

Envisioning Nonbinary Gender: The Art of Forrest Bess

Cyle Metzger

FORREST BESS WAS AN EX-GI, FISHERMAN, AND PAINTER who showed work at the Betty Parsons Gallery alongside some of the most celebrated figures of postwar American art, including Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. These men were champions of nonobjective painting, or what famed formalist critic Clement Greenberg described as painting that “synthesize[d] depth, volume, and surface in both dramatic and decorative unity.”¹ Bess’s art appeared similarly reductive, leading many to describe it as abstract. His shapes and colors, however, were symbols with specific meanings that constructed an elaborate theory of spiritual and psychological transformation rooted in unifying masculinity and femininity in a single body. Bess’s paintings advanced his belief that hermaphroditism is an ideal state of human embodiment and outline the methods he prescribed for achieving this state of being.² The artist implored Parsons to display his research alongside his canvases, and he wrote dozens of letters over nearly thirty years to Meyer Schapiro, hoping the art historian and critic might endorse his theory.³ Furthermore, because Bess saw his art as constituting a major advancement in modern sexual medicine, he wrote to noted psychiatrist Carl Jung and psychologist and sex researcher John Money to persuade them of his ideas.

To Bess’s great disappointment, both Parsons and Schapiro chose to focus only on the aesthetics of his art. Jung and Money, meanwhile, disregarded his theory as entirely speculative and rejected his methods because they never produced measurable results. Notwithstanding these rejections and objections from Bess’s contemporaries, a close examination of the artist’s work and archive reveals that a nonbinary approach to gender played a central role in the production of meaning in his paintings, and that



frontispiece

Forrest Bess, self-documentation as part of research, ca. 1955. Polaroid, 5 x 3 in. Meyer Schapiro Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

these visual explorations anticipated important developments in sexological medicine in the United States after World War II. Indeed, when analyzed in the context of Bess's thesis, his paintings do at least three things. First, they highlight affirming links between early twentieth-century European theories of bisexuality—a historical notion that all people have both male and female hormones and thus have both male and female physical characteristics—and nonbinary approaches to gender identity that today's practitioners of transgender and intersex medicine are beginning to embrace.⁴ Second, they offer a significant point of intersection between histories of homosexuality, transsexuality, and intersex medicine. Third, they reveal persistent discomforts with framing gender as nonbinary in postwar American art that have only recently started to erode.

In recent decades, *transgender* has come to replace *transsexual* as the dominant term designating a person whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth, or who does not otherwise conform to conventional notions of male or female, regardless of desire for surgery or hormone treatments.⁵ But modern transgender healthcare in the US is rooted in medical interventions for transsexualism that German-American endocrinologist Dr. Harry Benjamin began to develop in 1949 out of earlier work by his European mentor Magnus Hirschfeld.⁶ By the 1960s, Benjamin had come to define “true transsexuals” as people who saw themselves as definitively female although they were born with a penis and elevated levels of testosterone, or people who saw themselves as definitively male despite being born with a vagina and elevated levels of estrogen. For Benjamin and his colleagues, treatment for transsexualism “involve[d] a straightforward move from male to female or vice versa” through surgeries and hormone treatments.⁷

Intersex is the contemporary term used to describe people born with both male and female physical characteristics. However, such individuals were previously characterized as *hermaphrodites*. Derived from the name of the Greek god Hermaphroditus, who became eternally both male and female when the nymph Salmacis fused her body with his, the term hermaphrodite has been used in Western medicine since the fifteenth century.⁸ By the early twentieth century, physicians began to distinguish between *pseudohermaphroditism* (a condition wherein a person has a combination of male and female chromosomes, hormone levels, or genital characteristics) and *true hermaphroditism* (a rare condition in which a person has both ovular and testicular tissue).⁹ In the 1950s, physicians in the US (like Money) began developing treatment protocols to make intersex people appear more normatively male or female.

In their efforts to maintain binary definitions of male and female, the objective of both transgender and intersex medicine in the twentieth century in the US was to use newly developed medical technologies to repair supposedly flawed bodies and transform them into an ideal of American citizenship informed by, in historian Emily Skidmore's words, “normative investments in heterosexuality, consumerism, and white supremacy.”¹⁰ The importance of whiteness to this ideal is evidenced by the nearly exclusive focus on white experiences of transition in mainstream American media outlets like the *New York Daily News* and the relegation of Black transition

stories to publications that catered specifically to African Americans, like *Ebony* and *Jet*.¹¹ Notably, the success of medical treatments was measured by a person's ability to pass as cisgender. Compulsory heterosexuality is also apparent in this history, through policies that denied some transgender people access to technologies of medical transition if such interventions would not also eliminate their homosexuality.¹² Intersex patients were also commonly treated with hormones and surgeries as a way to "cure" their sexual desire for people of their same gender.¹³

Today, transgender medicine has largely abandoned these objectives. Guidelines published in 2011 by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) explain that "some people seek maximum feminization/masculinization, while others experience relief with an androgynous presentation resulting from hormonal minimization of existing secondary sex characteristics," and advise individualized hormone treatment plans that align with each patient's personal goals.¹⁴ As a result, many doctors invested in transgender health have stopped requiring their patients to declare that they fully identify as a man or a woman in order to access hormone treatments or surgery. Similarly, the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) now deems hermaphrodite an inaccurate descriptor for intersex people because it incorrectly implies that normative embodiment is either completely male or completely female and denies that all people have both male and female characteristics. Indeed, the ISNA considers the term derogatory because it equates intersex people with mythical beings, rather than recognizing their embodiments as part of "real biological variation."¹⁵ While some doctors now refrain from intervening to "correct" intersex conditions, this change of approach is occurring more slowly in intersex than transgender medicine due to what sociologist Georgiann Davis has described as the "ongoing struggle to challenge the belief that [intersex individuals] are abnormal."¹⁶

