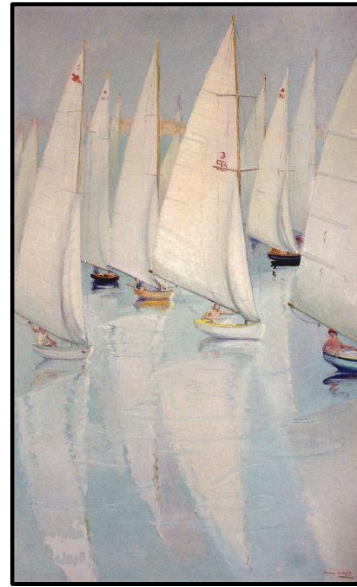
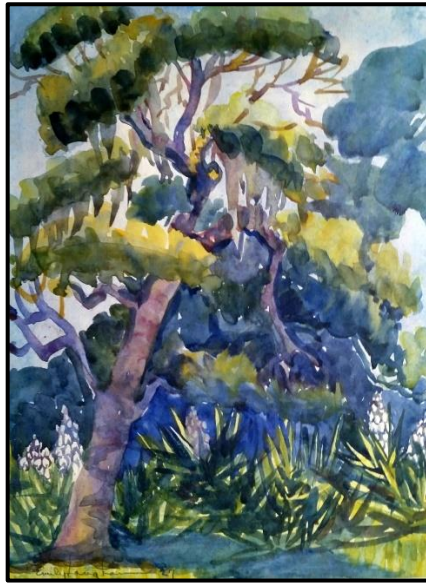


HETAG Newsletter No. 49, July 2021



Emily Langham *Green Summer* 1927(l); Dawson Dawson-Watson *Rockport, MA* 1933 (r)

What work of art could be more appropriate as a header to this Summer issue of the HETAG Newsletter than Emily Langham's 1927 watercolor, *Green Summer* – especially after all the rain we've had. Of course, many HETAGers are traveling this year, off to places like Rockport, Massachusetts, where Dawson Dawson-Watson made his exuberant painting of sailboats in 1933. (Yes, Dawson-Watson is a Houston artist, as we discovered in the [HETAG newsletter for March/April 2017!](#)) Or taking to the road around Texas, seeing the big landscape that Henri Gadbois captured in 1967. But whether you're at home or away, there's a wealth of Earlier Houston Art to see – and this year we can go see some of it in person! Here's wishing everyone a safe, happy, art-filled GREEN SUMMER.



Henri Gadbois *The Big Landscape* 1967

Houston Art History Notes: That Fiesty Forrest Bess



Forrest Bess in 1963 (l), and painting at his Chinquapin bait camp.

Forrest Bess (1911-1977) is now a Grand Old Darling of the Houston art world, with an international reputation and a backstory to go along with his art that is macabrely irresistible. Even though he spent most of his life in Bay City, he had strong Houston connections and his work is included in the permanent collections of both the [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston](#), and [The Menil Collection](#). In fact, he's one of the VERY FEW Houston artists of his period whose work you can actually see right now (or ever) on the gallery walls at both museums.

The Bess Myth says that he lived his life a recluse in a self-built shanty on Matagorda Bay, painting his visions in solitude, divorced from the world outside. But the truth is – it wasn't quite so. He was very much involved in his career, loved publicity, and welcomed visitors. Surviving documents reveal that he was a vivacious conversationalist, something of a wit, and, when necessary, could give as good (or bad) as he got.

Take for instance, his long-running back-&-forth in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the then art critic of THE HOUSTON POST, Campbell Geeslin (1925-2017). Geeslin did not like Bess's work at all, which he made quite clear in the pages of the newspaper: "I would prefer to just ignore Forrest Bess," he said in a 1962 review. But Bess wasn't taking it with his brushes lying down: "Even though he doesn't like my paintings, I read Campbell Geeslin and I think some day he'll make an art critic. He just isn't quite housebroken yet," Bess said to POST columnist, Leon Hale. "Tell him that for me."

The Bess-Geeslin "feud" makes for fun Houston Art History reading, and throws a clearer light on the true personality of one of Houston's most celebrated artists.

Critic Puts Artist Bess in a Black Mood

To The Houston Post.

In reviewing Mr Richard Stout's paintings at the New Art Gallery (Post Feb 1), Mr Campbell Geeslin revealed the fact that he (Mr Geeslin) did not like black paint. Quotation—"Mr Stout isn't dependent on black to create his graphic patterns. Only one tiny corner of one enormous picture, 'The Fabulous Hymn,' is black I'm glad of that."

