the elixir of immortality. In Buddhism it's the same thing—a Buddha is a being who has supposedly conquered involuntary presence in their own body and they're no longer bound to living and dying and drawing breath in the same cycle, and they therefore build their own body as a gesture for beings to whom they feel overwhelming compassion. Their embodiment or rebirth is an art form. And Bess, as yogi or siddha-adept, was thinking that maybe he could make his body into his supreme work of art. He wasn't content to just paint something and then sell it. He wanted to make his life and his body a work of art, and that's probably why he cut himself. And it was very brave of him really.

Years later, I was actually amazed to discover that his art had become so successful, but that indicates to me something about his greatness. He was a great person and I would be unhappy if people read his story and concluded that he was demented and crazy and a victim. I mean, he had a little distorted information, and took a few unnecessary steps and ended up out of sync with conventional reality, but what's so great about conventional reality? Making a lot of money, eating too much toxic beef, and then dropping dead of a heart attack or cancer, whichever comes first?

The point is Forrest Bess was a happy person, gentle, friendly, and affectionate, and on that long ago day in 1961, we felt absolutely at home with him. We had brought some wine and he had fish or something and we had a meal together and we talked of fascinating things. He was someone who was trying to make something of lasting value out of life and make something real. He wasn't just conceding to a modern materialistic way of life, thinking, "It's all meaningless and I might as well live and enjoy it until it ends in nothingness." I mean what's "insane," what's "crazy?" The way that most people live their lives of quiet desperation—that's insane! Bess was a great artist and a great soul who wasn't conventional, but if that's insane, I would take it as a compliment. Forrest made beautiful things and was striving for completeness and I hope wherever he's reborn now he's doing those same things.

ROBERT THURMAN, Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, 2013

THE OUTSIDER (1949)

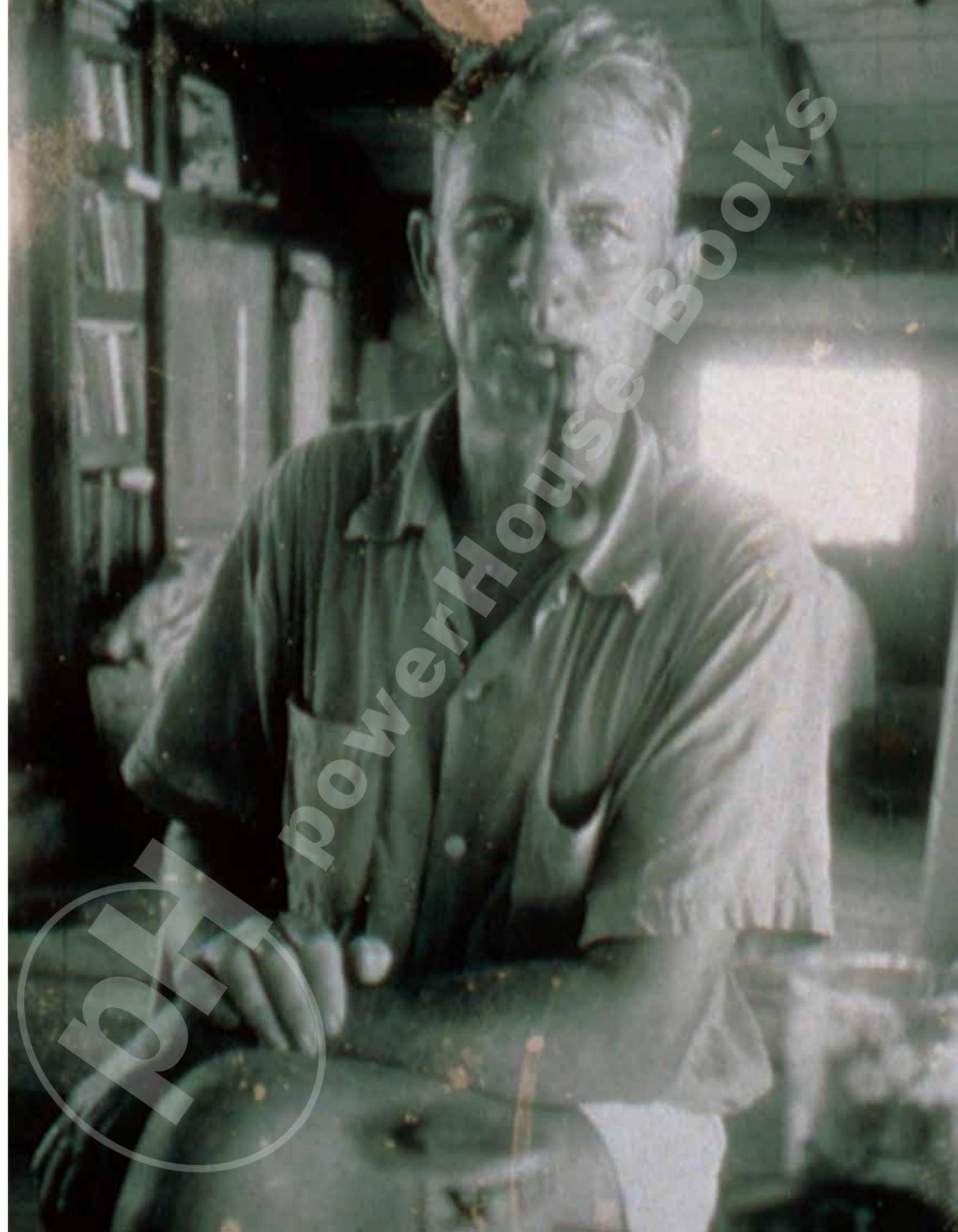
“DARKNESS GIVES BIRTH TO LIGHT.”