While most Americans refuted the idea of nonbinary gender in the 1950s, Bess not only supported it but believed that efforts to unify male and female within a single body would result in spiritual liberation, eternal life, and world peace. Bess attempted to unify male and female in his own body by creating a hole at the base of his penis that was large enough to penetrate.¹⁷ The artist located the origins of his theory in the shapes and colors that appeared to him in psychic visions, explaining that he came to understand their significance only after he transformed them into paintings. The most extensive explanations of his theory and process came in the series of letters he wrote to Schapiro from 1948 to 1959, now housed at the Archives of American Art. Bess explained that the meanings and messages in his compositions were unknown to him until the works were finished, and that he understood them through his readings in psychology, alchemy, Christianity, sexology, and anthropology. Many of the artist's missives to Schapiro came in the form of long, stream-of-consciousness paragraphs, clippings from various books, journals, and newspapers (*fig. 1*), self-staged photographs of his own figure (*see frontispiece*), and labeled illustrations of the lines and shapes that manifested his ideas and methods (*figs. 2, 3*).¹⁸ Through these diverse sources, the symbolic language Bess used in early paintings like *The Hermaphrodite* (1957) and applied to

fig. 1
Forrest Bess to Meyer Schapiro, February 11, 1955. Meyer Schapiro Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

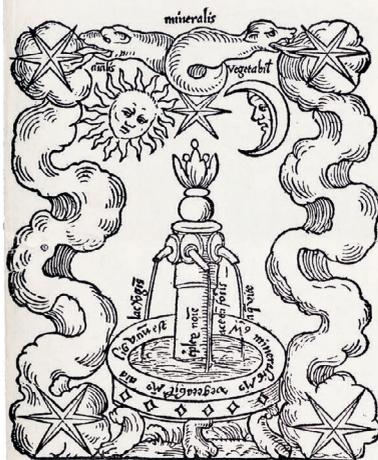


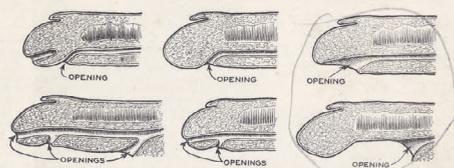
Fig. 25. The fountain of life as fons mercurialis.—From the *Rosarium*, 60(a).

1701 Avenue E, Bay City, Texas
11 February 1955

...some way, some how, we have rather
guilt. Jung says that there are
our position—that is of desiring
it means greater freedom—possibly

...can refute with confidence the
...There is every evidence that he
...experience of consciousness of
...to white, was present and that the
...ties naturally flooded consciousness
...brought to the surface in order to
...electricity. Compare the Fountain
...“Font of Life” at St. Remy. Why did
...doubt but that you have access to
...not psychotic. As Jung has stated
...—a process in nature, ever existing
...ghout time—and in Vincent's case
...man had no guide—he was before
...forefront. It sounds in a way I am
...low position he now occupies. Jung
...he individual to attempt to go the
...ctically. I might ask, what is the
...is symbols he has painted, he has
...must go the way—and if poverty
...question would be—does Jung know

...cent cutting off his ear and the
complimentary. As I have shown in earlier drawings, the breasts neck and
head are a symbol of the genitals. In order to follow—or I might say one
is compelled by the sea collective unconscious—the act—it would be a hown
in the unconscious as the mutilation—not of the front—the face but the side
of the head. It is shown in alchemy—as the splitting of the head—it is shown
in the Hatha Yoga as “going through the head—forcing open the door”



Hypospadias, an abnormal condition where the urethra opens at some point on the penis, as shown above. The orifice may occur at various positions.

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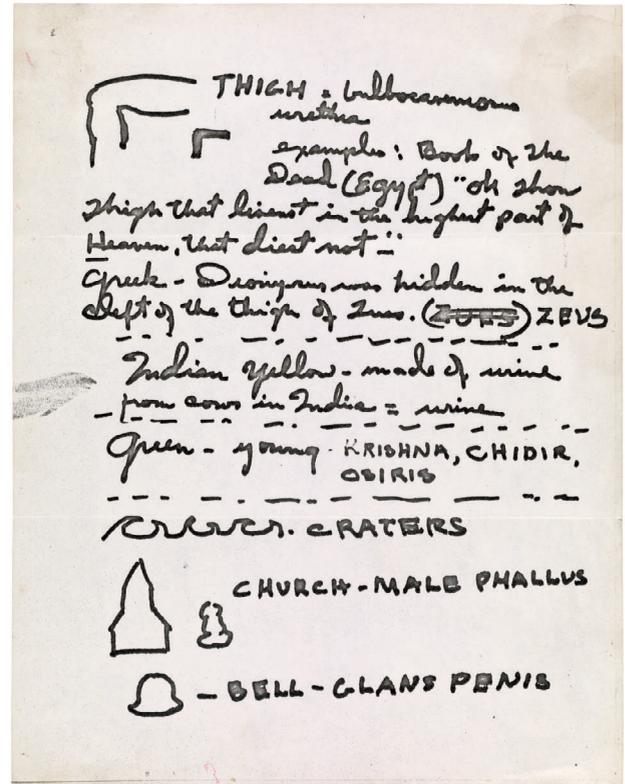
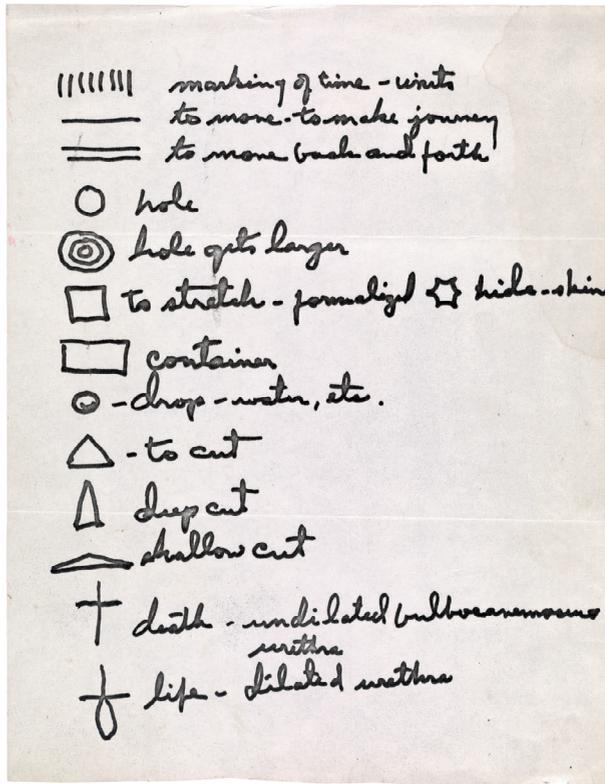
Sexology



Fig. 64. Alchemical Allegory: The Golden Rain

later works such as *Untitled* (1970), *Complete Freedom* (1970), and *Untitled (The Spider)* (1970) becomes legible.

