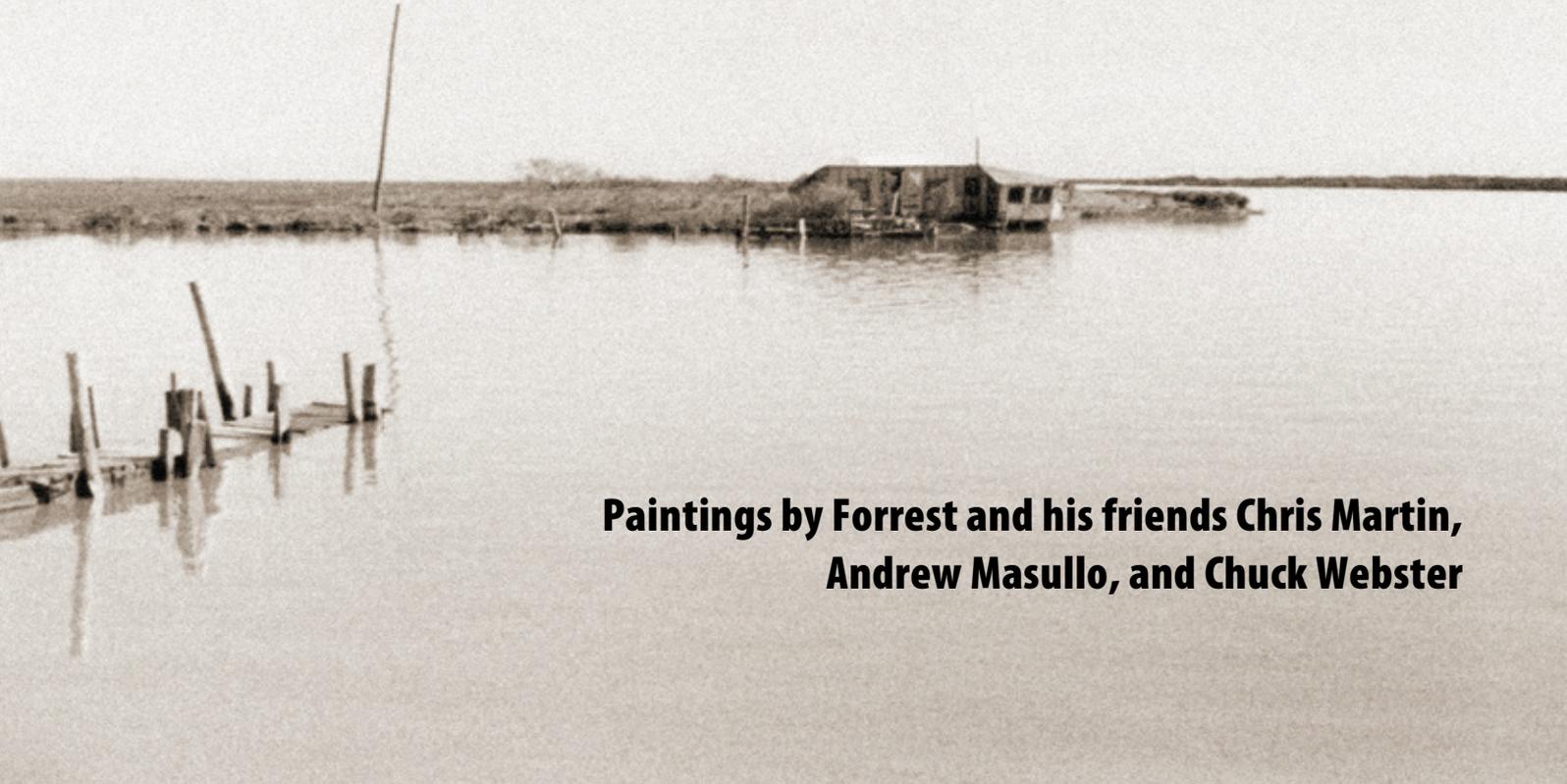


Forrest Bess: 100 years

IN CELEBRATION OF FORREST BESS' CENTENNIAL



**Paintings by Forrest and his friends Chris Martin,
Andrew Masullo, and Chuck Webster**

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In celebration of Forrest Bess' centennial

Paintings by Forrest and his friends
Chris Martin, Andrew Masullo, and Chuck Webster