— Chongyang Wang, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*

In the Fall of 1949, a 38-year-old artist named Forrest Bess left his bait camp on the east coast of Texas and headed for New York City with several paintings under his arm. A year earlier, he had met the art dealer Betty Parsons through a friend in San Antonio, and after seeing his slides Parsons had agreed to give him a show at her gallery. At the time, the Betty Parsons Gallery was home to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and other renowned artists who would soon make New York City the center of the art world; but contemporary art didn't interest Bess much. He wasn't going to New York to change the art world; he was simply going because Betty had liked his work, and he felt that his paintings “needed to be shown.” When he got to the gallery, Parsons was surprised. She had scheduled his show for December, but it was only October. Bess didn't have the money to go home and then return in a month, so Bess called his old friends from Texas, Sidney and Rosalie Berkowitz, who offered Bess a room in their house in Woodstock, New York. Forrest was relieved at the chance to visit the country after a week in New York because his initial encounter with the city was a bit of a let down. He had made a point of going to Greenwich Village for a drink at the Cedar Tavern, where Willem de Kooning and Pollock famously held court, but when Forrest began to talk art—a stranger with a Texas accent—Bess found himself, once again, in the role of an outsider. He was finally in the big city he had always dreamed of, but was having a hard time fitting in.

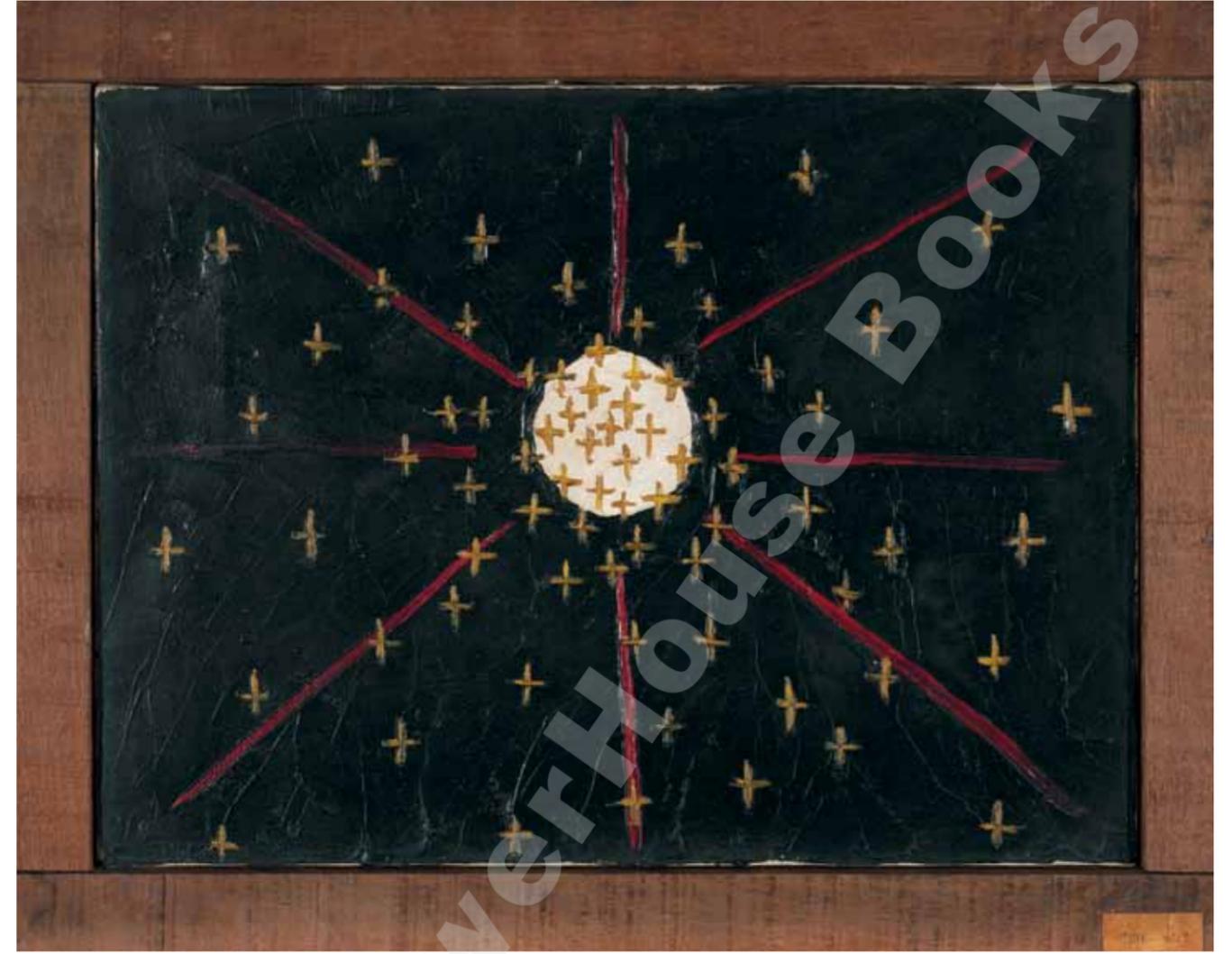
At age seven, Bess had first seen pictures of New York in his family's encyclopedia and two of his earliest pencil drawings were copies of the Statue of Liberty and the Woolworth Building—two urban icons from an alien world. Bess's father, Butch, was an oil worker, and the family was constantly on the move, but the surroundings were always the same; flatlands speckled with oil derricks and roughneck families that looked askew at the little kid who liked to draw. Forrest learned early that art and fantasy could help him escape his harsh surroundings, and his biggest supporter was his mother Minta, who also liked to draw and paint. Minta encouraged Forrest to take art classes from a neighbor, and he quickly mastered the rules of line and composition, but their shared love of art had a dark undercurrent that alienated the young boy. There were rumors that Minta's mother had died in an insane asylum after painting “fantastic canvases,” and, no matter how hard he tried, Forrest could never quite fit in with the other neighborhood kids. Now, as he sat in his temporary home in Woodstock, New York, surrounded by a few paintings that he had just started, the old fears of being ostracized came back and he began to wonder whether his first show in New York would be a failure. In November of 1949, apprehensive, and missing Texas, he sat down to write his new art dealer a letter:

OPPOSITE: [Forrest Bess, ca. 1952](#)





Indian Summer, 1949



Untitled No. 42, 1950



Family Portrait, 1946 (Bess in foreground, with his mother and father behind)

“EVERYONE LIVES IN THEIR OWN LITTLE WORLD.”

F.B.



Untitled, n.d.

“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.”

F.B.

CHINQUAPIN (1947-1967)

“WHAT I HAVE HERE IS A CANVAS
AND I AM LIVING IN IT.”

F.B.



About 20 miles south of Bay City, Texas, a dirt road covered with oyster shells ends at place called Chinquapin. Ahead is the Intercoastal Waterway, and beyond that the Gulf of Mexico. The first house you come to has the word "BAIT" painted on its side, and the only reason most people would ever go to Chinquapin is to fish. Today, all of the houses are on the mainland, but 50 years ago, Forrest Bess was living at a bait camp on a spit of saltgrass-covered land 100 feet offshore. Bess's camp, a two-room shack with a porch and a dock, was accessible only by boat, and until the late 1950s, there was no electricity or phone. The camp was started by his father, who moved to Chinquapin after retiring from the oil fields. At one time, Butch had made a lot of money on oil leases, but by the time he got to Chinquapin the family was poor again, and he and his wife Minta were forced to sell bait to make ends meet. In 1947, when his health started failing, Butch had asked Forrest if he would help him run the camp. At the time, Bess was living in San Antonio, painting in his studio and selling frames for a living, but he didn't feel comfortable living the "artist's life." As he told Betty Parsons, "I moved to Chinquapin with the express purpose of escaping evenings and days full of artistic talk, people visiting at my studio day and night—no chance to work or to think." If Forrest Bess was looking for a place to think and paint, he had found it.

Life at Chinquapin revolved around the small "bait" shrimp that spawned in the shallow, brackish waters around Bess's camp. Using nets and a small motorboat, Bess would catch the shrimp during the day, and the next morning around four a.m., fishermen would honk their horns, and Bess would wake up and sell them the shrimp. At night, he would think, paint, and write letters. Here are excerpts from two letters where he both explains and describes his life at the remote camp:

Many of my friends think I am pretty stupid to be down here when I could be in some art school teaching. I definitely feel that this is a phase - an experiment that I need. I need time to think - to sort out things. Many times I'm too tired physically at night to think or paint - all I want is to dry out wet clothes and flop on the cot and sleep, but this is sort of a clearing away of debris when I watch a sunrise or a sunset or watch for my fishing cork to go under. I feel that my nerves are better now than they have been for years, yet I feel that they need more toning - keener edging. I guess I was pretty sick in San Antonio. It's good that I came down here.