Among his artworks, *The Hermaphrodite* (fig. 4) centers the idea of unifying the male and the female most clearly.¹⁹ Bess indicates in letters to Schapiro, Parsons, and Money that he used the colors red and white in his paintings to symbolize this union; this information helps decipher the bicolored capsular form at the center of *The Hermaphrodite*.²⁰ The bright



compositional element contrasts with the all-encompassing blue/black color that surrounds it, making it difficult to discern the dark shapes in the background. However, upon close inspection, the red-and-white capsule appears to hover above the location where two dark, rounded forms meet and become one. In a diagram within a letter to Schapiro, Bess identifies this bulbous shape as representing the perineum.²¹ Bess incorrectly used this term to describe where the penis meets the scrotum (the perineum is rather the skin between the anus and the genitals). Despite his incorrect nomenclature, the meeting point of the penis and the scrotum is critically important to Bess's theory because it is the area the artist thought needed to be transformed in order to bring together male and female elements.

Later artworks like *Untitled* (fig. 5) also identify the perineum as a site for transformation. In this painting, a brown upside-down bell shape presses up from a field of red while a dotted yellow circle hovers in the gray space above. The bell-shaped form corresponds with an illustration that Bess labeled "bell-glans" in his index of symbols. "Glans" derives from the Latin term *glans penis*, which suggests that this shape represents the head of the penis. The placement of this form in *Untitled*—just at the edge of a fleshy red zone—seems to indicate that the importance of the penis sits right below the skin's surface. Additionally, Bess identified the color yellow as meaning "light," which suggests that penetrating the skin's surface would give way to the light of spiritual transformation.²²

If *The Hermaphrodite* and *Untitled* visualize Bess's theory, *Complete Freedom* (fig. 6) and *Untitled (The Spider)* (fig. 7) activate the methods he prescribed for manifesting it. *Complete Freedom*, in which three isosceles

figs. 2, 3

Forrest Bess, key to symbols in paintings, ca. 1955. Meyer Schapiro Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



fig. 4
Forrest Bess, *The Hermaphrodite*, 1957.
Oil on canvas, 8 x 11 ¼ in. The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of John Wilcox in memory of Frank Owen Wilson 1992-06. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston.

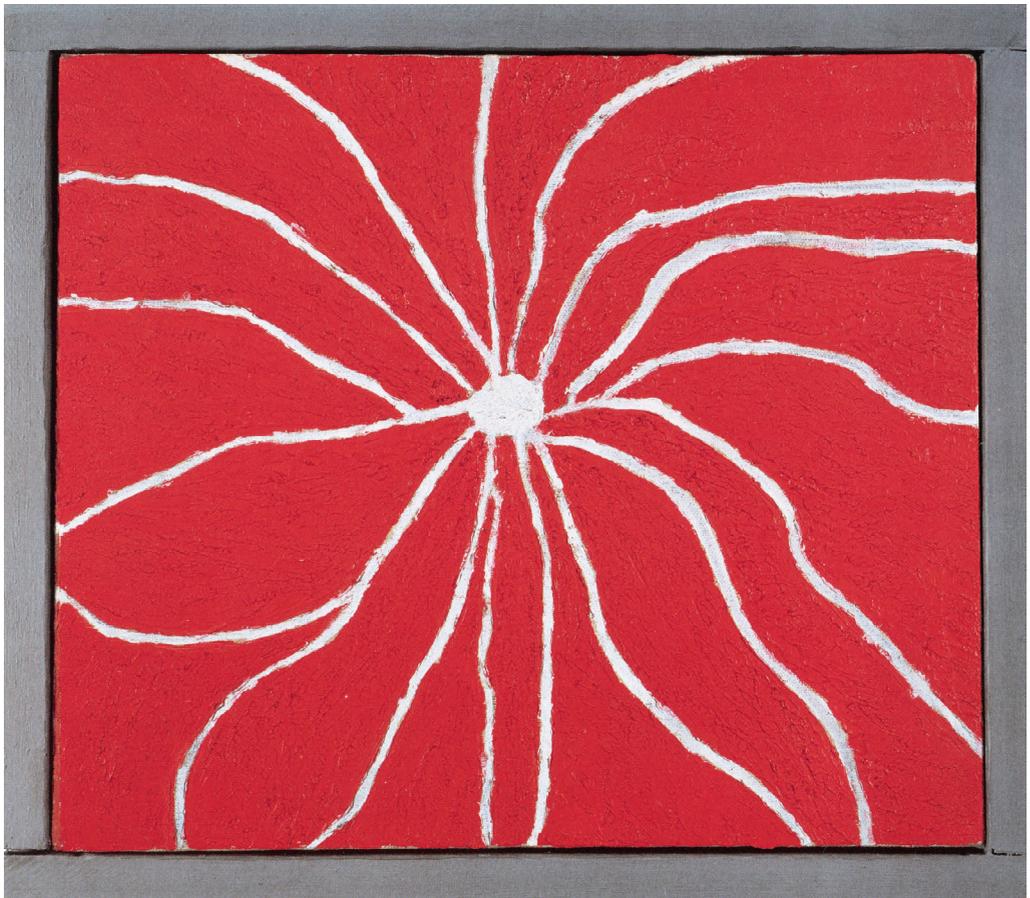
fig. 5 (opposite)
Forrest Bess, *Untitled*, 1970. Oil and sand on canvas, 14 x 14 in. Dallas Museum of Art, The Barrett Collection, Dallas, Texas 2007.15.4.

triangles float along a foggy white horizon amidst a darker blue expanse, posits that cutting into the base of the penis is the first step toward physical, spiritual, and psychological transformation. While the red and white of the composition refer to the union of male and female and the yellow suggests spiritual liberation, in Bess's symbology triangles of this sort refer to a "shallow cut." The thickly laid paint of these geometric shapes conjures the flesh that Bess proposed cutting into as a means of achieving the complete freedom that the title of the work declares. As the bright horizon fades to a deep blue, the atmospheric quality of this painting hints at the metaphysical aspirations that motivated this incision. *Untitled (The Spider)* signals another step toward this transcendent state. The texture of the paint again resembles flesh, while a red-and-white color palette signals the union of male and female. The simultaneous suggestion of expansion and recession conveyed by the tendrils that extend outward from a white circle at the center of the image conjures a similar sense of metaphysical transformation and physical release as that evoked by the blue-and-white space in *Complete Freedom*. Likewise, given that circles refer to holes in Bess's taxonomy, the painting may address the artist's interest in "the development of the bulbous section of the male urethra into a 'vagina masculinas'" that would enable urethral orgasm when penetrated.²⁵