October 1–22, 2011

Kirk Hopper Fine Art
3008 Commerce Street
Dallas, Texas

www.kirkhopperfineart.com

For more info on Forrest Bess, see www.forrestbess.org

Introduction by Susie Kalil

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orrest Bess' own words set the stage for this wryly beautiful, richly poetic show: "I close my eyes and paint what I see on the insides of my eyelids." In celebration of the centennial of Bess (1911–1977), Kirk Hopper Fine Art brings together a collection of the artist's visionary paintings—small baffling images unequivocally derived from his inner being, from dreams and a private symbolism based on obscure sexual references. To Bess, these "ideograms" conveyed universal meaning transmitted through the subconscious. He became obsessed with investigating the mystery of this language, believing the symbology held a key to the secret of eternal life.

Bess' oddly poignant works of crude abstract shapes were inspired by the land and sea he encountered daily while fishing for a meager livelihood. Bess' house, a ramshackle barge turned upside down and covered with tar and shells, was located on a spit of land reachable only by boat on the Intercoastal Waterway some 20 miles from Bay City on the southeastern Texas coast. The Gulf held an almost mystical attraction for Bess. In correspondence to Betty Parsons, his art dealer in New York, Bess consistently peppered his views regarding primitive symbolism and hermaphroditism with reports of the environment. Living conditions were rugged for the artist who died poverty stricken. His visions—raw, intuitive expressions of a time and place—are more prodigious than his reputation has yet acknowledged.

Bess' paintings are unabashedly romantic and reverberate with psychological intensity. All of the works have the potential to release certain feelings with which viewers can personally associate. The highly charged, enigmatic landscapes are more than mere impressions of what has been seen or remembered; they suggest and require significant and symbolic thinking. We are encouraged to translate and examine closely their haunting images and perceptual gambits, but are kept at arm's length from fixed interpretations of meaning and message. Their directness and authenticity, idiosyncratic symbolism—both personal and universal—and expressive paint surfaces, are revered by another generation of artists whose works also resonate in the gap between broad cultural memory and personal narrative.



Catalog essay for retrospective at Betty Parsons Gallery

By Meyer Schapiro

January 1962

Forrest Bess is that kind of artist rare at any time, a real visionary painter. He is not inspired by texts of poetry or religion, but by a strange significance in what he alone has seen. He also paints what he imagines and is faithful to its character as the imagined. It may be the heavens or the ocean, but the picture is small, true to the size of the image in his head, and a unique picture, never repeating or rearranging an already achieved view. This painted image is perfectly clear like a printed emblem or sign. Skill, power of rendering, the delights of spontaneity of the hand, do not tempt him; the handling is straightforward like the simple forms, soberly objective, without trace of the exaltation that comes with experience of a sought-for hidden sign. So plain and frank is the painting, so much like the un moulded strips of weathered wood with which he frames his pictures, that it seems at first sight the work of a self-taught civilized primitive with limited skill.

But look at his wonderful blacks, of many nuances: granular, matt, shiny and rough, and you will recognize his knowledge and discipline, his mastery of an exacting technique. The placing of the few elements has a natural sureness and is sometimes of a startling compositional wit. Colors and forms inhere together like the qualities in an object from nature, captivating in their coarse substance.

These grave little pictures, so broad and firm in conception, have held up over the years. They have kept their first impact of mystery and that air of secret insight symbolized for the painter by the objects and the enigmatic object-like forms. We cannot read them as the author does; but, undeciphered, we feel the beauty and completeness of his art.

◀ *Untitled, oil on canvas, 9" x 12", 1957*



▲ *Bess at his family's camp at Chinquapin, near Bay City*



▲ *Untitled from Mexican series, block print, 5" x 7"; c. 1930*

In 1934, Bess made the first of his periodic trips to Mexico, where he lived on \$10 a month and watched the renowned Mexican muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera at work.



▲ *"Night in Taxco, GTO" from Mexican series, block print, 5" x 7"; c. 1930*

Bess dropped out in his junior year in college and went to Mexico, where he remained intermittently for four years, painting in an expressionist style with thickly impastoed paint and dark colors.



▲ "I Can See Through Myself," oil on canvas, 22" x 23", 1946

Bess derived his images from dreams and from a private symbolism based on obscure sexual references.



