

Press Release

CHRISTIE'S

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A TRIBUTE TO FORREST BESS

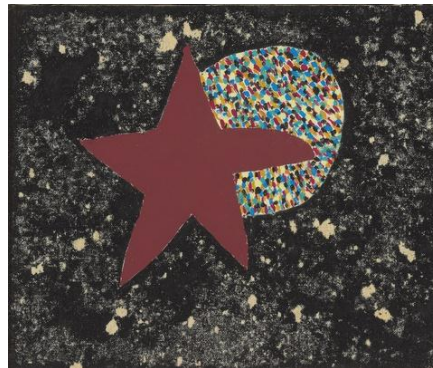
**A Selection of Master Works
By Forrest Bess (1911 -1977)
From The Harry Burkhart Collection**

A UNIQUE PRIVATE SELLING EXHIBITION

**Sold to benefit
The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center,
Houston, Texas**



Forrest Bess (1911-1977)
The Penetrator, 1967



Forrest Bess (1911-1977)
A Star, 1967

“I term myself a visionary painter for lack of a better word. Something seen otherwise than by ordinary sight. I can close my eyes in a dark room and if there is no outside noise or attraction, plus, if there is no conscious effort on my part—then I see color, lines, patterns and forms that make up my canvases. I have always copied these arrangements exactly without elaboration.” – Forrest Bess

New York – Christie’s is proud to present *Forrest Bess*, a unique private selling exhibition of the Harry Burkhart Collection of works by Forrest Bess, to be sold to benefit the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. The show will feature an extraordinary grouping of approximately forty works and will afford a rare and comprehensive view of the artist’s *oeuvre*, one that in its thorough originality continues to feel new today, affirming Bess’s self-categorization as one who saw beyond his time. This exceptional five week exhibition will take place on the 20th floor of 1230 Avenue of the Americas, at Rockefeller Center beginning March 1st, 2012. It coincides with the Armory Show and the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial and will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, complete with original texts by the writer and cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum and the art historian and Dean of the Yale University School of Art Robert Storr.

“It is an honor to present and sell this amazing and singular collection of Forrest Bess works. Bess has always captivated other artists particularly, with his intimately scaled, complexly composed paintings. With his known production of only approximately 100 works, it is astonishing to have the Burkhart Collection of 40 works to sell. These works have never been exhibited as a group before, and we look forward to showing the public the tenderness and edge of Forrest Bess’s paintings.” – **Amy Cappellazzo, Christie’s, Chairman, Post-War & Contemporary Development, Post War & Contemporary Art.**

“What (...) are the qualities that distinguish Bess’s pictures from others that we know (...)? First and foremost it is their combination of extreme economy and fixating self-sufficiency and self-containment. Each makes its forceful presence known while withholding some or all of its fundamental semiotic ‘raison d’etre.’ For our part, we can look long and hard and never know what he meant, but in the process resonances accrue and they become the subject of the painting...” – **Robert Storr, Dean of the Yale University School of Art.**

“Bess didn’t wait; he leapt directly into the painting. And now, its enigma is here before us, confronting us with a speech-defying spectacle of audacity, simplicity, recklessness, confidence, minimalism, humility, and delicacy (...) Use Bess’s paintings to understand the difficult art of human attentiveness (...) We don’t need to compare him to anyone else; nor did he. His painting life was an adventure of dis-affiliation, or non-affiliation. He severed bonds with the prior or the contemporary, and thereby releases his view from bondage” – **Wayne Koestenbaum, writer, cultural critic and visiting Professor in the painting department of the Yale University School of Art.**

Forrest Bess (1911-1977) lived simply, alone on a small island off the Gulf Coast of Texas, not far from Bay City, Texas, where he was born, supporting himself as a fisherman. Yet he had grand ambitions including a quest for immortality which he believed could be achieved when man possessed both male and female sexual

characteristics. His independent passion and fierce commitment to his ideas and practice are evident in his powerful paintings, and his singular work garnered him shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City alongside Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

A self-proclaimed visionary, Forrest Bess painted his somnolent revelations. Predominantly small-scale abstractions, his artworks are populated with idiosyncratic, personal symbols. They are careful combinations of elemental lines and forms that aggregate into mysterious hieroglyphs that feel drawn from a primitive language, recalling a primordial history shared by us all. Bess described his method as transposing his visions exactly, in the effort to capture their fleeting content and atmosphere. His colors are bold, his paint handling is coarse, his methods and techniques imbue his works with palpable energy. Scaled to his mind's eye, the paintings are intimate, little windows that invite viewers to look closely and contemplate a vastness that unfolds slowly.