In his letters to Schapiro, Bess frequently referenced the work of Carl Jung as inspiring these and other of his paintings. Jung theorized

the existence of a collective unconscious informed by a set of archetypes that all people can understand independent of their historical, cultural, or geographic contexts. He identified twelve of these universal symbols and images, but it seems that Bess's ideas resonate most closely with the *anima*. The *anima* refers to the female soul that constitutes the unconscious of a person with a penis and testes, and its counterpart, the *animus*, is the male soul that constitutes the unconscious of a person with a vagina and ovaries. Further, Jung described the embrace of the oppositely gendered soul and body within a single individual as an important step in the process of "individuation," or the attainment of spiritual and psychological liberation.²⁴ Bess not only read Jung's work as confirmation of his own





thesis but also insisted that the shapes and colors in his paintings—which he called ideograms—were yet undiscovered symbols that expanded Jung’s concepts from the psyche to the body. In 1952, Bess wrote fervent illustrated letters to Jung explaining his theory through his paintings (*fig. 8*). A return letter from the psychiatrist professed that he was “too old” to keep up with Bess’s communications (*fig. 9*), and the artist reported to friends that Jung deemed his ideas unoriginal.²⁵ Nevertheless, Bess took the very fact of Jung’s response as encouragement that he was in the process of discovering a lost secret of human life.

Even when Bess drew on other theories, it was often via his understanding of Jung. For example, the artist framed his ideas concerning alchemical and Christian lore through the lens of Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy* (1952), and he went so far as to cut an image out of his copy of this publication to illustrate a page of his thesis (*fig. 10*).²⁶ Originally reproduced in *Miscellanea Alchymica et Astrologica*, from the late sixteenth century, this image depicts Biblical Adam lying on his back surrounded by sprouting flora, looking anguished and exhausted. His right hand lays flaccidly by his side as his left hand grips an arrow that has pierced his abdomen. This arrow, which belongs to Mercurius—a god in alchemical mythology who is both male and female—has caused Adam’s genitals to transform into the Tree of Knowledge. By submitting to Mercurius’s power, Adam not only leaves the realm of human fallibility and original sin, but also becomes the physical embodiment of complete spiritual liberation. Bess wrote above his clipped copy of this image:

The “Tree of Life” constitutes not the penis growing on the scrotum but the scrotum as the foliage and the perineum as the trunk and the penis (outer) as the limb or the Branch. It is the ‘side’ of our body that we do not observe—the neglected side; that which is in darkness. That ‘side’ that God showed to Moses.

Here, however incoherently, Bess deduced that his theory was somehow part of the message God sent through the burning bush. By placing a photograph of his own genitals next to the depiction of Adam, Bess further suggested that, like Moses, he had been cast as a messenger of salvation. Finally, the simplicity of the line drawing that sits below the photograph of the artist’s genitalia mirrors that of the illustrations of symbols in his letters, hinting that this composition represents the alchemical and Christian roots of his theory and methods.

Other of the documents that together comprise Bess’s thesis include an article documenting modern medical techniques for growing new organs that Bess read as evidence that medical science was sufficiently developed to actualize his theory. “New Bladders from Old,” published in the December 1955 issue of the journal *Sexology*, describes experiments in replacing a diseased bladder by growing new tissue around an inflated bag that had been implanted within it (*fig. 11*).²⁷ Bess included a copy of the article in a letter to Schapiro, asking, “Is it a coincidence that medicine has found that the bladder will grow again by ‘regeneration’? Have we not contended that the urogenital region is the center of regeneration according to alchemy, art, mythology, and religion?”²⁸ From these questions, it is clear that Bess took these scientific advances as endorsements of his theory and methods, to the extent that he could not understand why, with such evidence, anyone might doubt him.

fig. 6 (opposite top)
Forrest Bess, *Complete Freedom*, 1970. Oil on canvas, 13 ¾ x 17 ¾ in. Private collection. Reproduced from *Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Visible* (Houston: Menil Collection in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013), 86.

fig. 7 (opposite bottom)
Forrest Bess, *Untitled (The Spider)*, 1970. Oil on canvas, 13 ¾ x 16 ½ in. Collection of Christian Zacharias. Reproduced from *Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Visible* (Houston: Menil Collection in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013), 85.



fig. 8

Forrest Bess, illustrations included in letter to Carl Jung, March 11, 1952. ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Hochschularchiv, C. G. Jung-Arbeitsarchiv.

In addition to Jung's writings and US-based medical research from the 1950s, Bess also derived significant motivation from Austrian sexologist Eugen Steinach's pioneering developments in twentieth-century biological understandings of sex. (In this history, *sex* refers to physical characteristics commonly classified as male or female.) Steinach was the first to assert that mammalian sexual development was not controlled by genes or gametes, but by hormones.²⁹ His research further indicated that, though the development of the penis and testes were caused by the predominance of testosterone and the development of the vagina and ovaries by high levels of estrogen, testosterone, estrogen, and other hormones are present in all mammals regardless of their genitals.³⁰ This realization was considered radical in the early twentieth century because it upended the rigid divisions between male and female that shaped previous scientific thought, and it