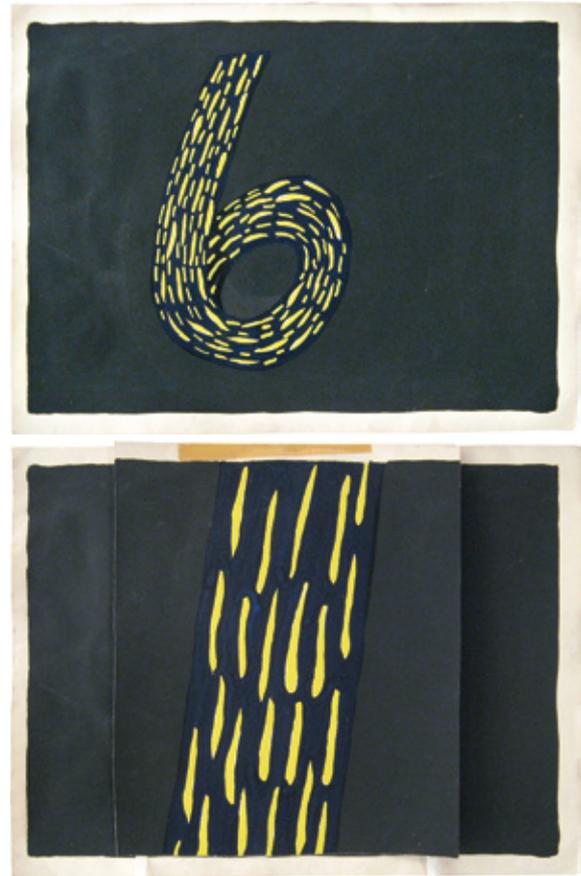
▲ Untitled, oil on canvas, 9" x 12", 1950

"God I can remember," he wrote, "hours—days months and years spent sitting at an easel staring at a blank canvas—trying to be successful—criticizing my own efforts—aping this master or that master. Thinking their thoughts. Hiding from myself through fear, that source which was pounding for recognition within my own being. And then when I relaxed from the effort I was aware that here it was."

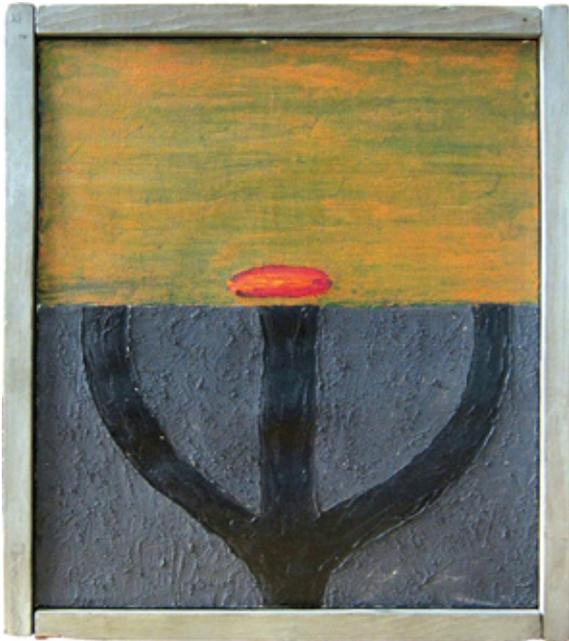


▲ "#1," oil on panel, 8.75" x 8.75", 1951

Bess felt himself merely a conduit, claiming not to know at times what his images meant until years later. "I do not feel responsible for my work," Bess wrote in 1951. "I was only a conduit through which this thing, whatever it was, flowed. . . . I have copied [my dreams] faithfully without elaboration."



