

On Confidence: Painting from Texas

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The history of art in Texas is like an aquifer, rarely seen but consistently tapped. Texas as a state could be broken into five separate states, each section more similar in many ways to their closet proximity, The Valley being more akin to the northern states of Mexico, the gulf coast more similar to Louisiana and so on, however there is a consistency within these specific regions that tie them to one another. Some type of specifically Texan *je ne sais quoi* that generates from a pride or a confidence in the singularity of the state. This confidence and isolation is something that no other region expresses so directly as Texas.

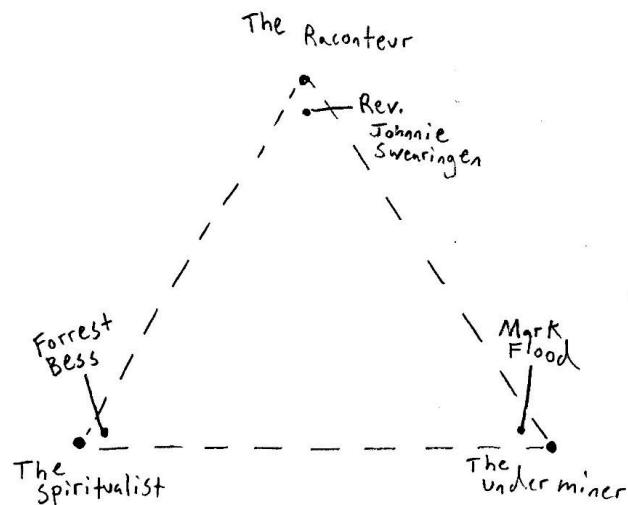
Within this essay I will delve into this specific confidence, community, and isolation and its effect upon painterly artistic output within the state. The shifting tides of Texas painters have ranged greatly over the years, however I will focus specifically upon three artists that encapsulate the essential modes of making within the creative environment of Texas over the past and present centuries. The specific parameters I have set in selecting these artists are their having been born and raised in Texas, along with having made the majority of their work within Texas. While the artists included in this essay adhere to these specifications, I will argue that these inherent traits of artmaking can be found in artists who were simply raised in Texas, though they might ultimately venture elsewhere.

While I will tend to generalize, this practice of division is based on my own fencing-in of the Texas artistic terrain for my own creative output, to better understand *my* practice—not to confine Texan artists to modes and practices that they can and cannot use. This is the practice of placing the cart behind the horse, following the ideas put forth with reverence, and locating artistic kin along the way.

That being said, people who find themselves under the shadow of being a *Texas Artist* fall into three primary groups, three pillars in which lies a certain tension: *the spiritualist*, an artist

who sees their practice as a substrate to harness certain unseen powers of the aether, a trait specifically found within practices of the south and the southwest United States; *the raconteur*, an artist who uses overt narrative in the form of traditional painting styles found in Texas—landscape and history painting, these artists are primarily referred to as “folk artists”, but I believe this term to be derogatory and outdated; and *the underminer*, an artist who takes the reins of accepted formats of artmaking, disassembling their history through sheer force, working as a prankster, self organized enfants terribles, a punk slinger of pigment.

These categories work on a spectrum, a proportion in which all Texas artists can be qualified. Forrest Bess, Rev. Johnnie Swearingen and Mark Flood respectively become the delegates of these vertices, however the similarities of their experiences emphasize a Texan specificity and confidence that could not have had come from any other region.



I first encountered the terse, self conscious paintings of Forrest Bess in New York City. The work was *Untitled (No. 5)*, wherein an orange slash sits in an ombre turquoise plane, its head engulfed in some sort of gray cloud or rock. The orange appears to be a figure photographing the

ocean, or Santa fishing. The painting is on panel and surrounded by an inch thick driftwood artist's frame, the entire piece could easily fit in a purse.