—Letter to Earle Ludgin, 1948

For the first time in my life, I feel at home and it's the place of my earliest memory as a child. When you get off by yourself as I have, very close to nature, those laws which are predominate in nature become a part of you. If there is a desire for understanding "big thoughts" then that desire alone is a terrific force. Our life here is close to the elements... Riding along in my boat on the canal, pulling my shrimp trawl behind, I often look at the banks of the canal with their spoil and weeds, but with a bit of



TOP LEFT: Bait shrimp, n.d. TOP RIGHT: Bess at Chinquapin, 1950s
BOTTOM: Bess camp at Chinquapin, 1960s

imagination - the miniature landscape becomes large, the mounds of dirt removed from the canal become hills and mountains, the weeds become beautiful jungle trees and a very quiet feeling arises, that this is as it should be - the panorama is a reflection of a much greater panorama - the banks of a much greater River and Man moves along this Great River, pausing here and there but ever moving on. Sometimes in my fantasy it seems that just around the corner might be a harbor of another dimension - another civilization.

—Letter to Betty Parsons, 1949



Dear Mr. Schapiro,

I have a problem on my mind. It pertains to the growing number of cases of mentally ill people that I encounter here at my camp. People come fishing and drop by for coffee with me and they discuss their personal problems.

For instance, tonight a man and his wife are anchored here in my bayou. They invited me over for coffee and during our discussion pertaining to the weather and fishing, the woman goes into a fit - a form of convulsion - she has a "silly child-like expression" on her face. The husband is highly nervous as the wife "holds her breath."

Yesterday - a friend comes in whose brother-in-law has been a respected money-making farmer for years, awoke with convulsions and a great fear of being killed. And then a friend of mine has a mental breakdown and ends up paralyzed and the doctors give up hope for his recovery. I am rather at a loss, I feel perplexed that here in this remote place one should come in contact with so much mental illness and aberration. Is this typical of every place one goes, or is it that I am overly conscious of these cases? That I am on the lookout for this?

It seems hopeless in a way - meeting the many cases of aberrations - and surely there is some simple solution to this problem. I am concerned about it.

As far as my work is concerned, I cannot bring myself to believe that the basis for it lies in an aberration. I simply believe that any man can "see" as I can see and I sincerely believe that someday he will be able to see the work.



THERE WAS A LONG CARAVAN OF TRUCKS, AUTOMOBILES, AND PEOPLE MOVING AWAY INTO THE DARKNESS. TWO MEN ON A MOTORCYCLE, AT THE END OF THE CARAVAN, STOPPED AND WATCHED THE FORMATION. WE WERE NEAR. I GOT A GLIMPSE OF A HUGE BLACK TOWER AMONG GREAT WINDOWLESS BUILDINGS.

I KNEW I WOULD NOT BE CRUSHED BY THE IMPACT SO I ENCOURAGED MY WEAK EYED COMPANION AND WE WALKED FORWARD.

AROUND THE CORNER OF A GREAT WHITE BUILDING I WOULD BE IN A NEW PLACE. I WAS VERY HAPPY.

Forrest Bess
San Antonio-1948

|||||
UNITS OF TIME

TO MAKE JOURNEY
TO TRAVEL



TO CUT



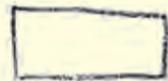
SHALLOW CUT



DEEP CUT



TO STRETCH



CONTAINER



HOLE



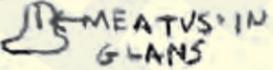
HOLE GETS LARGER



DROP



BELL-GLANS



MEATUS IN
GLANS
CRACKED BELL

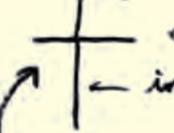


CHURCH
RECTILINEAR
PREPUCE
CORONA



CURVILINEAR

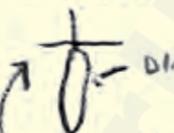
penis



testicles

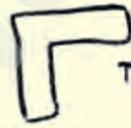
inner within

DEATH



DILATED

TAU SIGN OF LIFE
HELD BY USIRIS



TWO SIDED
SQUARE



THIGH AND
CALF

DIONYSUS WAS AIDEN
IN THE LEFT OF THE THIGH
OF ZEUS. "BOOK OF THE DEAD
OF EGYPT" ON THOU THIGH
THAT LIVES IN THE HIGHEST
PART OF HEAVEN THAT DIEST NOT

