

Forrest Bess
30 Sep 2022/15 Jan 2023



Image credit: Forrest Bess, *Untitled (Rainbow with Arc)*, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 27.4 x 32.9 cm. Collection of Beth Rudin
DeWoody. Photo: Robert Glowacki. Courtesy Modern Art,
London.

Camden Art Centre is pleased to present the first major institutional exhibition in the UK of the work of Forrest Bess (b. 1911, Bay City, Texas – d. 1977 Bay City, Texas).

Bess was an American artist, visionary and fisherman who lived on the Gulf Coast of Texas. Through his modestly scaled and highly personal paintings he developed an enigmatic painterly language, informed by visions that appeared to him on the threshold between wakefulness and sleep. The signs and symbols that populate his pictures were drawn from an exploration of his own unconscious, but he was also deeply influenced by various cultural, spiritual and mythological systems of thought, including aboriginal cosmology, medieval alchemy, eastern philosophy and Jungian psychoanalysis, as well as his own experience as a gay man living and working in rural Texas. The extraordinary body of work he created reveals a practice that was motivated by a restless and irrepressible principle of revelation, alongside a sustained investigation into often occluded systems of transcendental and collective wisdom and knowledge.

Drawing together rarely seen paintings from public and private collections across the world, the exhibition will present more than 40 works, many of which were hand-framed by the artist in driftwood. It will focus on Bess's visionary paintings from the late 1940s through to the early 1970s, with a particular emphasis on the lexicon of abstract forms and symbols that speak to his unique understanding of the universe: physically, spiritually and psychologically. These are presented alongside extensive archival material relating to Bess's wide-ranging research, including material from his 'Thesis', an ongoing research project around the conjunction of male and female energies and anatomies that preoccupied him for much of his life. Throughout his work, Bess explored questions of gender and sexuality that were driven by his personal feelings and lived experience, as well as an unshakeable belief in their wider significance to humanity. This exhibition will provide an opportunity for his paintings to be seen by contemporary audiences, as well as presenting his research and ideas in the context of more recent non-western, feminist, queer and neuro-diverse thinking and theory.

Bess is often misunderstood as an 'outsider' artist, as he lived in relative isolation and his radical beliefs and ideas alienated him from the mainstream of contemporary art and society. However, his work was presented in a series of exhibitions during his lifetime at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, (Parsons was one of the most influential dealers at the time, who also represented Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Robert Rauschenberg) and he enjoyed a close and lasting relationship with the art historian and academic Meyer Schapiro. Despite this, he remained largely misunderstood by his peers and public, becoming increasingly isolated in later life due to his insistent focus on what we would now consider

esoteric, non-normative and/or 'queer' systems of thought and knowledge, as well as his insistence on using his own body as a site of experimentation and praxis, culminating in him undergoing various surgeries in an attempt to achieve a state of 'pseudo-hermaphroditism'.

Recent museum retrospectives have been held at The Menil Collection, Houston (2013-14); the Hammer Museum Los Angeles, (2014-15); and the Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany (2020). Bess' work has been the subject of an award-winning documentary by Chuck Smith and Ari Marcopoulos (*Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle*, 1999), later published as a book; and a presentation of Bess' paintings, alongside material from his 'Thesis', was curated by Robert Gober and presented at the 2012 Whitney Biennial.

Camden Art Centre has a long and respected history of platforming exhibitions of significant 20th century artists who have been overlooked in the UK. This strand of our programme is motivated by an awareness that these artists offer a particular, timely and relevant source of inspiration to contemporary artists and their practices, as well as speaking to urgent issues and ideas of our time.

The exhibition is curated by Martin Clark, Director of Camden Art Centre, with assistance from Archie Squire (Curatorial Advisor) who has also conceived and curated the archival vitrines, and Kiera Blakey and Elsa Collinson (Curator and Assistant Curator, Camden Art Centre).

This exhibition was originally conceived as a touring partnership with the Fridericianum, Kassel, but due to the pandemic it was unable to travel. We would like to thank the museum for their continued support in helping us realise this new exhibition at Camden Art Centre.

Notes to editors

For further information, interviews and images please contact:

Sam Talbot, sam@sam-talbot.com // +44 (0) 772 5184 630

Mary Doherty mary@sam-talbot.com // +44 (0) 771 6701 499

Camden Art Centre

Camden Art Centre is a place for world-class contemporary art exhibitions and education. Situated in Hampstead, North London (charity number 1065829) Camden Art Centre is a place for art and artists; a place for the curious, the novice and the expert alike. It's a place to see, to make, to learn and to talk about contemporary art, whether in our building, attending off-site projects or via our digital forums. Founded by artists in 1965, the Centre continues to be a space for the most vital and diverse mix of practices and ideas and is dedicated to supporting artists at every stage of their careers.