▲ Untitled, gouache on paper in two parts, 9" x 11.75", 1951



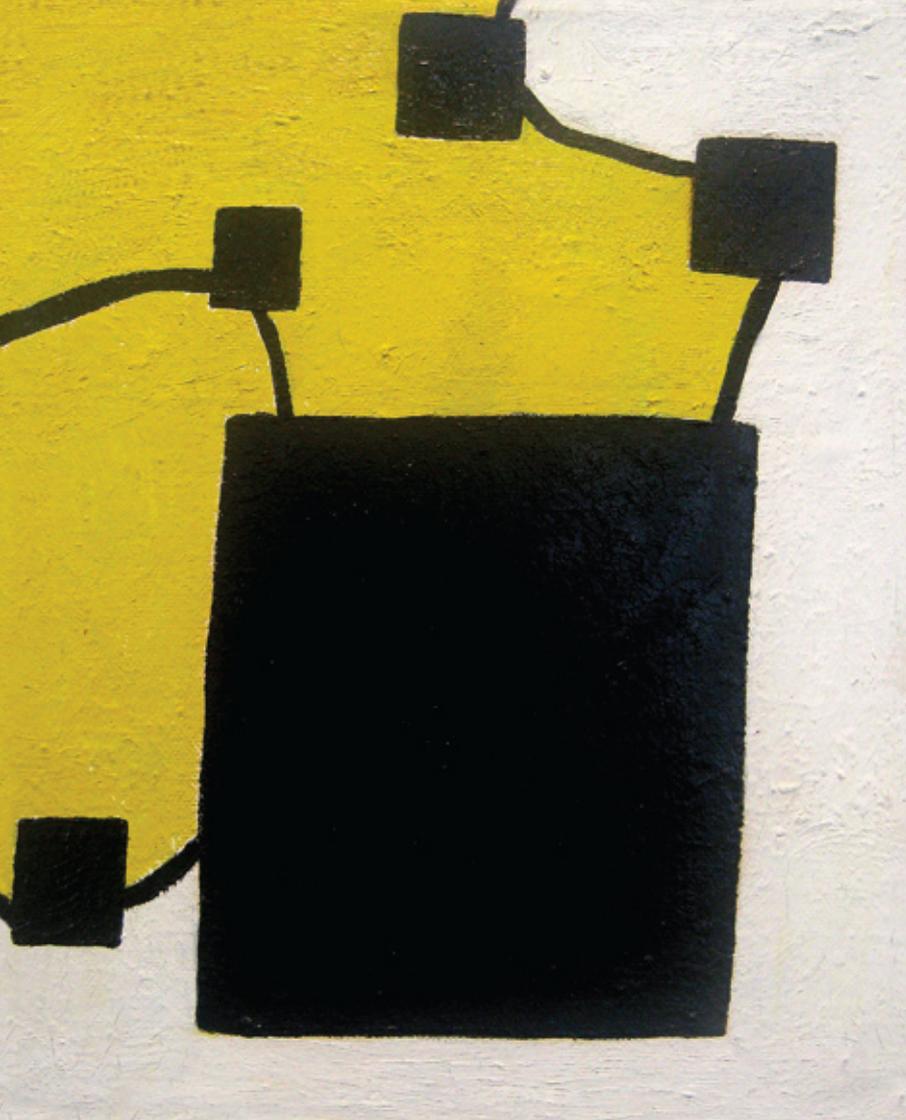
▲ "Tree of Life," oil on canvas, 16" x 13", 1953

Bess would change the title of this painting to "Sign of the Hermaphrodite" when turned on its side.



▲ *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 9" x 12", 1957

Eventually he concluded that this shared symbology held the key to the alchemists' quest for eternal life.



Andrew Masullo

Andrew Masullo (born 1957) currently lives and works in San Francisco. His small-scale Playskool colored compositions are exuberant, insouciant things full of textured wiggles and tipsy geometry that thrash and tumble with infectious energy. Crisp lines and scallop shapes alternate with grids and stripes in snappy, high-key hues, achieving a quirky balance, an undeniable humility.

◀ "4551," oil on canvas, 10" x 8", 2006–07

Notes on Forrest Bess by Andrew Masullo

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orrest Bess taught me how to paint. I was very young and impressionable when I first encountered Forrest at his Whitney Museum retrospective in 1981. Walking into that exhibit for the first time and seeing his small paintings scattered across the walls gave me an honest-to-goodness jolt, the kind I've never experienced before or since. Thunderous! His paintings felt foreign to me and yet strangely familiar. My connection with them was immediate and very personal. I never knew paintings could look the way his looked and never knew paintings could make me feel the way his did. I made many pilgrimages to the Whitney during the run of that show to pour my eyes over them, sit around and shoot the breeze with them, cry and die over them.

The way I think about painting—the personhood of a painting, the soul of a painting—stems directly from my relationship with Forrest. He showed me that a painting small in size can be monumental in every way that matters. He showed me that a painting made with a tube or two of paint, a paintbrush, and a scrap of canvas can triumph over those pyrotechnic concoctions that I see so often in the galleries. Forrest Bess gave me the confidence to listen to my own self and shut out the sideshow that is forever rumbling beyond the four walls of my canvas.