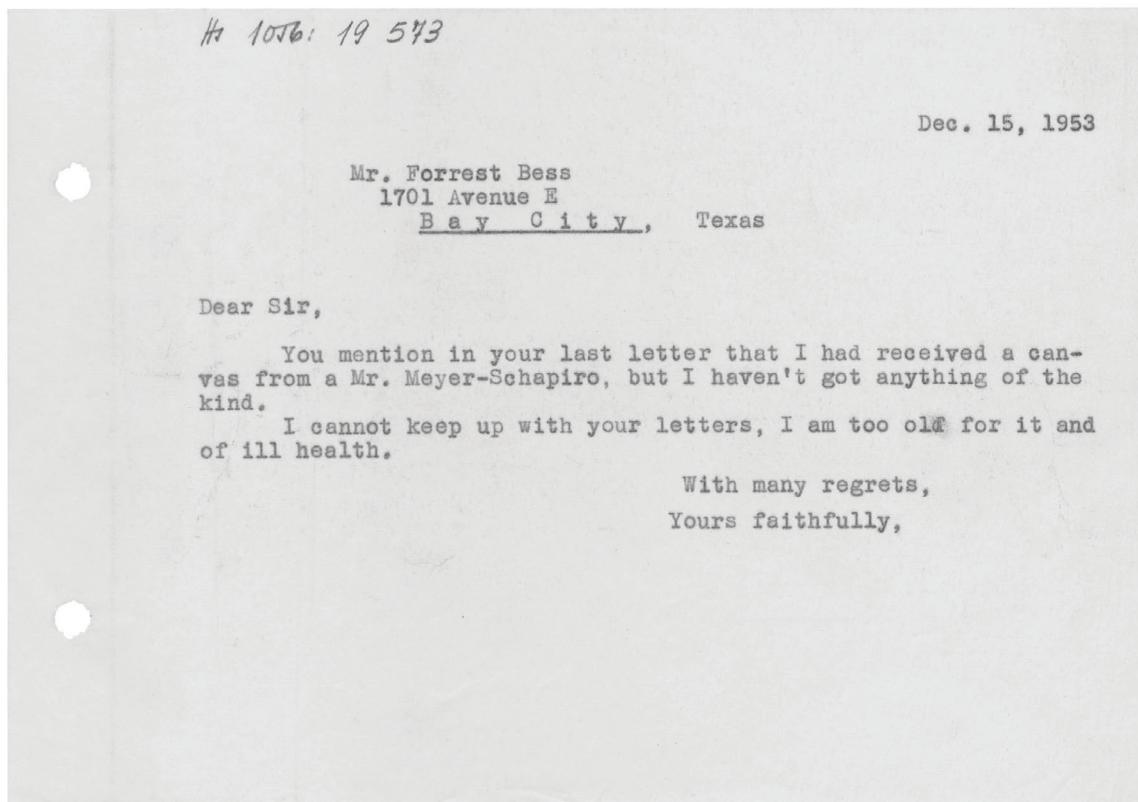
asserted that physical sex was not so easy to define.³¹ Bess took Steinach's work as proof that his theory of unifying male and female in a single body was supported by both ancient alchemical lore and modern medical science. He found further encouragement in Steinach's controversial experiments in vasoligation (the surgical tying of the muscular tube that conveys sperm from the testes to the urethra in preparation for ejaculation), which the doctor reported resulted in increased energy and tissue elasticity among rat and dog subjects.³² Bess saw Steinach's purported success in stalling the aging process as clear evidence that cutting into the penis was critical to manifesting his own theory of metaphysical transcendence.

For Bess, this transcendence was not an end in itself. Rather, the artist maintained that tensions between the male and female aspects of each individual seeded all conflict in the world. Thus, he felt that he had found a way to achieve world peace. Bess's Cold War context underscored the artist's sense of urgency in communicating his theory and methods; he believed so ardently in the potential of his research to protect national security that in January 1955 he wrote a letter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower explaining as much. Recalling Eisenhower's claim in a recent speech that "every avenue of peace, no matter how discernable or dim, should be investigated," Bess posited that his ideas might "be of great value to our government as a psychological means to end the tensions of the collective versus the individual."³³

Because these ideas came to him through his paintings, the artist sought to display the documents that comprised his thesis in his 1959 exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery. The previous year, he sent Parsons at least two letters arguing that exhibiting this content would "bridge the gap

fig. 9

Letter from Carl Jung to
Forrest Bess, December
15, 1953. ETH-Bibliothek
Zürich, Hochschularchiv,
C. G. Jung-Arbeitsarchiv.



between medicine and art because it concerns the analysis of the art form in relation to the human body.”³⁴ According to her friend and biographer Lee Hall, Parsons was interested in abstract art because it “could draw forth the deepest meaning and most profound spiritual truths.”³⁵ Nevertheless, the gallerist firmly but politely rejected Bess’s appeal, explaining, “No matter what the relationship is between art and medicine I would rather keep it purely on the aesthetic plain [*sic*].”³⁶

It is not difficult to understand why Parsons took this position. Indeed, in his communications with the gallerist, Bess acknowledged that the subject matter of his thesis was “not only delicate but highly provocative.” In his book *Sexual Inversion*, first published in 1897, sexologist Havelock Ellis characterized people who experienced same sex attraction as inverters because their sexual desire was perceived as evidence of gender inversion.³⁷ Bess had internalized this conflation of sexuality and gender. The artist confided to Rosalie and Sidney Berkowitz—friends and collectors of his work—that he was sexually attracted to men and that his investments in genital transformation were rooted in efforts to cope with his sexuality. In one letter, he wrote that he had learned to “sublimate” his desire or “pass into other channels (i.e., his painting) any sexual excitement” to protect himself from the homophobic abuses he suffered as a child and as an adult in the military.³⁸ Though Bess did not identify as transsexual, his theories nevertheless activated new discourses on the possibility of genital transformation and laid bare his sexual desire for men.

Parsons’s own biography sheds additional light on her refusal to highlight the roles that sexology and homosexuality played in Bess’s paintings. Art historian Ann Gibson has characterized Parsons as a lesbian who became “increasingly discrete” about her sexuality as her gallery became more and more successful.³⁹ Gibson asserts that a number of the most prominent artists in Parsons’s stable, including Newman, Pollock, Rothko, and Still, pressured Parsons to abandon artists who represented aesthetic and/or sexual difference and focus on an exclusively “heterosexual, male, and anti-naturalistic version of abstraction.”⁴⁰ Parsons had to strike a careful balance between her investment in showing artists who were “other” and her shrewd awareness that if the “Giants” left, her gallery would surely suffer. “In passing for straight,” Gibson writes, Parsons constructed a public image of herself and her gallery that “enabled her to escape the fixed determinism of heterosexual object choice” and embrace a more inclusive definition of abstraction.⁴¹ Showing Bess’s thesis next to his paintings might have disturbed the uneasy balance Parsons struck between the formal conservatism that helped make her gallery a powerhouse and the investment in unfettered creativity that drove her interest in art in the first place.

