

Born in 1911, Forrest Bess made his living as a shrimp fisherman in West Texas, while painting little bright outsider pictures of nature that shimmer with wry vibration beneath limpid surfaces. He died in his mid-60s, but weren't his friends surprised he had lived so long, with the self-surgeries he tried to perform after World War II? His studies of metaphysics and anatomy had convinced him that if he put his brain to work, he could increase his sexual pleasure by piercing new holes in his body — the “eighth passage” of Golden Temple mysticism. I credit Bess with the most out-there work on the future of the body, which he accomplished during a dark time for most gay people (and perhaps under the pressure of that dark era)?

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At his home studio Bess built what looks like a workable hospital, or at least erected some photogenic hospital flats, and photographed himself naked, ramrod straight, in profile, front, and rear. These nude “mug shots” adorn the cover of a recent biography (Chuck Smith's *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle* from 2013). From his studies of anatomy, Bess grew convinced that the perineum, for example, was rather like two giant muscles held in place by pressure, so it should be relatively easy to find the join and drive a scalpel through it. Or that if you held up your dick, you might be able to puncture it at its base, right above the scrotal sac; simple fixes to relieve the binary system of 1940s masculinity. Before he could really get going he passed out in pain at each attempt, but his typed notes of what he wanted to do can still make grown men cry out and cross their legs right quick. He sent photos of his wounds to his New

York gallerists, to his backers in the art world, to his collectors, and they thought he had gone mad. A few recent shows of Bess's work have come accompanied by vitrines displaying the records of his Bataillean attack on his own genitalia — rather a *Hollywood Babylon* approach to art education I think.

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His story as I came to hear it rhymed queerly with my own photo project, “Tagged,” in which I photograph individual artists and poets, mostly male, naked, their junk covered often by a squarish drawing, almost a caricature, of a cock and balls by Raymond Pettibon. Through this device of double distancing, I aim to lampoon the outward signs of masculinity, as overdetermination nearly always reveals a gap between what is valued, and what is fact. Genitalia is an “outward sign” by name only, of course, as most of the time society and jurisprudence dictate that these areas remain covered, occluded, by pain of law.

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But what has a cock and balls to show anyhow? My men walking around my staged sets, parading Raymond's drawing in front of them like it was something special, come over the course of the shoot to shrug and toss it to the studio floor; in the digital age, I tell my models, the genitals have gone vestigial, modular, could belong to anyone, so what is the point of the ongoing Judeo-Christian practice of reifying the dick and hiding it but for special occasions? I bring the Smith bio of Bess to my models and ask them to turn their attention to the big medical illustrations, then try to imitate what Bess did, onto their own bodies, or onto

the representation of the phallus that lies, like a rag doll, along their laps. Of course no two men wear the Pettibon drawing in precisely the same way, and likewise no two of them will respond to my prompt exactly as I see Bess did.

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Will they cut it with an X-ACTO knife? Will they grab it with both hands and attempt to tear it from their bodies? Thus, they say, the Greek demigod Attis, who went mad when his consort, Cybele, sang her love song to him, made away with the visible badge of his identity. Is dissatisfaction the form now? My models are only human after all, and like all men dissatisfied with the infrequency and brief moment of their orgasms. Wiser adepts would tell them that all answers to the age old question bide their time, and live within us until our own deaths. But sometimes we can't wait until death and seek the end to torment now.

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When Bess died, the blood of Attis sank deep into the earth, and from his seed rose poetry. In the dreary browns and tans, the splendid, rippling gold of his *Sticks*,¹ now in the Menil Collection, Houston, we see the blueprint for a better world, with a weird, near-animal neck rising up from the foreground. He punished his scrotum to bring ritual to a universe deadened to sin, by the distractions of world war and television, by racism and the measly satisfactions of the neoliberal. Perhaps by painting itself?

1 Forrest Bess, *Sticks*, ca. 1950. Oil on canvas, 6-1/2 x 7-5/8.

Courtesy the Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

Now I'm in late middle age and Forrest Bess's attempts at impalement become more critical to me all the time. As I travel the world with my two crummy cameras — my Canon PowerShot sx510HS, and my pale gold iPhone 6 smartphone — I'm wondering where I went wrong, and I'm wondering who gave us these choices anyhow? I climbed up to a long plateau in the Sierra hills and saw God there. Get those guys to drop their pants down among their ankles, God whispered to me. "Tell them that the path of eternal relief lies in making a new slit along the mysterious perineum which I invented without really thinking things through." She, God, pushed some knives into my hands and I came down from the mountain with two tablets on which she had inscribed a new future for the body.

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