RED = MALE
WHITE = FEMALE
GREEN = YOUNG
YELLOW = LIGHT
RED PLUS WHITE = HERMAPHRODITE



NEW
MOON



FULL
MOON -
SET -
WEST



MOON -
RISE
EAST

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN GOD
OF PLEASURE

"BES" (BAS)

MAN WOMAN



BRONZE
DWARF

UROBOROS

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Pages from a journal that Bess kept by his bedside



And all of the Things I have forgotten, 1953

Taking a cue from the Aborigines, Bess had apparently started the subincision procedure, but had stopped short, perhaps in shock, and was left with a glans penis incision known as a hypospadias. The “second incision in the perineum,” he refers to was where the subincision would have ended. In effect, he now had the beginning and end of a subincision. Bess’s self-surgery was done in a state of euphoria that seemed revelatory, but within weeks the old shadow of mental illness began to haunt him and he took his family doctor’s advice and went to see a psychiatrist in Houston. Ironically, Bess had asked his doctor for a “Jungian” psychiatrist, but instead was given a “young” psychiatrist by the name of Jackson Smith. Smith knew nothing of Jung’s theories, so Bess spent most of the session detailing the process of individuation and how it related to the integration of his paintings, and as Bess remembers it, Smith became “lost and confused.” When Smith asked about the cuts in his penis, Bess lied and said that he had gotten a fishhook caught there, and was “only trying to extract the hook.” Smith then concluded that Bess’s brush with insanity was “trauma from the experience,” and pronounced Bess “cured.” When Smith suggested that Bess could take care of his \$90 fee by giving him a painting, Bess told him that he wasn’t ready to own one, and paid in cash. Two weeks later, Bess was back at Chinquapin, trawling for bait shrimp by day and continuing his “research” at night. His initial flirtation with becoming a pseudo-hermaphrodite had only just begun.

“THE RAZOR BLADE SLIPPED
FROM MY HAND
AND I WAS KNOCKED ON THE
FLOOR.”

F.B.