If Parsons sought to downplay Bess’s theories, Schapiro flatly rejected them. In 1959 he replied to one of Bess’s letters, “I’m sorry to write what must be to you a disappointing judgment; I hope you will take it as a sincere statement from a friend who is devoted to you,” regretfully confessing, “I think that you force the evidence and depend too largely on analogies or vague resemblances.”⁴² While the pseudoscientific nature of Bess’s project certainly warranted this criticism, Schapiro’s reluctance to entertain the ideas concerning nonbinary gender embedded within them may also have been a product of growing media coverage of transsexuality in the 1950s, which was largely characterized by ambivalence or skepticism.⁴³ On December 1, 1952, a front-page article in the *New York Daily News* reported

on the so-called sex-change of World War II veteran Christine Jorgensen. This was one of the first news articles in the US to address the possibility of modifying one's sex.⁴⁴ The *Daily News* article introduced gender transition rather matter-of-factly, but by April 1953, the *New York Post* countered this coverage with a sensational exposé that framed Jorgensen's transformation as feigned. "The Truth about 'Christine' Jorgensen," which was reprinted in newspapers across the US, circulated the idea that Jorgensen was not a woman but rather a man who had removed his genitals.⁴⁵ *Newsweek* subsequently ran a similar story that accused Jorgensen of deceit and declared that she "was no girl at all, only an altered male."⁴⁶ Underlying

fig. 10

Forrest Bess to Meyer Schapiro, ca. 1955. Meyer Schapiro Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The "Tree of Life"constitutes not the penis growing on the scrotum but the scrotum as the foliage and the perineum as the trunk and the penis (outer)as the limb or the Branch.It is the 'side'of our body that we do not observe-the neglected side;that which is in darkness.That 'side' that God showed to Moses.Below shows both the tree in alchemy and in an actual photograph-



Fig. 131. Adam as *prima materia*, pierced by the arrow of Mercurius. The *arbor philosophica* is growing out of him.—From the "Miscellanea d'alchimia" (MS., 14th century), 20, vii.



Now, let us turn toward the stone itself; here is a passage from alchemy in John Read's *Prelude to Chemistry*—
After all this upon a day
I heard my noble Master say,



Fig. 150. The penetrating Mercurius.—From the "Speculum veritatis," (MS., 17th century), 20, liii.

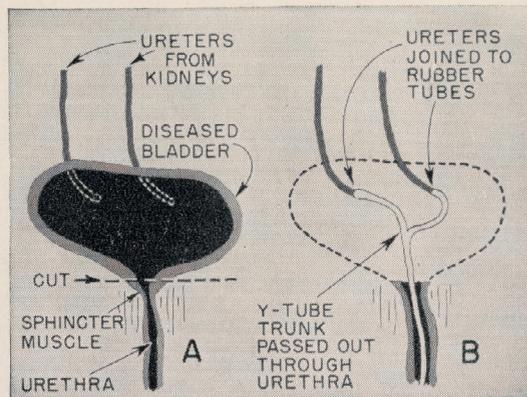
men patient and wise,
Stone with Exercise;
were trowle taught,
r that Stone they Caught;
)or scarcely one,
gdoms had our Red Stone. (P.W.Martin:Experiment in Depth)

ite Stone (see the Mandala—The Greek at Betty'
penetrating Mercurius was the act of open-
rein lies the Christian mystery. The trunk
e same—the snake possibly representing the

fig. 11

H. W. Secor, "New Bladders for Old," *Sexology* (December 1955): 314. Meyer Schapiro Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

By a remarkable technique a new bladder may be grown to replace a diseased one that has to be removed. The results obtained are experimental so far, but give promise of solving the baffling problem of how to substitute a new organ for an old one.



New Bladders for Old

THOUSANDS of people suffering from diseased bladders may soon be walking around with *new* ones, thanks to the discovery that a new bladder will grow by *regeneration*. Credit for adapting this miraculous operation for human benefit (it was first tried on dogs experimentally) goes to Dr. Arthur Waite Bohne, chief of the Department of Urology at the Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit, Michigan, Dr. Paul Jackson Hettle and Dr. Robert Wallace Osborn.

In a typical case, that of a 50-year-old man, the diseased bladder was removed. The *ureters* (the

Mr. Secor is Managing Editor of SEXOLOGY and an outstanding medical and sexological author.

two tubes delivering urine from the kidneys) and the *urethra* (the tube extending from the bladder and passing through the penis) were cut free from the diseased bladder. A plastic egg-shaped bag measuring 3 by 4 inches was introduced into the bladder cavity inside the patient. Around this plastic bag new bladder tissue was to form in about 90 days.

Meanwhile, the urine from the kidneys was discharged through a Y-shaped rubber tube arrangement placed inside the bag. The *ureters* were joined to the two arms of the Y-tube, and its main stem was passed through the *urethra* and outside the body through an incision (this is necessary only in males). Thus, while the new bladder was growing the patient was

these attacks was the notion that the categories male and female were distinct and immutable. Jorgensen refuted the idea that people belong to either category exclusively. "You seem to assume that every person is either a man or a woman," Jorgensen explained in a 1958 interview. "Each person is actually both in varying degrees."⁴⁷ This response was largely laughed off, however, signaling resistance to nonbinary approaches to gender within the

American popular consciousness. It was in this context that Bess's proposal for unifying male and female repeatedly faced rejection.

In 1962 Bess initiated a lengthy exchange with Money, who was at the time a psychologist specializing in the treatment of intersex conditions at the Johns Hopkins University Medical School. Based on his understanding that gender is psychological (manifests through a person's actions and personality) and sex is physical (a matter of external genital morphology, internal reproductive structures, hormones, and chromosomes), Money recommended that intersex patients' genitals be surgically altered to better align with the gender the doctor determined them to have. Money generally did not advocate for allowing a person to present a male gender and a female sex (or vice versa), nor did he endorse allowing patients to maintain both male and female genital characteristics.⁴⁸ Most of the letters Money wrote to Bess have been lost, but some of Bess's surviving dispatches indicate the tenor of the doctor's responses. For instance, a note from October 12 reads, "To answer the most pertinent questions that seem to be 'bugging' you. There has been no self mutilation of the genital. Therefore I am not psychotic."⁴⁹ This language suggests that Money expressed significant doubts about Bess's ideas and his sanity. However, other letters indicate that Money encouraged Bess to continue writing to him. One of the few surviving missives the doctor sent to the artist—quite late in their exchange—reads, "If you could keep your writing fairly brief, then I think it highly probable that I could write an introduction and a conclusion, with a view to submitting the entire paper for publication in a scientific journal."⁵⁰ Money's responsiveness to Bess's appeals likely derived from the psychologist's interest in the artist as a research subject. In 1976 he, along with University of Missouri medical student Michael De Priest, coauthored "Three Cases of Genital Self-Surgery and Their Relationship to Transsexualism," using Bess (identified generically in the article as "a middle-aged artist and coastal farmer") as one of their case studies. Bess was not a candidate for genital reassignment surgery, the authors explained, because he wished to maintain the shape of his penis while creating an additional vaginal cavity. Indeed, Bess's "case lay not in conventional homosexuality, nor in transsexualism or transvestitism, but in a quasi-hermaphroditic theory of bisexuality."⁵¹ Although Bess was sexually attracted to men, because he was more interested in creating the conditions for a urethral orgasm through surgery than he was in anal intercourse, Money and De Priest did not consider the artist to be a typical homosexual. (Their use of the term *bisexual* notably derives from early twentieth-century European sexological literature that describes all people as both male and female to varying degrees, rather than from modern-day definitions of people who sexually desire both men and women.)⁵²