Mr Geeslin attacked my paintings at the same gallery last May 4 as being frayed, cracked, dirty, not pretty, messy looking, crusty, and gave Mr Geeslin "the creeps."

He did mention that Dr Meyer Schapiro of Columbia liked them (and has bought several, I might add), which was the only nice thing he had to say about the show. Since May I have been at a loss to understand why such an attack was made on my work but I am now beginning to understand. Mr Geeslin doesn't like black He just doesn't like it and he is glad Mr Stout just had one tiny corner in black.

Gosh, Mr Editor, if only the artist knew what the critic didn't like! Take my canvas of "The Atom Bomb" as it has been described. Remove the black and all I would have would be two little spots of blue on a field of white. It is a terrific idea; no black and if black is there remove it; two little spots of blue; no "atom bomb"; no worry; just spots; no fly specks; no hurricane mud; no fish-camp filth;

just pure blue on clean white. It is a terrific idea. To what heights one could ascend without black paint!

Picasso! You used black in "Guernica"? Miro! What you using black for?

Harken unto this man, O aspiring artist (especially if you hang your work around Houston).

Has black printers' ink prejudiced Mr — naw, I don't believe it. Chuckle.

FORREST BESS

Bess Bait Camp at Chinquapin

The comment concerning black in the review of Richard Stout's show grew out of an earlier (Jan 25) review of the New York-Paris exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts. Mr Geeslin wrote then:

"The black vogue has reached such heights that one painter has two pictures that are nothing but black. . . . Franz Kline has smeared his wide black strokes across his slightly soiled canvas. Robert Motherwell makes his big black shapes against a brown background. . . . I like enormously Adolph Gottlieb's 'From Midnight to Dawn' of rich blue and (there it is again) black . . ." Mr Geeslin adds: "At the time I saw Mr Bess' work in April of last year I was not nearly so tired of black as I am at the moment. And by the time Mr Bess has his next exhibit I may have decided, in my own perverse fashion, to hate all paintings with red in them."

—Ed.

Forrest Bess to the Editor *The Houston Post* February 13, 1959.

Mrs Meadows Names No Name Painting

To The Houston Post

In reference to Jim Mousner's article (Houston Now, Feb 2) about Forrest Bess, artist, and his 8x10 No Name canvas

There is only one thing this canvas could be called—especially in our present day century—and that is "An Atomic Blast at Yucca Flats." What else? It's only too plain to see the great mushroom cloud hurling the earth and rocks from its center. Don't you agree?

I'm surprised the artist, with an imagination such as his, hasn't already figured this out for himself!

MRS L. C. MEADOWS
West Columbia



NO NAME PAINTING
Forrest Bess' Primitive Symbolism



Bess's "Atomic Painting" - as dubbed by Mrs. L.C. Meadows in her letter to *The Houston Post*.

NewsBank
Houston Post (published as THE HOUSTON POST) - May 9, 1963 - page 10
May 21, 1963 - Houston Post (published as THE HOUSTON POST) - Houston, Texas - Page 10

ART

By CAMPBELL GEESLIN

Bess at CAM

I would prefer to just ignore Forrest Bess.

But his work has been thoughtfully considered by Meyer Schapiro, art historian on the Columbia faculty. Bess has had one-man exhibits at the New Arts gallery, and this past season he had a large one-man exhibit at the Betty Parsons gallery in New York. Currently, 60 Bess works are hanging in the Contemporary Arts Museum.

The New Yorker magazine, in its listing of the Bess show in New York, referred to his work as "neo-primitive." The label sent me to the dictionary where I discovered that neo just means new and so I figured out (painfully) that Bess is a new kind of primitive.

ONE OF THE most welcome elements in primitive art (the Grandma kind of primitive, of course - not African-New Guinea) is the charm that comes from seeing familiar things depicted with childlike simplicity, originality and naivete.


Bess almost never gives us a recognizable object. His abstract pictures suggest some unpleasant diagram (poorly drawn and crudely painted) in a medical journal.

The colors are often dark, toneless, dull and depressing. Obviously, others do not share my reaction to Bess' work, because the display at the Contemporary Arts Museum is splendid. Because most of the Bess paintings are small, they have been grouped in tight little arrangements that make them seem a lot more interesting than they are.

