

FRIDERICIANVM



Kassel, January 31, 2020

Press Invitation: Forrest Bess at the Fridericianum

Forrest Bess

February 15 – May 3, 2020

Opening: Friday, February 14, 2020, 7 pm

Press Preview: Thursday, February 13, 2020, 11 am

Speakers:

Dr. Sabine Schormann, General Director of documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH
Moritz Wessler, Director of the Fridericianum

We look forward to your participation.

Please register under press@fridericianum.org

The Fridericianum presents the first exhibition of the work of American painter Forrest Bess in Germany for over thirty years.

The exhibition at the Fridericianum presents the remarkable and unusual work of Forrest Bess to a wider German audience for the first time since 1989. By featuring over seventy works from institutional and private collections, the artist's development is mapped from his early conventional, figurative formulations through to his so-called "visionary" paintings—the biomorphic abstractions—that make up the main body of his work. Furthermore, by exhibiting selected correspondence and other archival material, Bess's biography is carefully traced while at the same time providing a background to his art theoretical approaches, the handling of his homosexuality, and his theories of hermaphroditism. This insight into the life and work of an artist who has found a considerable



following among contemporary artists, such as Tomma Abts, James Benning, Robert Gober, Richard Hawkins, Henrik Olesen, and Amy Sillman, strongly highlights Bess's relevance to the present day.

Forrest Bess: Life and Work

The painter Forrest Bess, born in 1911 in Bay City, Texas, where he also died in 1977, is considered an outstanding yet little understood figure in American postwar art. Both his work and lifestyle conformed little to the conventions of the day. He thus led a rather secluded existence from the second half of the 1940s on the Gulf of Mexico where he worked as a catcher and seller of fish bait. During this time, Bess began to systematically produce small-format paintings which encapsulated "visions" that appeared to him on the threshold between waking and sleep. These works, which he exhibited fairly regularly from 1951, feature symbols, shapes, and spaces that are not clearly decipherable and which can be located in the field of biomorphic abstractions. For Bess, subconscious experiences and humanity's collective memory manifested themselves in these pictorial worlds. Accordingly, he pursued the exploration of his visions like an intense piece of research. He studied texts on mythology, art history, psychology, and sexual science that he articulated in countless records and correspondence without ever unravelling the mystery of his creativity. Over time he came to the conclusion that he could attain immortality by uniting the male and the female. In the 1950s this belief ultimately led to personal medical interventions on his own genitals, through which he tried to become a pseudo-hermaphrodite. For Bess artistic work was closely related to life itself, which, conveyed with his intensity and specificity, can be seen as a feature distinguishing him from artists like Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, or Clyfford Still—who like him exhibited at the legendary Betty Parsons Gallery. However, it is not only from this perspective that we can discern a difference to these artists who are today considered the main exponents of Abstract Expressionism. The intimate format of Bess's paintings is in direct contrast to the monumentality of his colleagues' works. Furthermore,

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his work is neither marked by a recognizable style nor characterized by any form of stringent development. Even though Bess's works, as abstractions, fit perfectly into the context of contemporary art history, his "visionary" pictures nevertheless tread their very own path. It is precisely this aspect that has played a considerable role in making him a point of reference for generations of subsequent artists.

After his death Bess gained recognition in the form of various institutional solo exhibitions. Marking the start of this was a presentation at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1981, followed by a touring exhibition in 1988 to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the San José Museum of Art in San José, concluding at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne in 1989. This was followed in 2013–14 by the exhibition *Seeing Things Invisible* which toured to the Menil Collection in Houston, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, as well as the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. Together with Robert Gober's initiated juxtaposition of Bess's writings and works in the context of the Whitney Biennial 2012, the tour formed a high point in the reception of this visionary painter. The exhibition at the Fridericianum follows on from these shows and, for the first time since 1989, updates the reception of Forrest Bess's work in the German context.

The exhibition is funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

Image material for download available here: <https://fridericianum.org/press>

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Service information

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Opening hours

Tue–Sun & public holidays 11 am–6 pm

Admission fee

6 Euro, reduced 4 Euro
Wednesdays free admission
Free admission for children and under 18s
Groups (10 or more) 4 Euro per person
Free admission for students with a Kulturticket
Students and trainees 2 Euro
Free admission for school groups

Press contact

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