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Forrest Bess was born in 1911 in Bay City, TX where he died in 1977. Living a secluded life in a house he built in the fishing village of Chinquapin, TX, Bess worked consistently in the same notebook paper scale from the year 1957 until his death.² The symbols depicted in varying levels of impasto were direct illustrations of visions related to Bess' understanding of sexuality and immortality. He became a steward of these messages. A bait fisherman by day, Bess' home was only reachable by boat, described by the Houston Chronicler as *the loneliest spot in Texas*³. This isolation is a commonality within the practices of Texas Artists. Bess' circumvention of the lack of a art world audience can be seen within his Thesis, a collaged one-page manifesto of his spiritual beliefs that he would try to get his gallerist, Betty Parsons, to hand out in conjunction

¹ Forrest Bess, *Untitled (No. 5)*, 1949, Collection of Mickey Cartin

² Michael Ennis, "His Name Was Forrest Bess," Texas Monthly, June 1982,
<https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/his-name-was-forrest-bess/>

³ Wallace Ludel, "Forrest Bess Was a Fisherman by Day and Painter of Wild Visions by Night. A New Show Explores His Legacy," Artnet, September 2022,
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/forrest-bess-camden-art-center-2182814#:~:text=In%201956%C2%A0writer%20for,the%20water%20in%20his%20skiff>

with his paintings, though she never did⁴. The images are graphic and speak of Bess' belief that immortality could be granted if the sexes were combined to become something which gives and receives simultaneously. After continually performing various surgeries on himself, Bess eventually died in 1977 due to complications of one of these ill-advised experiments, drilling a hole at the base of his scrotum⁵.

Continuing to live in Chinquapin while performing these surgeries, painting and writing, Bess remained a beloved member of the community. His paintings are constantly found in sheds and attics lining the gulf coast⁶. Given to friends as gifts, his painting became a kind of token, something to be shared and spread, for there was little to no art world at the time within Texas. Initially, the only way he could get his paintings out of his studio was if he directly gave them to people.

Bess' paintings continue to confound and exhilarate viewers, their wavering line and textured surface highlighting Bess' supposed lack of confidence—something we would now consider Abstract Expressionism. Bess' hand was a dial for his spiritual beliefs, his hand a tool for his psyche, unsurely rendering symbols and planes.

There is no front door to painting in Texas. No Texan painter approaches the idea of painting confidently without the confines of these separate beliefs. As with Bess' tie to spirituality, Reverend Johnnie Swearingen similarly did not see his paintings as simply paintings, rather as surfaces in which he could tell stories of his life. “Swearingen’s paintings are comic strips without the lines, the narrative can be read by following the painting from top to bottom.”⁷

⁴ Forrest Bess. Forrest Bess' "Thesis", circa 1955. Meyer Schapiro papers, 1949-1982. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵ Lucia Simek, “The Landscape of Eternity: Travels through Texas with Forrest Bess,” Ursula Magazine, September 2023

⁶ Simek, Lucia. (Deputy Director of the Dallas Contemporary). Interview with Sam Linguist. April 14, 2024.

⁷ Webb, Julie. (Owner of Webb Gallery). Interview with Sam Linguist. April 20, 2024

Painted in swirling Munchian lines in a flattened perspective reminiscent of Indian Court Paintings, Swearingen's surfaces become like coarse sand, scrubby, confident brush marks divide the campus into swaths of blue rivers, green prairies. Snow is rendered in milky transparencies lathered over the once brown dirt. Figures appear expressive, but seldom with faces.

Reverend Johnnie Swearingen was born in 1908 in Chappel Hill, TX and spent most of his later life in Brenham, TX and Huntsville, TX after train hopping to work grape fields in California. His first paintings were inspired by those of sailors on the West Coast and were composed of shoe polish on cardboard. Swearingen moved back to Texas when his mother became ill, and after her passing, he became a reverend. It was this return to Texas that prompted his practice in painting to grow, depicting both biblical and personal narratives. He would sell his paintings out of his truck parked next to the courthouse, gradually gaining him a devoted following.⁸ His commitment to narrative painting and his well-respected place in Texas art culture made his gestures more confident. Swearingen would slash the canvas with smears and puddles of oil paint, creating figures and landscapes with one or two gestures all with a very large brush.

⁸ Julie Webb, "Rev. Johnnie Swearingen" The Webb Gallery artist biography, <https://www.webbartgallery.com/rev-johnnie-swearingen>



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Swearingen's work was primarily about the community it produced or taught; his work did not exist without a viewer or a crowd. "I painted to make people happy. I love it. It's a gift from god."¹⁰ He was not an outsider in his community. Instead, he united artists and parishioners alike with his work and his personality.

