



Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle

Chuck Smith

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Painter, fisherman, pseudo-hermaphrodite—**Forrest Bess** lived his life in obscurity at an isolated bait camp off the east coast of Texas. From 1949 through 1967, Bess showed at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City, alongside superstar artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Rediscovered after his death in 1977, Bess's small visionary paintings are now prized by museums and collectors for their primal beauty, and can fetch over \$200,000 apiece.

Bess's treasured canvases were only part of a grander theory—based on alchemy, Jungian philosophy, and aboriginal rituals—that proposed that hermaphroditism was the key to immortality. As an artist, Bess could never equivocate, and in 1960 he underwent an operation to become a pseudo-hermaphrodite. For the first time ever in print, ***Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle*** combines the beauty of Bess's art with the drama and tragedy of his personal life. Using Bess's own hauntingly sincere words (in letters to Betty Parsons, Meyer Schapiro, and others) the book traces the life and logic of this forgotten artist and explains how a love of beauty and a desire for wholeness lead Bess to self-surgery and, ultimately, a mental hospital. ***Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle*** is a fascinating look at one of America's most notorious cult visionaries—a man who truly believed that art could save his life.

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