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## “In And Out Of Power”

### **P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center**

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This exhibition of photographs from the pages of the *New York Times*, collected during a four-month period last spring, provided a strange, discontinuous narrative given more sense by its context than by anything else. Quite a lot happened during those four months, or almost happened: there were the attempted assassinations of president and pope, an attempted coup in Spain, a flare-up in Northern Ireland, a near-revolution in Poland, a near-abortive space launching here. And of course a great deal of political to-ing and fro-ing in Washington and New York. A lot of activity, yet few of the pictures reflect this drama—a soldier waves his pistol at the Spanish parliament, some Irishmen overturn a truck, and of course there is Reagan’s puzzled dismay as the bullet strikes. Mostly the pictures are of small groups of men, important men, smiling and looking serious, always looking important. As Squiers observes in her press release, these pictures all have a reserve about them that is supposed to cue their viewers to the seriousness of current events, and to let them understand that serious people are taking care of things. All the shots are medium to long in range; all are informative rather than sensationalist;

and all are of public scenes, except on the rare occasion that a woman or child is allowed to be the center of attention to underscore the gravity of a situation (grieving widow, worried wife, bewildered son).

What also becomes apparent in these front-page pictures is the refusal of public figures to meet the individual gaze of the camera. Intimate pictures, pictures of family and friends, usually establish that gaze as a sign of shared emotion, and it is that sign that is appropriated in advertising and in pornography when the producer wants to establish that something is especially for you, and only you. Politicians are rarely bashful about using that same sign of intimacy when campaigning, so why not when recorded in the pursuit of their daily business? Can it be that they share a secret shame with those accused we see being led to and from court huddling under overcoats? Or have they learned the actor's trick of appearing more "natural" if ignoring the camera? But they are clearly not ignoring the camera—rather, they are ostentatiously posing for it, but avoiding eye contact. Squiers offers no analysis of this convention, merely a chance to observe it, but that in itself is a service few other photography critics are willing to provide. We still seem easily mystified by photography, and continued exposure to its variety is the only cure for that.

## Forrest Bess

### Whitney Museum of American Art

Artists and critics have long sought validation from wildmen, have looked for authority from the primitive and the unschooled. It was with madmen and saints that they hoped to find the key to an authentic expression. So it is interesting that the Whitney should choose this moment to revive the work of Forrest Bess, a Texas primitive who died four years ago. Interesting because of the current upsurge of pseudo-expressionism, and interesting because it demonstrates an apparent curatorial misunderstanding that might just prove to have gotten things right.

Bess, to put it mildly, was an eccentric. And by far the most fascinating thing about his eccentricity centers on what Barbara Haskell, writing in the brochure that accompanies the exhibition, rather daintily describes as his "obscure sexual references." Bess believed that androgyny held the key to everlasting life, and "advocated uniting male and female by means of a surgically produced fistula into the male urethra, which made possible urethral orgasm." Apparently Bess was a tireless advocate of this theory (though he never seems to have bothered overmuch that women would be unable to share this mode of immortality), and he even underwent a series of operations to prove his point. Haskell refuses to tell us any more, however, which is a disappointment, if an expected one. It seems to me that if critics and historians are going to use biography to help them explain an artist's work they have an obligation to go all the way, not just tease their readers with fragmentary gossip.

The paintings that came from this seemingly overheated imagination are remarkably modest and restrained—small icons of thick, dark paint framed by rather chunky strips of wood. We are told that the images came to Bess in that agitated state between wakefulness and sleep, and that he considered himself no more than a conduit or medium, recording these visions without

elaboration. The signs that he jotted down and used in his paintings are remarkably similar to that range of symbols collected and made familiar by Carl Jung. What at first can be claimed as a personal iconography turns out to be, if not universal, at least widespread enough to be characterized as stereotypical (something acknowledged by Jung when, in a response to a letter from Bess, he told the artist that his ideas were not unique or new). Odd as they are, the paintings yet gain a quiet force from this quality of being already known. They make the strange seem familiar, they domesticate the primitive.

And, in so doing, they would seem to contradict Haskell's thesis: that the "directness and authenticity" of Bess' paintings have something to do with current practice. She is right, though, if for the wrong reason. For what is interesting about Bess' work is that it demonstrates the impossibility of that much vaunted ideal of personal authenticity, and does so from the inside. Bess was a troubled man who cobbled together a theory of hermaphroditism to explain and justify a felt loss of real identity. And yet, working as an untutored loner, he still came up with the same old pictures. Apparently even wildmen cannot escape the prison house of language, the constraints of representation.