NewsBank
Houston Post (published as THE HOUSTON POST) - May 21, 1963 - page 18
May 21, 1963 - Houston Post (published as THE HOUSTON POST) - Houston, Texas - Page 18

Painter Bess Says He's 'In' In New York, But Not Here

The fact that Mr Campbell Geeslin (Art, May 12) has not mellowed in his criticism of my painting is admirable. He don't like my work. The fact that he remembered having seen them before is complimentary.



There is certainly nothing wishy-washy about his attitude.

I can't say as much about the New York art critics. For example my 1959 show there was panned by everyone. Why didn't I just fish for a living? What a character; take him away; send him back to Texas. However my last show there in 1961 was different even though I showed "the same . . . pictures." This time I was a good guy; authentic; unpretentious; awesome; wonderful. What can the artist think about such wishy-washy, turnabout criticism? It couldn't possibly mean very much.

I think perhaps I respect the divergent views of Mr Geeslin and Miss Ann Holmes and had better hang around here for awhile. This letter will possibly bar me from New York.

Bait shrimp is still two bucks a quart. Fishing is slow because of the wind but ought to pick up soon. It had better pick up soon.

FORREST BESS

1701 E, Bay City

NewsBank

Houston Post (published as THE HOUSTON POST) October 2, 1963 page 50
October 2, 1963 Houston Post (published as THE HOUSTON POST) Houston, Texas Page 50

LEON HALE

'Recluse,' in Rebellion, Painted Sputniks in 1946



Forrest Bess is 52 and a bachelor. On the telephone he tells people he lives in a cave.

But when you go to see him the cave turns out to be a crude cabin of irregular shape. It stands on the west bank of Chinquapin Bayou where that stream intersects the Intracoastal Canal before emptying into East Matagorda Bay.

BESS LIVES THERE alone. He fishes and shrimps and paints pictures that a lot of people don't understand.

"The story goes that I'm a recluse," Bess told me last week. "I'm not. I probably mix with more people than anybody."

To mix with Forrest Bess, you can drive out of Bay City to Wadsworth and on down below Lake Austin by way of a shell road. When the road stops at the Intracoastal you park and honk. That's Bess' "cave" yonder across the bayou. He'll come across in his boat and get you.

At least that's how it worked when I went, with an appointment set up by telephone. I guess Bess is right about not being a recluse. A recluse wouldn't have a telephone or a television or a radio and Bess has all three, there in his cave.

Bess is tall and blue-eyed and has a red weathered complexion and a coarse shock of hair, almost white. He wore sneakers and khaki pants and a red and white checked sport shirt. Smokes a pipe.

A LOT OF PEOPLE that know about art know about Forrest Bess and his paintings. But I had never heard of him, and he had never heard of me, so we had an even start.

We didn't get very far, though.

I confess I had trouble communicating with the man, so if this report seems confused I will apologize in advance. And if it contains inaccuracies about Bess' painting, perhaps Bess can write to Campbell Geeslin, the art critic of this journal, and get Geeslin to straighten everything out.

"Even though he doesn't like my paintings," Bess said, "I read Geeslin and I think some day he'll make an art critic. He just isn't quite housebroken yet. Tell him that for me."

This much I think I got right:

BESS CAME TO Chinquapin Bayou to build a cabin for his father. Then he began "looking

at clouds and got into a school of trout or two, and I've been here 18 years."

The cabin has a bed, a two-burner stove, a refrigerator, a table with a typewriter and a great deal of paraphernalia a man needs to fish and shrimp and paint pictures.

Bess said he stays down on Chinquapin because there are days when he has a lot of time just to run his boat around and reflect.

"I am in rebellion against," he said.

Did that mean he is in rebellion against everything?

No, that wasn't what he meant at all. And then he explained what he meant, but I didn't understand it.

I EXAMINED ONE of Bess' paintings. The title of it is "Before Man." It struck me as being a desert landscape at night. The sand is black and I could see some pyramids on the horizon. Then in the foreground are a series of vertical lines with circles on the ends of them, and little horizontal lines crossing the verticals so that I thought of musical notes.

"I'm not of the school of abstract expressionism," Bess said. "I'm classified as a visionary painter."

He said he was doing research in co-operation with Johns Hopkins University concerning the relationship between endocrinology and painting. This has to do with the effect asserted by human glands on painting. I may have that wrong. I think I have.