Photo of Bess's self-inflicted hypospadias

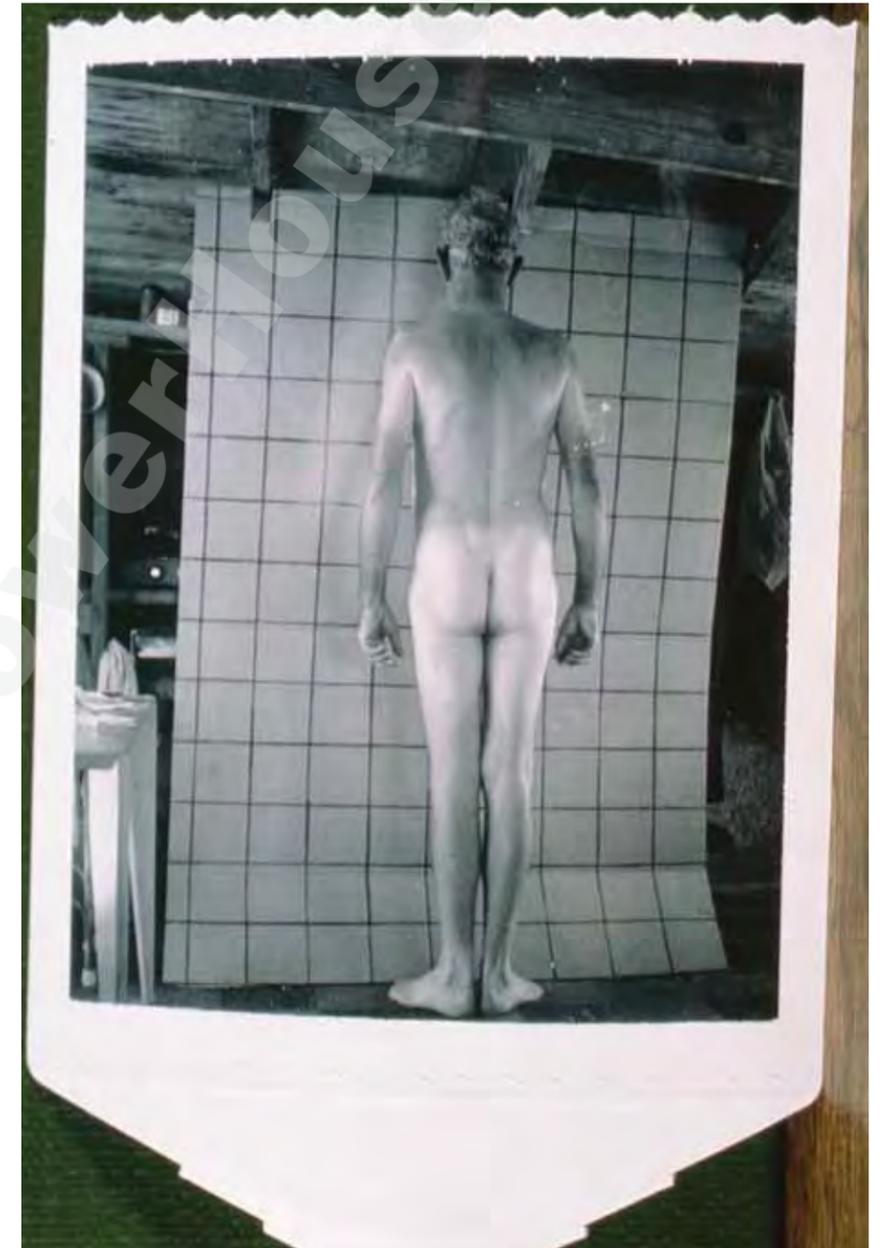


Before Man, 1952-53

Ready to prove to the world that his “Thesis” was correct and that pseudo-hermaphroditism could in fact lead to immortality, Bess took “before” Polaroids of himself that are eerily similar to the Chinese convict photos. As he explained to Meyer Schapiro, “I need photographs showing my bald head, gray hair, pot belly and then a few months after to see if I am on the right path or if this is sexual perversion only.”

He took them with a Polaroid, and somebody said, “Well how did you focus on yourself?” And Forrest said, “Well, I hung a spark plug from the ceiling on a string and I focused on the spark plug, then I went over and stood where the spark plug was.” So that was his camera technique.

—Roy Fridge, artist



Three self-portrait Polaroids by Forrest Bess



Untitled, 1959

REACTION

“WHAT YOU HAVE FOUND IS NOT UNIQUE.
IT HAS BEEN FOUND POSSIBLY ONCE
A CENTURY FROM THE BEGINNING
OF TIME. IT INVARIABLY LEAVES THE
INDIVIDUAL WITH THE FEELING THAT HE
HAS MADE THE GREAT DISCOVERY.”

— Carl Jung,
Letter to Forrest Bess, 1953

Bess was disappointed that Parsons wouldn't show his "Thesis," but by 1958 he had already become accustomed to being rejected. After it was completed in 1954, Bess had sent his "Thesis" to scores of psychologists, doctors, and scholars who he thought might be able to understand it and help him share his discovery. The list of people who received the "Thesis" or correspondence from Bess regarding his discoveries included President Eisenhower, Bruno Bettelheim, Frances G. Wickes, and Carl Jung himself. Jung not only received the "Thesis" but he also received a painting (an earlier version of No. 11A, 1958), and frequent updates and "corrections" regarding the theory:

6 February 1954

Dear Dr. Jung,

The unconscious has made a correction which I believe will be of importance to you. The conscious question was: could the perineum actually be the site of the "door" of the alchemists, since their drawings depict their aiming at the base of the key? ...Forgive me for having to write to you again.

Sincerely Yours,
Forrest Bess

Whether or not Jung read every letter, he was familiar enough with Bess's hermaphrodite theory to finally reply: "What you have found is not unique. It has been found possibly once a century from the beginning of time. It invariably leaves the individual with the feeling that he has made The Great Discovery. Let us return to the safe basis of facts." Rather than heed Jung's advice, and return to the "safe basis of facts," Bess was encouraged by Jung's response, and frequently re-quoted the letter as evidence that he was on to something. Naturally, Meyer Schapiro was one of the first to learn of Jung's reaction to the "Thesis." Since the "Ballet" letters began in 1952, Bess had shared every development with Schapiro, and while Schapiro had occasionally responded politely, he had refrained from giving Bess an explicit opinion on the matter. By 1959, Bess was desperate to hear what his "teacher" had to say:

September, 1959

Dear Meyer,

I will admit that I am all of the things people say I am - I am stupid, I am naive (and I can't spell), I can't write, and I "Really must be a character, personally," quoting Art News. However, in spite of all these 'deficiencies,' I honestly believe that the thesis I have presented to you is the key to understanding, not only art, but all manifestations of the unconscious. I am also a fanatic, according to Jung's Practice of Psychotherapy, because when he states that it is impossible, I say it is Possible!

I take your word for it that you will give me an opinion?
You ask about the opinion of others -

Dr. Charles Shultz, local doctor - thesis shelved for two weeks -
"Psychology has no place in science."

W. McNeil Lowry, Ford Foundation - "Very interesting - more related to medicine and cultural anthropology than the visual arts." Here I am at complete disagreement.

Betty Parsons - "No, I cannot hang your thesis. Better hang it in a small hospital lobby."

Chambliss, thug, member of a rough gang in Houston - "You mean I can get a piece of pussy without knocking up the gal? I'm for it!"

Michael Oheeron, Urologist - "Publish it first in popular form then in medical form. I am anxious to have a copy of it. If Jung thinks the scrotum cannot be divided than he is mistaken."

