

a. SQUIRE

Forrest Bess

Trees in Snow

16 November–11 January

Opening: Saturday 16th November, 4–8 pm

a. SQUIRE is proud to present a single canvas by Forrest Bess, *Trees in Snow* (1946), one of the artist's earliest surviving 'visionary' paintings. Belying its small scale, the work reveals the first glimmers of the abstract glyphs by which Bess is known and so marks a pivotal moment in his (re-)orientation toward the unconscious mind: a sign of the self-searching in paint to come. It has remained in the same family since the late '40s and is shown here for the first time since Bess's 1962 mid-career survey at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

In 1934, Forrest Bess experienced his first adulthood visions. Eidetic, unmooring, and often elusive, they set forth his imagery and thus recast him, in his word, as a "conduit". He showed oil renditions of them in his earliest solo exhibition, held in the lobby of the BayTex, a local Bay City hotel, in 1936. The cold reception drove him to abandon abstract forms in favour of a parallel figurative mode, and for the next five years he reverted to a conservative style after van Gogh and Vlaminck. The whereabouts of all the paintings from his initial visionary chapter are unknown; Bess later revealed to his gallerist, Betty Parsons, that he had destroyed the majority. Only one can be envisioned with any certainty, a 1935 canvas sketched in a letter to Dr. Raymond Piper of the Syracuse University philosophy department. The tiny diagram shows a formation of white, wishbone-shaped trees against a field of brown and blue, and is accompanied by the line, "this ~~tree~~ shape has been constant since about 1934".

When Bess de-sublimated his visionary source around 1946 following a complicated interlude in the camouflage unit of the US Corps of Engineers, the same tree symbol immediately appeared in a second work—the painting shown here. A primal landscape in striated white and yellow ochre, *Trees in Snow* conjures an unusually enigmatic place, even for Bess. Now the trees entwine in an intricate tangle of engraved lines, wild and tendril-like, a screen of Devonian saplings at once towering and microscopic. They make patterns of nature and survival, the understated horizontals beneath them forming ripples, or a mirage, a frontier or some kind of nether land. Every gesture encodes the invisible. Amid the blanketing snow, these wheat-coloured contours attest to the matter-of-factness of Bess's economic hand, his paradoxically delicate roughness, the impossible quietude of his images. He noted later on, "When Meyer Schapiro writes that [my] work is *roots of art—shoots of art* etc. but sparse—then he feels as I do when two lines compose a finished work for me. But I can't elaborate—I have no desire to do so."

Forrest Bess (b. 1911–d. 1977, Bay City, TX, USA) was an American artist-fisherman. He spent most of his adult years in the Texan wilds on the Gulf of Mexico, and meanwhile showed at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York between 1950 and 1967, becoming in the decades since the subject of a succession of curatorial re-examinations. In 2013, The Menil Collection, Houston, mounted the retrospective *Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible*, which later travelled to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY; and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. More recently, a European retrospective was organised by the Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany, in 2020, the publication for which is forthcoming (2025). *Forrest Bess: Trees in Snow* follows a large-scale survey of Bess's visionary works and parallel correspondences, *Forrest Bess: Out of the Blue*, at Camden Art Centre, London, in 2022–2023. Works by Bess are on view concurrently in the exhibition *Vital Signs: Artists and the Body* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Bess's paintings are held in many collections including those of The Art Institute of Chicago; the Dallas Museum of Art; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Menil Collection, Houston; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. A fragmented body of letters written by Bess to a sprawling array of correspondents in the fields of anthropology, art history, endocrinology, psychoanalysis, sexology, and urology, among others, is scattered throughout archives across the US and Europe.

a. SQUIRE

Work

Trees in Snow, 1946

Signed and dated in pencil, upper right recto

Oil and sgraffito on canvas

20.6 x 24.4 cm, 8 1/8 x 9 5/8 in

AS-BESSF-0002

After dinner - postroast and black coffee.

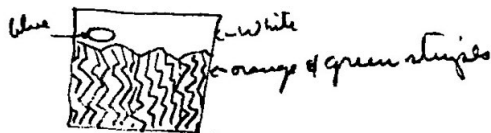
Back to our problem -

Question - where does the mind get the stuff to make up a pathological fantasy?

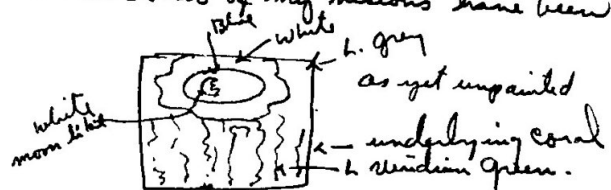
I have asked this question of myself often in trying to analyze my own work. Then when I worked in occupational therapy with psychos in the army I often asked this question. Things crop out unexpectedly that surprise and often confuse.

Psychiatry, I understand, doesn't give much credence to the inherited or ~~inherited~~ ^{collective} unconscious. Such is considered approaching the religious - mystic - occult.

I am interested in the point that one or two of my visions have been repeated. For example



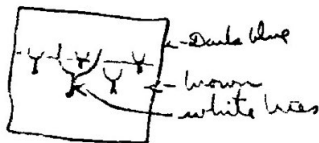
I called this Dedication to van Gogh.



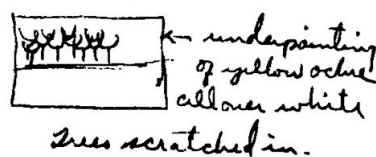
Here's the new version - Untitled

Another is "Trees" - this to shape has been constant since about 1934.

1st Canvas 1935



2nd Canvas



3rd Canvas unpainted



I am interested in this same form appearing yet in a different setting.

Parallel with the painting - for example when I go floundering I have a peculiar "feeling" or sense that a flounder is at such and such a place and is

Forrest Bess to Dr. Raymond Piper, undated, annotated 'Feb. 18?/49'. Raymond Piper Papers, Box 160, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University.