The narrative of an artist working outside of a recognized urban artistic community is most times likened to a loner or an outsider—one that is rejected from the society in which they are engaged outside of. Bess and Swearingen flip this idea on its head, revealing a community that in its essence describes the experience of being an artist in Texas. While many people who engaged with the paintings of Bess or Swearingen certainly did not know initially what exactly was going on, or to what importance their artistic talents would leave, they were greatly accepted and cared for by the community. The raconteur cannot tell a story without an audience.

This is similar to the anti-establishment ultimately requiring an establishment. For what can there be to undermine if you're above ground? West of Rauschenberg's hometown and just

⁹ Rev. Johnnie Swearingen, Red Cows, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 30", 1978, Courtesy of Webb Gallery

¹⁰ Julie Webb, "Rev. Johnnie Swearingen" The Webb Gallery artist biography, <https://www.webbartgallery.com/rev-johnnie-swearingen>

up the coast from the waters Forrest Bess used to fish lies the petrochemical capital of the United States. Houston, Texas is mostly known for the oil industry, astroturf and the Rothko Chapel; and Mark Flood is the love child of the three. Born in 1957, Mark Flood—a pseudonym sometimes exchanged for Perry Webb—became a sponge for Houston during the 70s and 80s. Graduating from Rice University 1981, Flood was involved in many music and art groups, most importantly being the frontman for Culturcide, a punk band.

Flood worked for many years as a security guard for the Menil Collection, one of the highest esteemed private collections in America. Having to be dressed in usual security guard garb during his day job in perhaps the most climate controlled location on the gulf coast, Flood spent his off time brashly painting canvases with slogans such as “*MASTURBATE OFTEN*” or my personal favorite, “*EAT HUMAN FLESH*”. Flood uses the same language of abstract expressionists and color field painters, but mockingly laces it with critique and innuendo. At one point, Flood gifted the painting titled *Eat Human Flesh* to a friend who hung it above his couch in front of his picture frame window. The Houston police department saw it from the street and raided the house, thinking that Flood’s friend was running a cannibalistic operation. Somewhere between the humor of Ed Ruscha and Carrot Top, Flood lathers surfaces with flecked marks of spray paint and magazine cutouts, removing the artist’s hand almost completely from the making of the work. His phrases, starting in the late eighties and continuing today, become almost like advertisements or protest posters. His like xerox machine trying its hand at neo-expressionism.¹¹

¹¹ Mark Flood, *The Diary of Mark Flood, Part Two: Home Alone*, Artnet, May 2016



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Flood is the bridge for countless Houston-based artists to the outside art world. For many years within *Mark Flood resents*, a gallery in which couches and Lazy Boys lined the rear of a stripmall storefront, Flood gathered a congregation of young artists who have now gone on to greater art world fame.¹³

Flood is a direct descendent of the Rauschenbergian conception of what painting could be. Flood points at the insecurities of the art world and the art market from a flyover state distance. If Rauschenberg brought anality back into painting—the lower body opposed to the wingspan—Flood brings not only the lowbrow, but the gutter.

The city of Houston has no zoning laws. It is through this that a strip club can be directly adjacent to a daycare, or a donut shop to a slaughterhouse. It is hard to imagine Flood's work without this infrastructural loophole. Celebrity and gesture are put side by side to undermine, make fun of, and optimistically—but Flood would never officially think he could actually make a ripple in the cosmos—dismantle the art world. This—the uncaring shrug, the unrestrained potty humor—is a trait that only an artist from Texas could have. In complete opposition to the

¹² Mark Flood, *Eat Human Flesh*, mixed media, 1989

¹³ Carlo McCormick, *Après moi le déluge: Mark Flood at a High-Water Mark*, Contemporary Art Museum of Houston, 2016

tradition and confidence of the paintings of Rev. Johnnie Swearingen, Mark Flood is confident in opposition, confident with the crowd he amasses of fellow under-miners.