## [Alexander Liberman](#)

### **Andre Emmerich**

From the unschooled to the over-schooled, from the oversexed to the bloodless. There is really not much to say about work like Alexander Liberman's, since it has been emptied so relentlessly of all meaning. Eschewing all reference but the depiction of space, the work is supposed to stand on its formal qualities alone, but even these are revealed as easy gestures and easier shapes. There is no transcendent beauty here, no significant form (though we are meant to believe there is)—only the banal doodlings of a decorator sadly lacking in wit.

The paintings here were of bright, unmixed acrylic paint applied in broad sweeps. In most of them a black shape, something like an abstracted door frame, serves as a foil for generally sloping bands of color arranged across the surface of the canvas. Each stroke looks complete, considered, although there is a certain allowance for mess and spatter and drip, the obligatory signs of creative intuition expressing itself.

The sculptures are equally formulaic, equally the result of exercise for its own sake. Volumetric studies faintly echoing the work of Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, they describe a space through the deployment of painted steel flats. The larger pieces, with many interlocking planes within the confines of a fairly simple overall shape, are quite complicated, but never complex. The show, and one's attention, drooped.

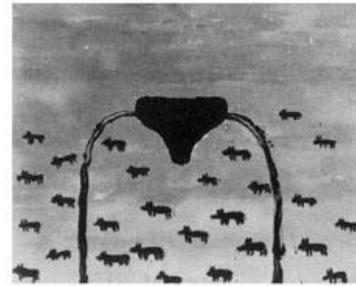
—[Thomas Lawson](#)

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Illustrations within the review section are designed to be considered as references to (not reproductions of) original works. In the dimensions, height precedes width; performance, film, and video are represented by two images where possible; installation photos are indicated by a surrounding gray box.



Forrest Bess, untitled, 1951, oil on canvas, 8 x 10"

## New York

"In and Out of Power: Photographs from the New York Times," P.S. 1; FORREST BESS, Whitney Museum of American Art; ALEXANDER LIBERMAN, André Emmerich:

### "In and Out of Power"

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Alexander Liberman, *Gate XVI*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 84 1/4 x 60"



Vernon Fisher, *Show and Tell*, 1981, mixed media, about 67 x 180"

everlasting life, and "advocated uniting male and female by means of a surgically produced fistula into the male urethra, which made possible urethral orgasm." Apparently Bess was a tireless advocate of this theory (though he never seems to have bothered overmuch that women would be unable to share this mode of immortality), and he even underwent a series of operations to prove his point. Haskell refuses to tell us any more, however, which is a disappointment, if an expected one. It seems to me that if critics and historians are going to use biography to help them explain an artist's work they have an obligation to go all the way, not just tease their readers with fragmentary gossip.

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**VERNON FISHER, Barbara Gladstone Gallery; BARBARA SCHWARTZ, Willard Gallery; RICHARD POUSETTE-DART, Marisa del Re Gallery;**

#### VERNON FISHER

"Snow" is the key word in Vernon Fisher's new triptychs of texts and images. Snow, the natural phenomenon, appears as the manifest content of two of the narratives. In one an unfortunate child, never prepared for "sharing time" in school, finally demonstrates snow by crumbling Kleenex; in another snowflakes fall, as big as "trashcan lids" and as "transparent" as "jellyfish." Snow, the technological phenomenon—interference on your TV set—forms the latent content of all the pieces; Fisher's use of texts superimposed on photo-derived images, each obscuring the other, invokes bad reception on the tube. His insistence on using visual imagery from

the mass media, and his fractured multiplicity, strengthen the theme of information overload, snow as the buzz of competing signals. Even the re-creation of a Jackson Pollock "drip" painting, in *Pollock*, becomes in this context the objective correlative of static.

The impulse is to tune out the background noise. Yet "interference" is for Fisher the crucial interface, the point from which one can see/hear both sides. It's where meaning resides. Hence the presence of various images of transparency and of connection. In *Snow Dream* there are the jellyfishlike snowflakes, and a small bridge mediates between its own rainbow-colored three-dimensionality and a rectangle of black brushstrokes applied directly on the wall. In *Albino*, a sheet of tracing paper allows us to see through to stars painted underneath. The central panel is a kind of photorealist painting representing blue sky and clouds. The albino of the text, we infer, is both monstrous, a freak of nature, belonging to the "bestial" representations of the third part of the triptych—canvas cutouts of a rabbit, dog, lion, caveman among others—and otherworldly: ethereal in her whiteness, the "celestial" stars and clouds claim her.

There are some distinctions that, at first, Fisher does not seem willing to blur. Several pieces dealing with relations between men and women incorporate war imagery—fighter planes, paratroopers, swastikas. No easy connections here. But if the only place where both sexes can meet is in battle, is the annihilation that results like the evanescence of the albino? *Pollock* insists on male and female anatomical