

~~STUFF~~ OF FORREST BESS

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**The Bess Test**  
**Amy Sillman**

Try this experiment. Take one of my paintings—  
isolate it from others. Concentrate on it for  
about ten minutes before retiring. Don't be  
afraid of the dream.<sup>1</sup>

Alone on a cold night in December, I took up Forrest Bess's hypnagogic instructions a little nervously. What if I woke up clammy and discomforted from *the dream*, or what if the paintings made me go crazy? But Bess had thrown down a good gauntlet: if you want to write about my work, put it in your subconscious and smoke it. So I accepted the challenge and chose a painting, a weird one from 1960 called *The Noble Carbunkle*, a picture I had seen in 2012 in Robert Gober's show-within-a-show of Bess's work at the Whitney Biennial.

I settled into bed with an image of the painting and set a timer. For fifteen solid minutes, I scrutinized the image *really* hard, hoping Bess wouldn't mind that I was looking at a photo instead of the real thing. I didn't exactly start to hallucinate, but the painting was a bromide, producing a fizz of questions, starting with question A: What *is* a carbunkle, anyway? Is it a gem or a wound, or both? before slipping sideways to zzz, when I fell asleep.

*The Noble Carbunkle* is one of Bess's largest paintings, and it's a complicated one. Animal figures are fastened into place in a gold and white field, like the screwball kind of Christianity you see in a Ravenna mosaic or a medieval tapestry, which makes sense given Bess's description of himself as a pelican in a church. After staring at it for a while, the painting's indeterminate ground starts to resemble the upper part of a chest rising up to a neck, with two symbolic white orbs nestled above what would be the figure's shoulders. Where its throat should be is a squawking bird, and two haloed animals round out the shoulders, each one held in place by a verdigris-colored sac surrounded in turn by palette-knifed golden outlines, like gold chains. In the dead center is a gem-shaped red form, like a vagina or the painting's big red heart. Looking closer, I realized that each animal had a little red attribute: The bird has a red gash in its middle, so perhaps it is an avatar of a cut-open Bess, bleeding from the incision he made at the base of his scrotum in an act of self-surgery. The unicorn's red mark is right under its horn, in a place equivalent to where Bess made his cut. The faceless bovine-looking creature on the left has a ruff around its neck and red-tipped feet, which at first I took to be lacquered nails, a camp signal from a man who described himself as "too masculine."<sup>2</sup> Looking again, I realized that this was no manicure; it was a kind of amputation. The creature's legs were four bloody stumps with the feet chopped off. Was this image borrowed from an alchemical

<sup>1</sup> Forrest Bess to Earle Ludgin, January 5, 1970. EML, AAA, SI.

In this book, abbreviations have been created for frequently cited documents and archives, details of which can be found on p. 369.

<sup>2</sup> See Forrest Bess to Rosalie and Sidney Berkowitz, August 9, 1950. RB, reel 3458, frame no. illegible, AAA, SI.

picture book of a lion with its paws removed? Was the red motif *rubedo*, the sign of success in the final stage of an alchemical procedure?

As in a dream, all these animals, forms, and figures seem to be configurations of Bess himself; but in that case, what about the big red shape at the center of the painting? In Bess’s symbology, he names red as the color of the male, white as the female, and red and white together as the hermaphrodite. Was this a palette of his own devising or a system he borrowed straight out of Jung, alchemy, and various obscure research papers the artist mined for clues on self-transformation? Bess claimed that he himself did not even understand his own work, so it’s not clear to me if his signs are fixed or if they are as mutable as he hoped gender was. Bess also said he was merely the copyist of his own visions, so were these forms “others” to him, mysteries? Did Bess, the pelican in the church, feel *other* to himself? In a letter to his gallerist Betty Parsons, he wrote, “I am a conduit through which they [visions] pass... ”<sup>3</sup> The conduit, indeed, is always central in Bess’s compositions. Should we think of his paintings as realistic instructions or models? Or prayers? Or poems? Bess also referred to his thesis on hermaphroditism as a “ballet.” What was the female role in his works? If there even was one, since it seems like, in *The Noble Carbunkle* at least, “female” was just a white placeholder across from the red (male) principle in his schema. Where did Bess get his images, anyway? Did he have a television? All these questions were percolating when I fell asleep.

In the morning, I woke up with no memory of a dream at all, but with a vivid sense, almost a word floating in the air: THE HOLE. I realized that there was a hole at the center of Bess’s enterprise, but I wasn’t sure if the hole was a portal going in or out. Or both.

The mystery of my first vision as a child of four ...  
I wanted to participate—yet—in a chair  
on one side of the table was a huge lion and in  
the chair on the other side was the huge tiger.  
... I had to keep my distance and only look.<sup>4</sup>

Many of Bess’s works and notes were destroyed in a storm, but his voluminous letters tell us about various goings-on in both his inner and outer life. Two things became most apparent to me when reading them: the chronic difficulty he had grappling with his queerness, and his instinct that painting was a way out of trouble. It is painful to read Bess’s anguished accounts of homosexual desire in the homophobic environment of rural Christian Texas. Homosexuality required concealment for safety’s sake, and Bess treated it as a kind of cooking or curing process—something stored inside, stewed, steeped, and ripened until it finally becomes something else. There is one euphoric moment in Bess’s letters where he describes being flooded

with lightness after a formerly sealed part of his body is surgically opened, but his procedures are mostly agonizing to read about, like backroom abortions, with a lot of gushing blood and anxiety, accidents, a surgical tool slipping from his hand, and the unnerving aftermath of procedures done to him by others. It is painful to be immersed in his chronicle of loneliness, to read how ill-fitting he felt everywhere, and it is harrowing to read about a gay-bashing episode that led to serious injury followed by a nervous breakdown and time spent in psychiatric hospitals. Many years later he was again treated for some months in psychiatric institutions before being admitted into a nursing home where he spent the last three years of his life. His letters also show better times: Bess living an active gay life, cruising in bars while visiting New York City for exhibitions, casting like the fisherman he was for sexual partners and for art friends too. Though Bess often gets cinched into place as a crackpot loner, he built an active network for himself of compatriots, and like many other so-called “hermits” (including Vincent van Gogh, Hilma af Klint, Agnes Pelton, and Agnes Martin), he reached out in active letter writing to art people. But Bess’s painting process remained hermetic, rooted in translation—cooking up oil paintings from the oneiric visions he transcribed daily into notebooks by his bedside.