Dr. H. H. Matthes, local doctor. "Your english is very bad. I read it on a rainy day. And besides, we would have to get permission to perform such an operation."

Jim Mousner - Houston Post art reporter - "I don't quite understand the theory. I want to come down with a colored camera and do an article on you. De Kooning is getting too much publicity."

Kenneth Sherrer, drag-line operator - "If you ever decide to cut yourself let me help you."

J. Knable, peanut grower, "The idea will possibly be more acceptable to future generations than it is to us."

Dr. Cauldwell, Sexology magazine - "A new form of homosexuality"

Bob Smith, millionaire, "You're Nuts!"

Jim Love, sculptor, "Do you think it will work? May I bring down a friend to talk with you?"

Skeeter Birkner, bricklayer - "When do you think this will become acceptable?"

answer - "When a friend of mine in New York becomes convinced that I am on the right path!"

Sincerely Yours
Forrest

A few months later, Bess's most admired "teacher," Meyer Schapiro, finally responded:

Dear Forrest,

I have read your text several times together with the excerpted material from books and magazines, and I have studied the illustrations with some care.

There are two main points in question. One is physiological: the effects of the dilation of the bulbous section of the urethra and the return of semen through the urethral tract. The other concerns ancient beliefs on these matters as evidenced in works of art, religious thought, and alchemists writings.

On the first point, as I have written you in the past, I have no opinion. Only a medical specialist or physiologist could pronounce on the idea, and on the significance of your own experiments. Here, I am only an ignorant layman.

On the second point, I think that you force the evidence and depend too largely on analogies or vague resemblances. Though you refer often to the alchemists, as if they were interested in just such physiological processes and details as you mention, nowhere do you quote from the vast alchemical literature a single passage that confirms your point. Nothing that you cite from the alchemists and none of their diagrams in your rich body of illustrations shows that they identified the vas hermetica with the bulbous section of the urethra or regarded the latter's dilation as a means of regenerating the individual.

I'm sure that the same objection would be raised by other scholars who read your text. In all this, I do not question your own experiences. But, as I have said before, these can only be judged by medical people who are at home in just this part of physiology.

I'm sorry to write what must be to you a disappointing judgment; I hope you will take it as a sincere statement from a friend who is devoted to you.

Cordially,
Meyer

This letter marked a dramatic cooling of Bess's relationship to Schapiro; the number of letters he sent to Schapiro dropped from an average of one a month to several per year. But Schapiro's rejection didn't have any long-term affect on Bess's own faith in the theory. He continued to share the "Thesis" with friends, acquaintances, and anyone else he could trust. Below is a sample of personal reactions from individuals who read or discussed the thesis with Bess in person.

He would just go on expansively on the hermaphroditic thing. I never heard of these kind of things before, but he was just so happy to share it with you, and so excited about it. About what he said, and what Jung said, and about how the Indians would pierce their penis, and it was their way of birth control, and this was also his big thing—the unification of the male-female within one person. That was something pretty new to me.

—Gertrude Barnstone, sculptor

It had to do with an operation, and he said, “The next time you see some of your male friends, ask them to look under their penis, near the base of the penis, and see if there isn’t a demarcation that is natural.” And I spoke to two guys about it, and in their own privacy they looked. And one of them said he couldn’t find anything, and the other one said “Yes” he did. In the meantime, I looked on myself, and I did find it. And it was right where he said, and he said this was where they were to do an operation. And the operation was to open the urethra at that point so that men could work together on a sex act, except he didn’t seem to indicate that it was a sex act, and the one would be penetrated through that opening that had been operated on, and the other one, who was not operated on, would be fertile, and his semen would go into the other one, and that would give the one was receiving it extra strength, power. In other words, creating a kind of “superman.” And personally, I thought it was an amusing idea.

—Hank Pearson, artist

He showed me books of a hermaphrodite, we looked at books, he had several pictures. He was intrigued with it. I didn’t know if he was, say, coming out of the closet, I didn’t know if he wanted my reaction, I didn’t know if it was something that he wanted to tell me to make himself feel better; I never, ever figured it out. You didn’t feel to secure when he’d start talking about things like this, but yet, it was intriguing enough to sit there and listen to it.

—Gerald Ludwig, fisherman

The subincision was what truly intrigued Mr. Bess. Do you know what subincision is? All right, the subincision is—instead of just cutting off the foreskin, which is circumcision—the penis is lifted up and slit from the base all the way to the tip where the urethral tube is, so that it flattens out. It is said, so I’ve read, that in some tribes that was done to an elite group of people only, who the ladies then sought after greatly because they could have intercourse with a lessened frequency of getting pregnant... They did it as a sort of totemic allegiance to the kangaroo which has a split penis.