For what is there to do in a state that is in opposition to the arts? Painting functions as something both of reverence, but what could it actually do in today's society?

These painters grapple with this question, for painting is greatly misunderstood in Texas and they do not see it as their job to explain it to its citizens.



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What is more pathetic than painting at the end of the world? This question—grappling with subject matter and form, managing anxiety within the anthropocene—bookends my interests regarding creative and theoretical practice during this new apocalyptic millenia.

The work I am presently most engaged with are ceramic substrates onto which underglazes are painted and fired. Their forms are simultaneously durable and frail, they have the ability to fossilize, yet could easily shatter. The paintings act as faces, compositional structures that both demand the viewer's attention and rely on cumulative layered spaces within the

¹⁴ Visitors at the Rothko Chapel, Houston, 1977. Completed in 1971. (Photo by Romano Cagnoni/Hulton Getty Images)

surface—resembling the allover compositional motifs of screen static or New York School painters of the 1940s. Taking cues from Bess, my work becomes more of an object than a painting, highlighting the touch of the artist and the memory of both the ceramic and painterly mediums.



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Seduction functions in the work in the same way as the physical properties of an LCD television screen, both in subject matter and density. Images are flattened, serving simply as the act of accumulative histories and mark-making, much like sifting through channels or watching boxcar graffiti as it rolls down the tracks. The creation of the LCD screen marked a departure from the television as sculpture or furniture, to that of a screen or a painting. Within my work, I reintroduce this objecthood of the painted surface or screen, decisively leveling the playing field between the object itself and what is layered upon the face. This is achieved through the inherent haptic memory of the ceramic, as well as the aggressive, utilitarian metal structures that suspend the pieces off of the wall.

¹⁵ Sam Linguist, *what amount is a good amount*, Underglazed stoneware, 4.5 x 5.5 x 3.75 inches, 2024, Image: Charles Benton, Courtesy of Laurel Gitlen Gallery

Accumulation and image are directly linked within the viewing and dissemination of modern painting. This idea—a painting’s relation to a network—posited by David Joselit in reference to the work of Martin Kippenberger, in which paintings are thought to explicitly visualize the networks within which they are involved, is ever-prevalent in a rapidly accelerating, 24-hour absorption cycle borne of social media platforms¹⁶. As paintings are the most readily seductive artforms for this kind of arena—easily transmitted and viewed on a backlit screen—how can such works escape the digital cycle and still remain contemporary? Within my practice, I seek this specific circumvention by bringing painting—its form and its surface—into the realm of sculpture. In *Untitled (Nude in the Bath)* a trompe l’oeil stick functions alongside a reproduction of a Bonnard bather, flattening and disrupting the space within the painting both historically and physically, like a fly landing atop a television screen as a football game plays. This disjunction of subject matter within the same composition further emphasizes that the subjects depicted are simply accumulative, democratic in their source and flat in their production.

¹⁶ David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself,” October, Fall 2009



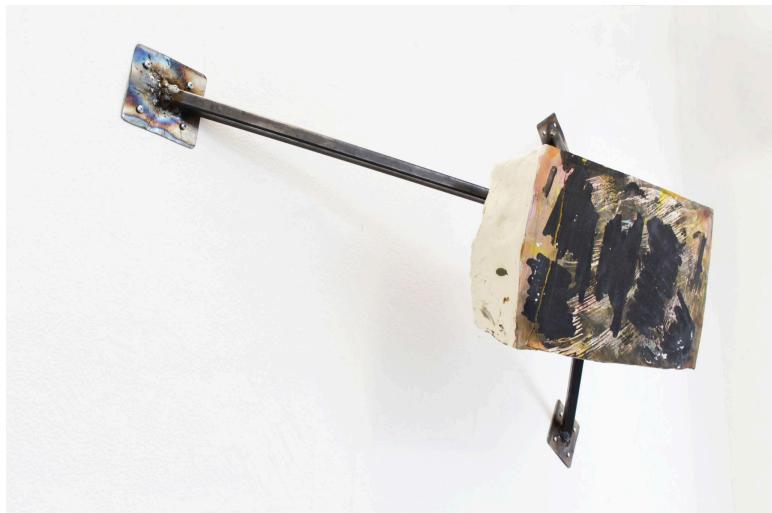
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Mark making is held to the same standard within my work. Using a heterogeneous arsenal of utensils as well as subjects, the marks made are at times both earnest and apathetic. This is seen in the work *the serrated knife for the bread I just baked*, in which the sgraffito surface is covered by a stenciled reproduction of the scribbles of David Foster Wallace that were exhibited at the 2014 Whitney Biennial¹⁷. These marks are contrasted by renderings of sticks found on a hike in southwest Texas, which blend into the nearly camouflage-like surface. The box-like ceramic is held a foot and a half away from the wall with a menacing, institutional metal structure—an apparatus evocative of anti-theft devices bolted to televisions in hospitals and waiting rooms. Angled deliberately downwards, the painting functions as a screen which cannot be turned off, demanding observation and simultaneously observing. The metal forms—reminiscent of football bleachers or moonlight towers—serve as rootless scaffolds that morph and collapse as viewer perspective shifts. Taking cues from the likes of archaic