Recalling that Money recommended surgery to make the genitals of his patients appear more male or female, we can see why he characterized Bess's desire to have both male and female sex organs and his willingness to operate on himself to achieve this goal as signs of mental illness. Money described Bess in his article as "delusional in the genuine paranoid sense" and, perhaps in an attempt to substantiate this assertion, reported that the artist had been hospitalized for schizophrenia in 1974.⁵³ Recent work in disability studies has shown how the presence of disability—be it physical, developmental, or psychological—has historically been used to undermine the desires and self-identities of people who are deemed atypical.⁵⁴ In his 2014 essay "On Radical Empathy and Schizophrenia," Ben G. asserts that the experiences, thoughts,

and ideas of people with schizophrenia, in particular—a condition wherein individuals are described as “interpret[ing] reality abnormally”—tend to be disregarded as baseless products of disease rather than considered for the deeper meanings and insights that might lay within them.⁵⁵ In using mental illness as a reason to disregard Bess’s nonbinary ideas about human genitalia, Money performed a similarly reductive operation, bypassing the opportunity to develop new approaches to gender that could benefit intersex patients more broadly. After all, Money’s insistence on using surgery and hormone treatments to make the genitals of intersex people appear more distinctly male or female proved traumatic for many; the practice led to at least one suicide and Money was eventually framed as a fraud.⁵⁶ In part due to the disastrous consequences of Money’s approach, the ISNA currently endorses a “patient-centered model” of care that advises against medical interventions aimed at correcting intersex conditions.⁵⁷ To be sure, practitioners of contemporary intersex or transgender medicine have not adopted anything like the methods for producing nonbinary genitalia that Bess imagined. Nevertheless, the artist’s commitment to nonbinary approaches to sexology anticipated significant shifts toward nonbinary gender in intersex as well as transgender healthcare in the US.

Because Bess’s sexological theory was so widely rejected in his lifetime, the art-historical literature written before his death in 1977 says next to nothing about its role in his painting. Scholars and critics in his moment described Bess’s work as having obscure roots, but did not disclose any details about these origins. For instance, in his brief essay for Bess’s 1962 retrospective exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, Schapiro wrote that the artist was “not inspired by texts of poetry or religion, but by a strange significance in what he alone has seen.” Schapiro did not identify that “strange significance,” and he foreclosed the possibility of seeing the paintings from Bess’s perspective, insisting, “We can not read them as the author does; but undeciphered, we feel the beauty and completeness of his art.”⁵⁸ Writing in the catalogue for Bess’s 1981 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, curator Barbara Haskell was the first scholar to mention the foundational motivation in Bess’s paintings when she described them as “derived . . . from dreams and from private symbolism based on obscure sexual references,” but she did not expand on how these sexual references appeared in the work or what they meant.⁵⁹ Critic John Yau wrote enthusiastically about the dreams and visions that drove Bess’s work for the 1989 solo exhibition *Here Is a Sign*, at the Museum Ludwig in Köln, Germany, but Yau, too, downplayed issues of gender and sexuality.⁶⁰

It was not until artist, curator, and critic Robert Gober used his invitation to participate in the 2012 Whitney Biennial as an opportunity to present Bess’s paintings together with his thesis that the importance of the artist’s theory began to surface (fig. 12). Gober called this exhibition-within-an-exhibition *The Man That Got Away*, explaining that the display of archival materials related to the artist’s sexological ideas was his attempt to “make the show happen that never happened during [Bess’s] lifetime.”⁶¹ Gober’s essay for the biennial catalogue marked the first published account of Bess’s theory, methods, and the lengths to which the painter went to try to share his ideas with others.⁶²



Building on this resurgence of interest in Bess's art, the robust scholarship coming out of transgender studies in recent years, and current developments in the nascent field of transgender art history, this essay calls for further consideration of how histories of gender transgression have appeared and continue to appear in art independent of figuration. I borrow poet and literary scholar Charles Bernstein's notion that abstraction can be "figuration by other means."⁶⁵ Bess's use of abstract symbols allowed him to present his ideas about unifying male and female in a single body to audiences who at best may have disregarded them, and at worst might have attacked him for what they perceived as perverted thinking. Further, Bess's significant presence in the papers of Betty Parsons, Meyer Schapiro, and others at the Archives of American Art demonstrates that, despite their earlier censorship, his ideas have been part of the canon of American art for decades. Painting symbolic shapes allowed Bess to stealthily imagine ways of shaping the body that transcended naturalized notions of sexed and gendered existence and to activate transgender and intersex history in American art long before contemporary moves toward their inclusion. Surely, Bess's paintings are but one example of how nonfigurative methods have been used to visualize expansive approaches to gender in art, and there is much work to be done to find others.

fig. 12

Installation view from the Whitney Biennial 2012, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left to right: Forrest Bess, *Untitled (No. 5)*, 1949; *The Hermaphrodite*, 1957; *Untitled*, 1967; *Untitled No. 31*, 1951; *Untitled No. 12a*, 1957; *Bodies of Little Dead Children*, 1949. Photo by Sheldon C. Collins. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art/Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, NY.