—Dr. John Money, professor, Johns Hopkins University



TOP: *Wheatfield*, 1951 BOTTOM: *It Fits*, 1955

THE END (1974 - 1977)



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The San Antonio State Mental Hospital is a pleasant enough looking place. A wide, tree-lined driveway leads to a cluster of dorm-like buildings that look more like a campus than a lock-down for the mentally ill. It hasn't changed much since April 30, 1974, when Forrest Bess arrived here against his will. The first psychologist to see Bess saw an emaciated 62 year-old man in a disheveled state suffering the tremors of alcohol withdrawal. The psychologist asked Bess what he did for a living, and when Bess replied that he was a well-known painter with a gallery in New York, and paintings in collections all over the country, the psychologist quietly wrote, "suffers from paranoid-delusions" in his notebook. Another employee of the mental hospital was intrigued and tried to verify what Bess had said. Within a few days, Jock Truman sent a letter to the hospital stating, "We have represented Forrest Bess for over 25 years and consider him an outstanding artist." The first psychologist was removed from the case, and Bess received an apology, but he still wasn't able to go home.

According to Bess's file at the San Antonio hospital, the "precipitating factors" leading to his committal were:

On February 6, 1974, the City Police received complaints from the neighbors that Mr. Bess was nude. The day the officers went to the house, Mr. Bess was nude from the waist down. On February 22 another visit for the same reason was made. At this time, Mr. Bess complained of seeing bright lights and devils at night. On March 12, 1974 the neighbors again complained of noises from the Bess residence. April 3, 1974 complaints were received that Mr. Bess was begging for money. On April 7, Mr. Bess reported nude on his front porch. On April 26, Mr. Bess was in the courthouse making weird accusations about the employees. On April 28 he was removed from his neighbor's porch for being nude.

Finally, on the evening of April 30, 1974, Bess was arrested for "indecent behavior." Bess's younger brother, Milton, a soft-spoken petroleum engineer, remembers receiving a call from the Matagorda County Sheriff's office. The Sheriff told Milton that if he didn't consent to have his brother sent to a mental hospital, then they would formally charge Forrest, and keep him in jail. Without much of a choice, Milton consented and became the "informant" for Forrest's committal to San Antonio. The following letter to Meyer Schapiro captures Bess's shock and confusion after being committed:

June 12th, 1974

Dear Meyer and Lillian,

It has been so very long since I last heard from you. Much has happened. For some reason not yet explained to me, I was thrown in jail in Bay City and then brought to this mental hospital here in San Antonio. My brother Milton, I believe, is responsible for these actions. He has always believed that the Fuqua side of the family (that is my mother's side) had a strain of insanity. He also must

have heard of my changing my will to my estate. He has been here once to see me and brought some oil paints and pastels. I am due to be released on June 19th, or transferred to the Veteran's Hospital in Waco. I want to go back to Bay City and paint. Mr. James Harithas has promised me a show first at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York for the month of November then later in Houston at the Contemporary Arts Museum. The date for this show has not been set. I saw a letter from Mr. Bernard J Reis of the Mark Rothko Foundation to Miss Ann Felton, a social worker here in this hospital. It said in effect that you were responsible for my getting the grant* (which I knew and greatly appreciated).

My brother has cut off my rent house that brought me \$45 a month. He doesn't like art or artists. He considers them homosexuals. I think he is a bit jealous of me being listed in "Who's Who in America," "Who's Who in American Art" (I saw this write-up for the first time yesterday in the hospital library here), and I am listed in the Dictionary of International Biography - out of London...

My grandmother Laura Fuqua Ferrell died in this hospital in 1911 the year I was born. Her paintings were destroyed by her husband, (my grandfather) Samuel Farrell and their oldest son, Walter Ferrell. She saw visions by looking into a rain barrel. I have tried to locate some of her work but so far no luck. My mother, Minta Lee Ferrell was also an artist. I have kept some of her work - a collage with roses surrounding a butterfly and a stout oak tree...

The grounds (rolling) are beautiful but littered with paper and cigarette butts. It is a huge installation and now I know where my state tax goes, and I am proud of my small contribution of taxes.

The mesquite trees are not unlike the olive trees of Italy and Spain. I have found one that reminds me so much of Pan: body and arms turning into branches and leaves. I have a charcoal started then will do a pastel, then on to an oil. "The Miracle of Ward 2." Gosh I hope I can go home and get to work. I have several visions to paint. Please write...

Affectionately,
Forrest

P.S. I studied Greek Art under Dr. Battle. He often stated that Austin and San Antonio reminded him of Greece without the water. Some of the work of the past patients is very beautiful. The Art Dept. gave me a collage made with sequins. It is superior.

Meyer - what Greek was turned into a tree?

* \$125 per month from the Mark Rothko Foundation

FORREST BESS: THE KEY TO THE RIDDLE

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