Throughout his lifetime and in the years following, Bess's mysterious and captivating abstractions have maintained loyal followers. One was Harry Burkhart, a neighbor of the artist who, in exchange for sandwiches and companionship, received paintings. Burkhart eventually amassed an extensive collection which he bequeathed to the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

In 1962, Bess wrote, "*My painting is tomorrow's painting. Watch and see.*" His works have a timeless quality, at once deeply personal and powerfully universal. The art historian Meyer Schapiro considered Bess "...that kind of artist rare at any time, a real visionary painter." His major monographic museum exhibitions took place after his death, beginning in 1981, when Barbara Haskell mounted her acclaimed show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, followed by the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago in 1988 and the Museum Ludwig in Cologne in 1989.

Christie's is honored to present *Forrest Bess*, an exhibition which will serve to reintroduce Bess to the wider public. With works available for sale privately, the show will also generate vital revenue for the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center and their important research.

EXCEPTIONAL FIVE WEEK EXHIBITION

**Rockefeller Center, 20th Floor on 1230 Avenue of the Americas
March 1st, 2012 – April 3rd, 2012
Tuesday-Saturday; 10 am – 5 pm**

Note to Editors

The Whitney Museum of American Art has announced the list of artists participating in the upcoming 2012 Whitney Biennial, which takes place at the Whitney from March 1 through May 27, 2012. Fifty-one artists from both emerging and established have been selected, amongst them, Forrest Bess which exhibition will be curated by Robert Gober.
<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2012Biennial>

About Forrest Bess

Forrest Bess (October 5, 1911 – November 10, 1977) painter, fisherman, visionary, eccentric - Forrest Bess was one of the most original American artists of his generation. Born in Bay City, Texas, Bess picked up his love of art from his mother. His father worked in the oil fields and ran a bait fishing camp off the Texas coast in Chinquapin. After a short stint in the army where he suffered a slight breakdown related to a head injury, Bess moved to this isolated bait camp and began painting his visions. During his most creative period, 1949 through 1967, Bess showed at Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City alongside artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. In the 1950s, he also began a life-long correspondence with art historian and author Meyer Schapiro, and sexologist John Money. In these and other letters (which were donated to the Smithsonian Archives of American Art) Bess makes it clear that his paintings were only part of a grander theory, based on alchemy, the philosophy of Carl Jung, and the rituals of Australian aborigines, which proposed that becoming a hermaphrodite was the key to immortality. In 1960, Bess operated on himself to become a pseudo-hermaphrodite. This physical manifestation of his theory never achieved the results he had hoped for and, ironically, this quest for immortality was the beginning of a slow decline in both his health and his creative output. In 1977, he died in a nursing home in Bay City, Texas after battling multiple ailments. Throughout his career, Bess admired the work of Vincent van Gogh and Albert Pinkham Ryder, but the strongest of his paintings stand alone as truly original works of art. His mature *oeuvre* consists of only about 100 small paintings, many with simple driftwood frames that he built himself. The majority of these paintings are in private collections, although the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Art in Houston, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, all have Bess paintings in their collections.

www.forrestbess.org

About Robert Storr

An accomplished painter, writer, critic and curator, Robert Storr came to Yale as dean of the School of Art in 2006, shortly after he was named the commissioner of the 2007 Venice Biennale, becoming the first American invited to assume that position. Robert Storr has been reappointed as dean of the Yale School of Art, in 2011.

