

## ***FORREST BESS: SEEING THINGS INVISIBLE***

**On view at the Menil April 19 – August 18, 2013**

**Public Preview & Wine Reception: Thursday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 7–9 PM**



HOUSTON, TX, February 12, 2013 — A singular figure in American art who experienced significant recognition and painful isolation during his life – and whose fame has waxed and waned since his death – Forrest Bess (1911-77) has recently become the subject of keen new interest. At the 2012 Whitney Biennial, one of the most provocative projects was an exhibition curated by sculptor Robert Gober, titled *The Man That Got Away*, which illuminated some of the most disturbing aspects of Bess's art and life.

The first museum retrospective devoted to Bess in more than twenty years, ***Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible*** will present 48 of the artist's visionary paintings, dating from 1946 to 1970. This Menil exhibition will also include an expanded version of the Robert Gober installation. Works in the exhibition will come from the Menil's own holdings, private lenders in the United States and Europe, and major institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Curated by Assistant Curator Clare Elliott, ***Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible*** will be on view at the Menil from April 19 through August 18, 2013.

Menil Director Josef Helfenstein stated: "Forrest Bess has always been associated with Houston, where he lived at the beginning of his career and where the Contemporary Arts Museum, enabled by John and Dominique de Menil, became one of the first institutions to exhibit his work. The Menil is particularly suited to undertake this first retrospective in decades because of our founders' prescience in collecting Bess's paintings, and also because of the ongoing ties between the Menil and the contemporary artists who have led the way in renewing interest in his work."

Born in Bay City, Texas, the son of a housewife and an oil-field roughneck, Forrest Bess taught himself to paint by copying illustrations in books and magazines, and later by imitating the still-life and landscape paintings of artists he admired, including Vincent van Gogh and Albert

Pinkham Ryder. From early childhood he experienced intense hallucinations that frightened but also intrigued him. He was also aware of being sexually different, and at Texas A&M University and the University of Texas he plunged into the study of literature, psychology, anthropology, mathematics, comparative religion, and philosophy, searching to understand his sexual identity and his place in the world. A severe beating he endured while serving in the military during World War II—the outcome of his revealing his homosexuality to a fellow enlistee—led to a physical and psychological breakdown. On the advice of an Army psychiatrist, Bess resumed painting in 1946, recording his visions as a form of therapy.

For the next twenty years, having returned to his family's bait-fish camp outside of Bay City, Bess eked out a meager living by fishing. By night and during the off-season, however, he read, wrote, and painted prolifically, creating an extraordinary body of mostly small-scale canvases rich with enigmatic symbolism. Despite his isolation in Bay City, Bess was taken up by the prominent New York art dealer Betty Parsons, who gave him six solo exhibitions between 1949 and 1967. Bess also won the support of the distinguished art historian Meyer Schapiro, with whom he carried on an extensive correspondence. Bess's work was also exhibited at Houston's André Emmerich Gallery (1958) and the Contemporary Arts Museum (1962), but there was no major museum exhibition until after his death, when the Whitney presented a retrospective in 1981.

During his lifetime Bess never achieved his dream of exhibiting his paintings along with the sketches, writings, and historical and medical texts – which altogether he referred to as his “thesis.” As Bess became more immersed in exploring the symbolism of his visions, Robert Gober explains, “he also became increasingly preoccupied with the idea of uniting the male and female within himself.... Bess's long obsession with his thesis... convinced him that the male and female could in fact be united, and in the mid-1950s he made the decision to use his own body to prove it. With the fortification of alcohol, Bess performed at least two operations on his genitals that turned him into a self-described pseudo-hermaphrodite.” Gober's installation, *The Man That Got Away*, which brings together a selection of Bess's artwork and writings and photographs of the artist, is the first attempt to present the “thesis” and acknowledge its realization in Bess's own body.

Said exhibition curator Clare Elliott: “Forrest Bess committed himself to his visionary paintings as a scientific and philosophical inquiry, convinced that by ‘integrating’ their abstract, mythic images, he would reveal the ‘universal unconscious’ of memories and experiences that reside in humanity's subconscious. In terms of style and their creator's fascination with Jungian psychology, his paintings can be compared with those of artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, with whom he shared a New York City art gallery in the early 1950s. But Bess stood apart from the Abstract Expressionists. Whereas they valued the large, spontaneous gesture, he was determined to reproduce the mystical symbols that came to him in his visions.”

***Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible*** will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue featuring essays by Clare Elliott and Robert Gober. The exhibition will travel to the Hammer Museum from September 29, 2013 – January 5, 2014, to the Neuberger Museum of Art from

February 16 – May 11, 2014, and to the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive from June 11 – September 14, 2014.

### **About The Menil Collection**

Considered one of the most important privately assembled collections of the twentieth century, the Menil Collection opened officially on June 4, 1987, and is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. The Menil's holdings, ranging from the prehistoric to art of the present day, are housed in a modern landmark designed by the renowned architect Renzo Piano. In the quarter-century since it opened to the public, the Menil has established an international reputation for presenting acclaimed exhibitions and producing many highly respected scholarly publications; pioneering partnerships with other cultural and education institutions across Houston, Texas and the United States; and conducting groundbreaking research into the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The Menil charges no admission fees.

### **Public Programs**

#### **Wednesday, April 24, 2013, 8:00 p.m.**

Panel Discussion: *Aspects of Forrest Bess*

With David Aylsworth, Terrell James, Susie Kalil, and Jenni Sorkin. Clare Elliott, moderator

In conjunction with the exhibition ***Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible***, Menil Assistant Curator Clare Elliott, who organized the exhibition, will introduce and moderate a discussion about Bess's life and paintings with artists David Aylsworth and Terrell James, and art historians Susie Kalil and Jenni Sorkin.

#### **Sunday, May 5, 2013, 3:00 p.m.**

The Artist's Eye – Christopher Cascio on Forrest Bess

#### **Wednesday, May 29, 2013, 8:00 p.m.**

Lecture: John Yau Forrest Bess

John Yau first wrote about Forrest Bess in the 1980s and remains fascinated by the artist's work. Yau is a poet, fiction writer, and critic, and his latest books include *Further Adventures in Monochrome* and *A Thing Among Things: The Art of Jasper Johns*. In addition to being the editor of the web magazine *Hyperallergic Weekend*, he teaches at Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University).

Image caption: Forrest Bess, *The Hermaphrodite*, 1957. Oil on canvas, The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of John Wilcox in memory of Frank Owen Wilson. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

### **Contact:**

Vance Muse or Gretchen Sammons

Menil Press Office

713 535 3170

[press@menil.org](mailto:press@menil.org)

[www.menil.org](http://www.menil.org)