BESS TALKED ABOUT his work being "a new dimension in painting," in which he is dealing with the projection of the subconscious.

He showed me a photograph of one of his paintings, done in 1946. It looked like a couple of satellites orbiting the earth. Bess said that was his subconscious prophesying the sputniks, 10 years before they came to pass.

I also understood him to say he felt his subconscious was about to prophesy something else in the near future, and that this would bring about a change in his life.

Bess offered to serve refreshments and boiled shrimp. I found him friendly and patient. A good host. A mighty interesting man who for all I know may be a genius.

At one point he explained that he painted his canvases small because when a hurricane came he had to stick 'em all under his arm and run. That much about his paintings I understood.

SAVE THE DATE

**CASETA MEMBERS AND ALL PASSIONATE
EARLY TEXAS ART LOVERS**



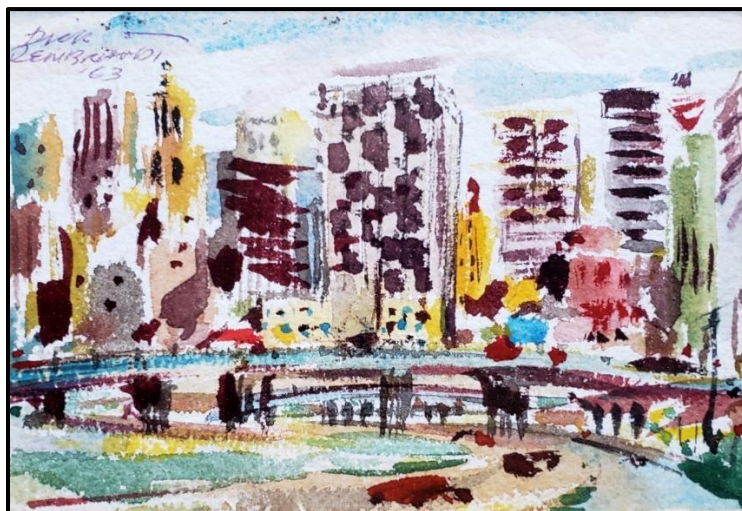
**2021 CASETA
VIRTUAL FALL FORUM
OCTOBER 1 & 2**

With virtual talks and virtual collection tours.

The focus will be on Houston, since the 2020 CASETA Symposium and Texas Art Fair in our city had to be cancelled.

**October 1: Friday evening
opening program**

**October 2: Saturday sessions
throughout the day**



Dick Rembrandt Houston Skyline 1963

**[More information to come!](#)
[Keep an eye on the CASETA website.](#)**

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

As some of you already know because you were there, we had our first in-person HETAG meeting in over a year on Wednesday, July 14, to join HETAGer and Earlier Houston Artist (and also Contemporary Houston Artist) Erik Sprohge for a HETAG reception of his retrospective exhibition.



[ERIK SPROHGE: THROUGH A MYSTICAL LENS](#)

[Watercolor Art Society Houston](#)
1601 West Alabama

It was a wonderful evening, but if you had to miss it, you can still see the exhibition through July, and you can join Erik for his -

Artist Talk
Friday, July 30, 2021
5-7 PM

"Featuring more than 50 original watercolors and acrylics, this exhibition will be a true survey of Sprohge's life's work, with pieces ranging from his early years as a professional artist to his most recent abstract paintings. This exhibit will present the breadth of subject matter he has tackled, including early pieces from his time in Mexico, Texana, figures in motion, land and seascapes, and more recent abstracts."



HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Exhibitions of interest – in Houston and around Texas:



Roberta Harris *Round and Round Again* 2021

[Going to the Moon And Making Love Like Crazy](#)

[Roberta Harris](#)

[Heidi Vaughan Fine Art](#)

**Saturday, July 10 – September 4, 2021
Artist Talk Saturday, August 21, 2021, 1 PM**



[The Road So Far: Jesse Lott & Travis Whitfield](#)

Exhibition curated by Ann Harithas

[The Station Museum of Contemporary Art](#)

1502 Alabama St. - Houston, TX

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group



David Cargill: The Lighter Side

On view June 5 - September 12, 2021

[AMSET: Art Museum of Southeast Texas](#), Beaumont



Emma Richardson Cherry *On the Gallery, at the Pines* 1896.
Collection of Juli and Sam Stevens.