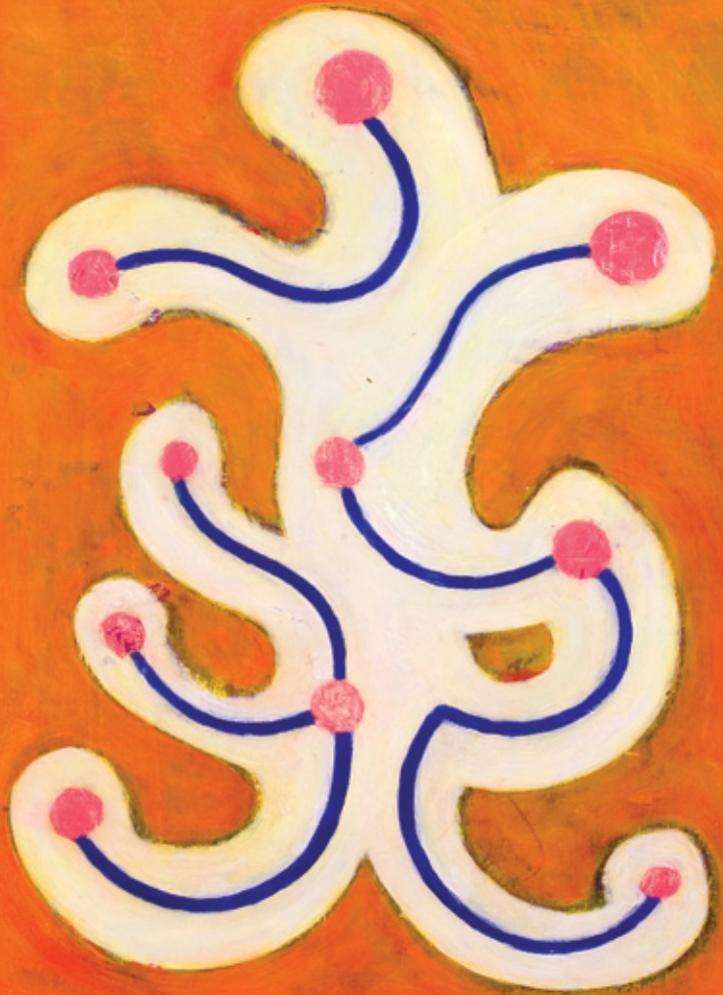
◀ *Bess' studio in the camp at Chinquapin*



Chris Martin

Chris Martin (born 1954) lives and works in Brooklyn, N.Y. His compulsive paintings are playful, unpredictable encounters of the world around him, combining found objects and collage in abstract geometries and bold rhythmic patterns. Martin's small abstractions serve as investigations in color, form and texture—some thick and lumpy, others painted with spare restraint indicative of an unstable, constantly shifting internal landscape. *Chris Martin: Painting Big*, a three-part exhibition (and Martin's first museum solo) opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. in June.

◀ *Untitled, oil and gesso on paper, 14.5" x 9", 1987*



Chuck Webster

Chuck Webster (born 1970) lives and works in Brooklyn, N.Y. His modest, emblematic and biomorphic abstractions—clustered pods or loopy tongue shapes, leaf, mound and gourd forms, as well as blobby anthropomorphic heads and limbs—are characterized by buoyant, luminous hues. Painterly surfaces have been built up, sanded and burnished to a waxy sheen.

◀ *"Science Fair," oil on panel, 16" x 12", 2009*

The Wounded Brush by Daphne Merkin



The first time I saw a painting of Forrest Bess more than two decades ago—I believe it was part of a small exhibit at a gallery on the Upper East Side and that the main event was a show of Marsden Hartley’s work, but I could be misremembering—I was electrified, almost as if the daubs on the canvas had a tensile strength all their own that pulled me in. There was something about the intensity of Bess’ style—the thick and uneven application of color, the almost child-like rendition of imagery, the palpable aura of anxiety—that spoke to me on a level that bypassed the usual niceties of discourse. I felt as if my subconscious were being met by Bess’ subconscious, somewhere before the collective muck of socialization started up, before the super-ego began doing its work of repression and sublimation. We were meeting in a place that was kept hidden from most onlookers, one where primal conflicts about identity were allowed their say without a premature rush to judgment.