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Notes

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- 1 Greenberg, "Abstract Art," *The Nation*, April 15, 1944, 450–51.
- 2 Because *hermaphrodite* is a derogatory term for intersex people, it is used in this essay only when directly quoting Bess or one of his contemporaries and in reference to ancient mythology. I have chosen to retain the troubling term in these instances to preserve the link between the ancient and the modern that was so central to Bess's theory.
- 3 Bess to Parsons, March 12, 1958, Betty Parsons Gallery Records and Personal Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Parsons Records and Papers). For Bess's correspondence with Schapiro, see Meyer Schapiro Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Schapiro Papers).
- 4 See Otto Weininger, Ladislaus Löb, Daniel Steuer, and Laura Marcus, *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 12.
- 5 "Transgender, Adj. and n.," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 8, 2020, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/247649>.
- 6 Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 45.
- 7 Aren Z. Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment, Perverse Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 6–7.
- 8 Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 31.
- 9 Georgiann Davis, *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 31.
- 10 Skidmore, "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 273–77.
- 11 C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 150–75.
- 12 Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 7.
- 13 Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, 8–9.
- 14 World Professional Association for Transgender Health, *Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People, Version 7*, 33, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://www.wpath.org/media/cms/Documents/SOC%20v7/Standards%20of%20Care%20V7%20-%202011%20WPATH.pdf?t=1605186324>.
- 15 "What Is Intersex? Intersex Society of North America," accessed June 10, 2020, https://isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex/.
- 16 Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 146.
- 17 See Bess to Schapiro, "Medical Thesis," ca. 1955, and Bess to Schapiro, January 10, 1956, Schapiro Papers; Bess to John Money, 1963, John Money Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Money Papers); Bess to Parsons, October 26, 1965, Parsons Papers and Records; and Bess to Parsons, n.d., reproduced in Chuck Smith, *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2013), 110. Bess's theory and method only consider the transformation of the penis, thus exhibiting bias in favor of people born with this organ.
- 18 Bess considered these photographic self-portraits part and parcel of his sexological research.
- 19 While Bess's theory seems in line with contemporary definitions of *intersex*, this term did not come into common use until after the artist's death. Thus, he used the older and now

- offensive term *hermaphroditism* to describe his conception of ideal genital embodiment throughout his letters to Schapiro and others.
- 20 Bess to Schapiro, n.d., Schapiro Papers; Bess to Parsons, ca. 1963, Parsons Records and Papers; and Bess to Money, 1969, microfilm reel 3458, frame 57, Money Papers.
- 21 Bess to Schapiro, December 12, 1958, Schapiro Papers.
- 22 Bess to Money, 1969, reel 3458:57, Money Papers.
- 23 Bess to Money, March 13, 1962, reel 3458:389, Money Papers.
- 24 Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 53.
- 25 Bess to James Hillman, March 22, 1961, Parsons Records and Papers.
- 26 Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 12: Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 256.
- 27 H. W. Secor, "New Bladders for Old," *Sexology* 22, no. 5 (December 1955): 314–15.
- 28 Bess to Schapiro, December 1955, Schapiro Papers.
- 29 Cheryl A. Logan, *Hormones, Heredity, and Race: Spectacular Failure in Interwar Vienna* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 23.
- 30 Steinach, *Sex and Life: Forty Years of Biological and Medical Experiments* (New York: Viking Press, 1940), 134–35.
- 31 Logan, *Hormones, Heredity, and Race*, 7–8.
- 32 Smith, *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle*, 88.
- 33 Bess to Eisenhower, January 28, 1955, Schapiro Papers. There is no record in the Archives that Eisenhower's office ever responded to this letter.
- 34 Parsons to Bess, March 12 and September 22, 1958, Parsons Records and Papers.
- 35 Hall, *Betty Parsons: Artist, Dealer, Collector* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 81.
- 36 Parsons to Bess, October 22, 1958, Parsons Records and Papers.
- 37 Ellis, *Havelock Ellis Collection: Sexual Inversion* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 17.
- 38 Bess to Rosalie and Sidney Berkowitz, August 6, 1950 (postmark), Rosalie Berkowitz Papers Related to Forrest Bess, Smithsonian Institution.
- 39 Gibson, "Lesbian Identity and the Politics of Representation in Betty Parson's [sic] Gallery," in *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*, ed. Whitney Davis (New York: Haworth Press, 1994), 256.
- 40 These artists included Bess, Alphonso Ossorio, Sonia Sekula, Leon Polk Smith, and Hedda Sterne. See Gibson, "Lesbian Identity," 254; and Hall, *Betty Parsons*, 95.
- 41 Gibson, "Lesbian Identity," 267.
- 42 Schapiro to Bess, November 9, 1959, Schapiro Papers.
- 43 See Emylia N. Terry, *Christine Jorgensen and the Media: Identity Politics in the Early 1950s Press* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada, 2012), accessed March 2, 2021, <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/award/9/>.
- 44 "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Bronx Youth Is a Happy Woman After 2 Years, 6 Operations," *New York Daily News*, December 1, 1952, 75.
- 45 Alvin Davis, "The Truth About 'Christine' Jorgensen," *New York Evening Post*, April 6, 1953, 2.
- 46 "Christine and the News," *Newsweek*, December 15, 1952, 64.
- 47 Jorgensen, interview conducted by R. Russell, *Christine Jorgensen Reveals* (New York: J Records, 1958). LP, 51 min.
- 48 Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 58–60.
- 49 Bess to Money, October 12, 1962, Money Papers.
- 50 Money to Bess, January 22, 1973, Money Papers.
- 51 Money and Michael De Priest, "Three Cases of Genital Self-Surgery and Their Relationship to Transsexualism," *Journal of Sex Research* 12, no. 4 (November 1976): 283–94.
- 52 Weininger et al., *Sex and Character*.
- 53 Money and De Priest, "Three Cases of Genital Self-Surgery and Their Relationship to Transsexualism," 286.
- 54 See, for example, Eli Clare, "Body Shame, Body Pride," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 261–65.
- 55 "Schizophrenia," Mayo Clinic, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/schizophrenia/symptoms-causes/syc-20354443>; and Ben G., "On Radical Empathy and Schizophrenia," in *Criptiques*, ed. Caitlin Wood (Mineral Point, WI: May Day Press, 2014), 219–27.
- 56 Davis, *Contesting Intersex*, 63–66.
- 57 Alice Dreger, "Shifting the Paradigm of Intersex Treatment," Intersex Society of North America, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://isna.org/compare/>.
- 58 Schapiro, foreword to *Forrest Bess* (New York: Betty Parsons Gallery, 1962), Parsons Records and Papers.
- 59 Haskell, *Forrest Bess* (exhibition pamphlet) (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1981), Dana Friis-Hansen Papers on Forrest Bess, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 60 Yau, "On the Life and Art of Forrest Bess," in *Here is a Sign: Forrest Bess (1911–1977)*, ed. Alfred M. Fischer (Köln: Museum Ludwig, 1989), 24.
- 61 Gober, "Forrest Bess (by Robert Gober)," Whitney Museum of American Art, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/777>.
- 62 Gober, "Forrest Bess," in *Whitney Biennial 2012*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in collaboration with Yale University Press, 2012), 67–69. Smith's *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle* (2013) reprints many of the materials that Gober displayed in the biennial and contextualizes them with biographical information about the artist.
- 63 Bernstein, "Disfiguring Abstraction," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 3 (2013): 488.