[America's Impressionism: Echoes of a Revolution](#)

[San Antonio Museum of Art](#)

June 11 – September 5, 2021



Gene Charlton *Cherries* 1947 (l); Ruth Laird and Stella Sullivan *Owls, Owls, Owls* (r)

Evocative Objects: Still Life Painting in Texas

**J. Wayne Stark Galleries
Memorial Student Center, MSC 1110
Texas A&M University, College Station
August 12 – October 3, 2021**

**Gallery talk with
Judy Tedford Deaton,
Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Grace Museum, Abilene
September 9, 2021, 5:30 PM**

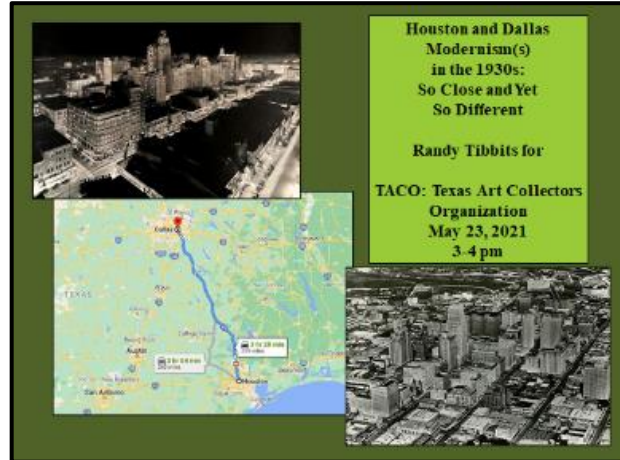
Strokes of Genius
An overview of Texas Impressionism

**J. Wayne Stark Galleries
Memorial Student Center, MSC 1110
Texas A&M University, College Station
October 7 – December 18, 2021**

**Gallery talk with
Michael Grauer,
McCaslin Chair of Cowboy Culture and Curator of Cowboy Collections and
Western Art at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum
October 7, 2021, 5:30 PM**

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

Through this pandemic year, CASETA: Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art, TACO: Texas Art Collectors Group, and HETAG: Houston Earlier Texas Art Group have presented a number of virtual Early Texas Art programs which are available for online viewing. Here are links to some – in case you missed them the first time:



[The Artist as Citizen: Frank Freed's Lessons on the Importance of Social Commentary](#) presented by Carmen Champion

[Houston/Dallas Modernism\(s\) in the 1930s: So Close, and Yet so Different](#) presented by Randy Tibbits

[Texas Curatorial Wander Series by CASETA](#)

Taking us to San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, The Umlauf Sculptor Garden and Museum, Austin, and The Grace Museum, Abilene.

[Texas Made Modern: The Art of Everett Spruce](#) presented by Shirley Reece-Hughes

[LIVE from The Heritage Society with Mister McKinney](#), featuring Randy Tibbits

HETAG: The Houston Earlier Texas Art Group

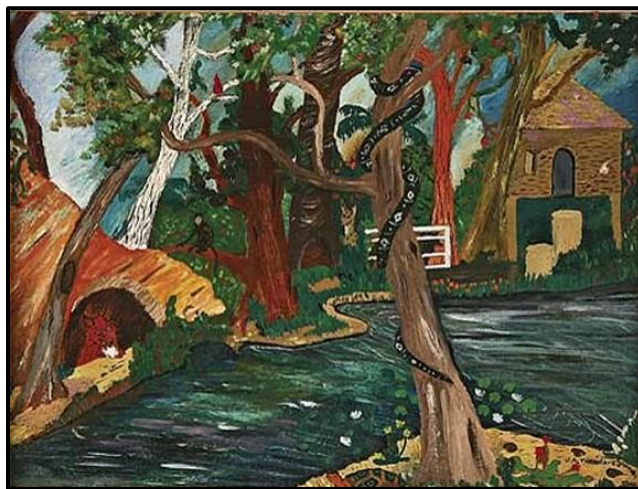


Jewel Woodard Simon *The Stream* ca1930s, Panhandle-Plains Historical Collection

The mission of HETAG is to illuminate Houston's art history by providing viewing opportunities for art, by supporting and doing research on the artists and art communities working in Houston through the years, and by spreading the word.

Back issues of the HETAG Newsletter are available via the
[University of Houston Libraries Digital Library](#)
and
[The Portal to Texas History](#)

Randy Tibbits, coordinator
HETAG: The Houston Earlier
Texas Art Group
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Jewel Woodard Simon *A Jungle Fancy, Child of the Imagination* ca1930s.