¹⁷ Sam Lingust, *Untitled (The Big Bath)*, Underglazed stoneware and steel, 118 x 108 x 10 inches, 2024

¹⁸ David Foster Wallace, page from the *Pale King* materials, “Midwesternism” notebook, undated. Manuscript notebook, 10 1/2 x 8 1/4 in. (26.7 x 21.0 cm). Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Image used with permission from the David Foster Wallace Literary Trust.

playground fixtures and gently bobbing oil derricks, I seek to subvert utilitarian and industrial structures and materials in service of intentionally theatrical infrastructures. This is underscored by the industry of metal fabrication found in the Southwest—a region inextricable from oil, agriculture and theater.



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Far from a romantic patina, the American Southwest, riddled with industrial ruin and environmental commotion, embodies something of a fallen society. Within this quadrant of the country, however, rests an unavoidable warmth, a pervasive nostalgia that surfaces upon encountering a lone windmill in a field overrun with weeds and rust. It is within this phenomenological saudade, this convergence of barren alienness and familiarity, that my practice is borne—it is a search for something long-extinct, followed by a brief, fleeting experience of that missing element before its dissipation. Concerning the material qualities of my work, I do not simply illustrate this ruin; I directly encompass it. This perpetual duel between pleasure and anxiety is an inevitable byproduct of life within a late capitalist society. Why, then, does painting today not directly relay these affective traits?

¹⁹ Sam Linguist, *the serrated knife for the bread I just baked*, Underglazed stoneware and steel, 28.5 x 42 x 12 inches, 2024

I initially set up the three corners of being a Texas artist—essentially—to say that I wish to be at the center of this tripartite. For I do not wish to assert myself to the world as a Texas Artist, but as it has become quite exotic and interesting whilst living in New York, this distinction seems to have followed me, from my own desire to be seen and understood and from others desire to pigeonhole my experiences. Piecing together what I see as entirely intuitive to what art is and what it should be, for what is simple for many and very difficult to me has led to my creation of my own narrative, my own history of painting. For painting in its essence is an act of confidence, and I believe there has been a great lack in investigation of this noun and rather an intense inquiry into its effects.

Tradition within the histories of western painting has been heavily reliant on singing to the choir, an artist when referencing history attempts to impress and pursue a novel creative act upon the artistic world. What happens then if the artistic world is vacant, and instead consists of—dare I say—the real world. Histories of Texas painting is this history; the cataloging of practices meant to be understood by the public. We see this in the work of Bess, in his invention of a complete personal spiritual conquest that led to his abstractions; by Swearingen in his urge to educate and illustrate stories through imagery; and through Flood whose community construction was built on the firm foundation of contempt for the status quo. The act of painting in this way becomes less about action than the social and psychological constructs that frame each painters' practice. This echoes David Joselit's notion of network painting and transitive painting in which the artist is aware of every aspect of their practice in relation to the work itself.²⁰ Within Texas I argue that there is no such practice as non-network painting, for within a state that initially is adverse to contemporary artistic practices, one has to consider every factor of one's practice in relation to how the viewer will engage with the work.

²⁰ David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," October, Fall 2009