Perhaps one meaning of abstraction can be ambivalence if ambivalence means thinking of two things at once. If so, then abstraction was right up Bess’s alley because the center of so many of his paintings is an ambiguous portal that simultaneously functions as an entryway and an exit. Abstraction might also mean the ability to state something obliquely, by way of something else; and if so, then we can think of his work as a form of queer refraction, where the glare of passionate feelings, like ecstasy and shame, can be rendered in little shapes, forms, and patches of color set in territories that lie somewhere off the grid. Though his paintings seem magical, they are also straightforward, even prim, and without frills or embroidery. They are made up of surfaces and objects that reflect the everyday events of a fisherman, the patterns of marshlands, grasses, nets, rippled water, fences, bugs, dappled skins, and starry skies. Against these surfaces come all kinds of phallic uprights, the knobs of saddles, fenceposts, trees, and silhouettes, thrusting up from the bottom edge of his paintings toward the front and center, things you can literally take in hand or at least imagine grasping, like prows, buoys, bottles, bowling pins, arrows. And then there are less graspable things, things that go around or make up bigger systems, like celestial orbs, glyphs, typewriter keys, and mandalas, and color events—dots, gradients, rays, strokes, and even mistakes, like blurs of light, blobs, and smears. All these signs and signifiers are disposed neatly near, or in relation to, a central portal that is variously depicted as a frame, an aperture, a puncture, a ring, a window or doorway, a halo, a

<sup>3</sup> Forrest Bess to Betty Parsons, undated (1949). BPG, Box 1, Folder 19, AAA, SI.

<sup>4</sup> Forrest Bess to Betty Parsons, undated (October 1950). BPG, Box 1, Folder 19, AAA, SI.



scopic device like a looking glass, or even an eye itself peering back in at you. It's a painting space that is at the same time shallow and deep, compressed and expansive.

And what is "painting space" anyway? It's something that most people just don't talk about anymore, an old-fashioned way to deconstruct what the painting is all about. The painting space is a place where all the elements of a painting seem to sit together, and the space gives a directional sense of how far back the little box that holds them seems to go, and a hint of what the parts unfold into. It is also conjoined to a rhythm that exists inside the construction of a painting, its ticker, a kind of heart that beats. So a painting space is the whole sensation of what the painting contains and how its meaning is released. Like "prosody" for poets or "the signal" for video artists, "painting space" is an essential unit of measure, yet it's often imperceptible to someone unaccustomed to looking at a painting as a construction. But the painting space makes it work just so. Painting space can even be flat, a compressed kind of no-space without any perspectival convergence. Bess's paintings are like that: compact little powerhouses, built by hand, by feel—like his own house—usually smaller than a breadbox but with a libidinal depth charge packed in. As you look at them, they unfold, and they emit a charge made up of the compressed energies of longing, memory, vision, dream, and time itself. To make these works, Bess had to shuttle back and forth in his own shallow-but-deep psychic space, receiving signals, transcribing notes, and translating what he thought to be primordial messages into what amounted to information that he felt was potentially revolutionary. They look simple and straightforward, but they are not. They are arranged, tinkered over, and refined, and when you do the long looking that Bess prescribes, you come into his paintings' thrall, where their suggestions start to percolate and fizz into questions about what's possible. This is where Bess hoped they would achieve his ultimate goal: transformation. I don't take Bess's works as mystic truths or heavenly visions, but I do take them as vehicles for escape, transformation, and change.

So isn't Forrest Bess, himself, the real portal? His paintings are autobiographical machines for change. When he told Parsons that he was only a conduit, he added, "And there are times I suffer much because I don't know how."<sup>5</sup> I thought about his difficulty achieving one dream that he did not live to see, an exhibition of his paintings shown together with his research, which was finally realized when Robert Gober installed these two parts of his work together in the Whitney Biennial in 2012. Is the combination of both the ultimate alchemy, the coming together of the two disparate elements of his thinking—one part dream, the other part science—like his early vision of the two different animals guarding a doorway, the lion and the tiger? I thought about how a person's head has two eyeholes and how looking

through them together forms a stereoscopic projection in front of you. Maybe his paintings are mostly vehicles for seeing what converges before you in the future. Back in the twentieth century, Bess wrote, "My painting is tomorrow's painting. Watch and see."<sup>6</sup> Now it's the twenty-first century, and his tomorrow is today, and we're looking through his portal. Aren't we?

Epilogue: I tried looking at another of Bess's paintings for a long time last night before I fell asleep, this one featuring two dotted / dashed forms standing next to each other amid a storm of beige dots. The two shapes are sweetly sad and cheerful, side by side but not touching, a bit lonesome; one a simple rectangle and the other an odd unnameable shape, like a knob on a stick. When I woke up, I was keenly aware of an intense sensation of loneliness and desire. I think it was the Bess working through me.