As a curator, Storr made his mark early with a number of major exhibitions at MoMA and elsewhere, which enhanced the public prominence of such artists as Elizabeth Murray, Gerhard Richter, Max Beckmann, Tony Smith and Robert Ryman. He also organized a number of reinstallations of MoMA's permanent collection, covering such topics as abstraction and the modern grotesque. Storr is the author of dozens of monographs and catalogs and has been a regular contributor to arts publications, including *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Art Press*, *Art & Design*, *Art Press (Paris)* and *Frieze (London)* as well as wide-circulation newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Named by *New York Magazine* in 2007 as among the nine most influential leaders in the art world, Storr was described by the magazine as a "*vital link between the museum world and academia.*" The citation also noted that Storr is "*an artist who's logged enough studio time to have a special regard for painters' painters ... and a gifted writer who can make us appreciate them, too.*"

His many honors include a Penny McCall Foundation Grant for painting, a Norton Family Foundation Curator Grant, and honorary doctorates from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Maine College of Art. He also received awards from the American Chapter of the International Association of Art Critics, a special AICA award for Distinguished Contribution to the Field of Art Criticism, an ICI Agnes Gund Curatorial Award, and the Lawrence A. Fleischman Award for Scholarly Excellence in the Field of American Art History

from the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. In 2000 the French Ministry of Culture presented him with the medal of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres.

About Wayne Koestenbaum

Wayne Koestenbaum has published six books of poetry: *Blue Stranger with Mosaic Background*, *Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films*, *Model Homes*, *The Milk of Inquiry*, *Rhapsodies of a Repeat Offender*, and *Ode to Anna Moffo and Other Poems*. He has also published a novel, *Moirá Orfei in Aigues-Mortes*, and eight books of nonfiction: *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx*, *Humiliation*, *Hotel Theory*, *Andy Warhol*, *Cleavage*, *Jackie Under My Skin*, *The Queen's Throat* (a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist), and *Double Talk*. Koestenbaum is a Distinguished Professor of English at the CUNY Graduate Center, and also a Visiting Professor in the painting department of the Yale School of Art.

About The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center is one of the world's most respected centers devoted exclusively to cancer patient care, research, education and prevention. It is located in central Houston on the Texas Medical Center campus. MD Anderson is one of the nation's original three comprehensive cancer centers designated by the National Cancer Act of 1971 and is ranked by U.S. News & World Report's "Best Hospitals" survey as the nation's top hospital for cancer care. In 2011, MD Anderson marked its 70-year anniversary and welcomed Ronald DePinho, M.D., as the fourth full-time president in the institution's history.

www.mdanderson.org

About Christie's

Christie's, the world's leading art business had global auction and private sales in the first half of 2011 that totaled £2.0 billion/\$3.2 billion. In 2010 it achieved global auction and private sales of £3.3 billion/\$5.0 billion. Christie's is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie's conducted the greatest auctions of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and today remains a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie's offers over 450 sales annually in over 80 categories, including all areas of fine and decorative arts, jewellery, photographs, collectibles, wine, and more. Prices range from \$200 to over \$100 million. Christie's has 53 offices in 32 countries and 10 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Dubai and Hong Kong. More recently, Christie's has led the market with expanded initiatives in emerging and new markets such as Russia, China, India and the United Arab Emirates, with successful sales and exhibitions in Beijing, Mumbai and Dubai.

www.christies.com

Christie's 20th floor exhibition space (Entrance at 1230 Avenue of the Americas), is used for special sales and exhibitions. The space was inaugurated in 2006 with the pre-sale exhibition of the Works of Donald Judd, from the Judd Foundation. Additional world-class exhibitions have included the Pierre Hubert 'Beyond' collection in 2007, and gallery Haunch of Venison's 2010 group show, 'Your History is not Our History' organized by David Salle and Richard Phillips. In November 2011, the Annick and Anton Herbert collection of Conceptual, Minimal art and Arte Povera was shown in this unique space, which is specially designed to highlight the important connection between art and its spatial context.

Visit Christie's Website at www.christies.com

Images available on request

Complete catalogue available online at www.christies.com or via the Christie's iPhone app

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