My curiosity about Bess has stayed with me since that day but although I have read up on his biography as well as some of the available criticism about his work there is something that remains elusive about him. Perhaps it has to do with his essential “outsiderness,” the way he lived so entirely on his own and by his own peculiar lights despite communications with people like Betty Parsons, Lincoln Kirstein and Meyer Schapiro. Although he was capable of friendship with both adults and children, Bess was in some sense the quintessential artist-as-loner, someone who looked to books and his own inner life for companionship. One might describe him as a small-town eccentric, as some critics have. Or one might think of him as he thought of himself, as that rarest of creatures, one we of secular faith tend to raise a bemused eyebrow at—a bona fide visionary, straight out of a poem by Blake or a novel by Dostoyevsky. “My painting is tomorrow’s painting,” Bess wrote in 1962. “Watch and see.”

Forrest Bess was born in Bay City, Texas, in 1911 and already as a young boy experienced visions. He started drawing at the age of seven, mostly copying from an encyclopedia, and in 1924 took private lessons in drawing from a neighbor in Corsicana, Texas. In 1933, after attending Texas A&M College for two years and then studying architecture for a year at the University of Texas he went to work as a roughneck in the oil fields and continued to paint. He also made repeated trips to Mexico over the next six years, having fallen in love with both the land and the people. He had his first one-man exhibition in 1938 at the Witte Memorial Museum in San Antonio and was also

included in a group show at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. After an extended period of military service during World War II, he suffered a mental breakdown and later made use of his hallucinations in his painting. In 1947 he returned to Bay City and set up a commercial fishing and bait camp on Chinquapin Bay on the Intracoastal Waterway, living on a strip of land accessible only by boat.

Bess remained preoccupied by his personal symbolism and what it expressed of a more universal nature his whole life, going so far as to contact C. G. Jung and to correspond with psychologists and anthropologists. He felt himself to be divided between two personalities—one more rough-and-ready and one “somewhat effeminate,” as he himself described it—and eventually developed a somewhat loopy theory about the key to eternal life residing in the urethral orgasm of the pseudo-hermaphrodite. It was in support of this thesis that he kept a notebook of sketches, clippings and quotations—drawn from a wide range of sources that ranged from the Bible to Goethe—and underwent a series of surgical operations, some self-administered, in pursuit of hermaphroditic alteration. As early as 1949 he began showing at the Betty Parsons Gallery (he went on to have six solo shows with her) and during his lifetime his reputation as a painter steadily grew as did a certain interest in his ideas. He died of skin cancer at the age of 66, on November 11, 1977, in Bay Villa Nursing Home.

Forrest Bess was one of those fragile, eternally misplaced, primordially nostalgic souls who occasionally come to rest on this earth. He reminds me of the Consul in Malcolm Lowry’s great novel, *Under the Volcano*, who is “homesick for being homesick.” Although it is something of a commonplace to say that an artist paints out of a sense of psychic injury, I think in Bess’ case he painted out of an urgent need to restore an original apprehension of harmony. “Art is a search for beauty,” he wrote Betty Parsons in 1954, “but not a superficial beauty—a very deep longing for a uniting of lost parts.” According to Bess’ view, the paradigm for this lost wholeness had its basis in an imaginary period of androgyny, before the bifurcation of gender—of a distinct maleness versus a distinct femaleness—came into existence. The notion that this wholeness could be retrieved through an actual tinkering with sexual organs, such as Bess arranged for himself, seems like an inconceivably brutal assault on the self. Yet to write it off as mere pathology seems to me to be underselling the poignant radicalness of Bess’ vision, one which expresses in extreme, even purist form the yearning for unity that we all possess in our splintered, everyday lives.

“Among American Modernists,” writes John Yau in his excellent essay on the painter, “Bess belongs to the tradition which fights to reinvest symbols with meaning.” Because Bess believed that he was the carrier of the images he produced on canvas rather than their creator, his symbols seem to writhe and implode with a kinetic energy, one that promises to offset our own daily tensions and offer in their place a diagrammatic resolution of opposites. These are the scratches and squiggles of a holy innocent, a blessed misfit of a fisherman who saw things, in his own words, “otherwise than by ordinary sight” and thereby saw the world as it might be rather than how it is.

