

"I KNEW IT TO BE SO!"

FORREST

BESS

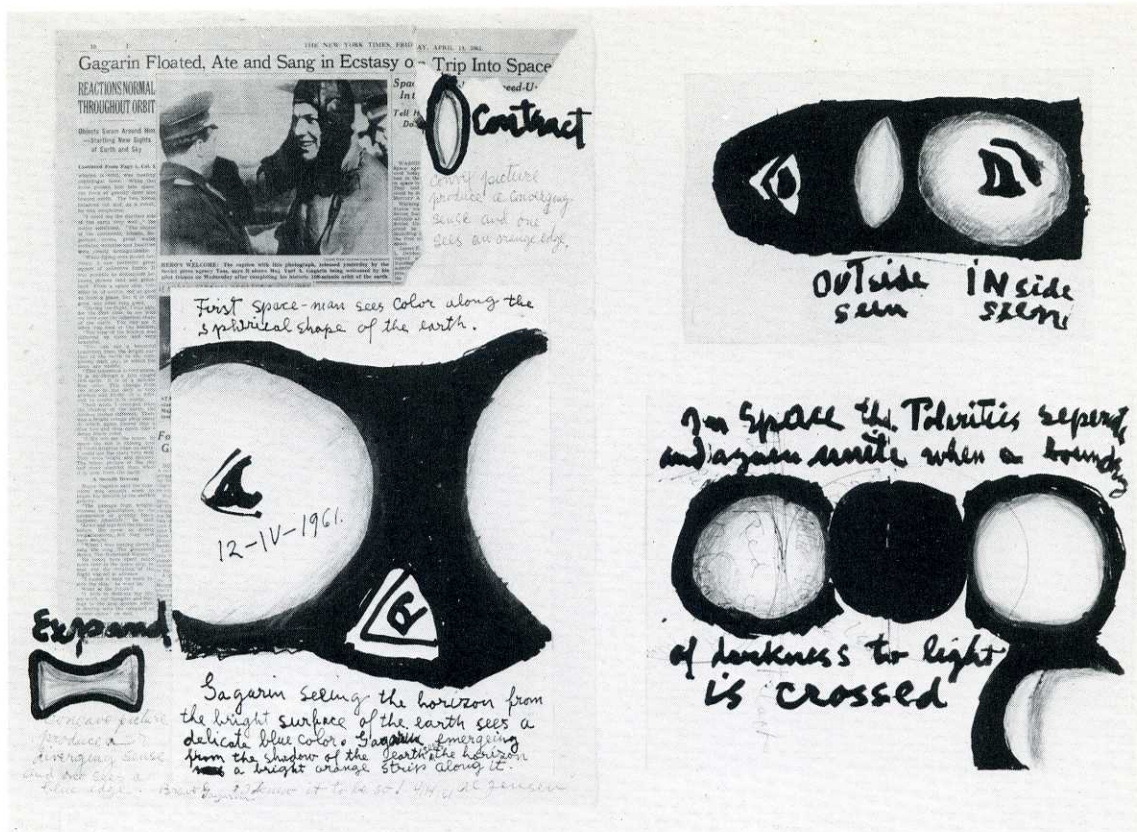
ALFRED

JENSEN

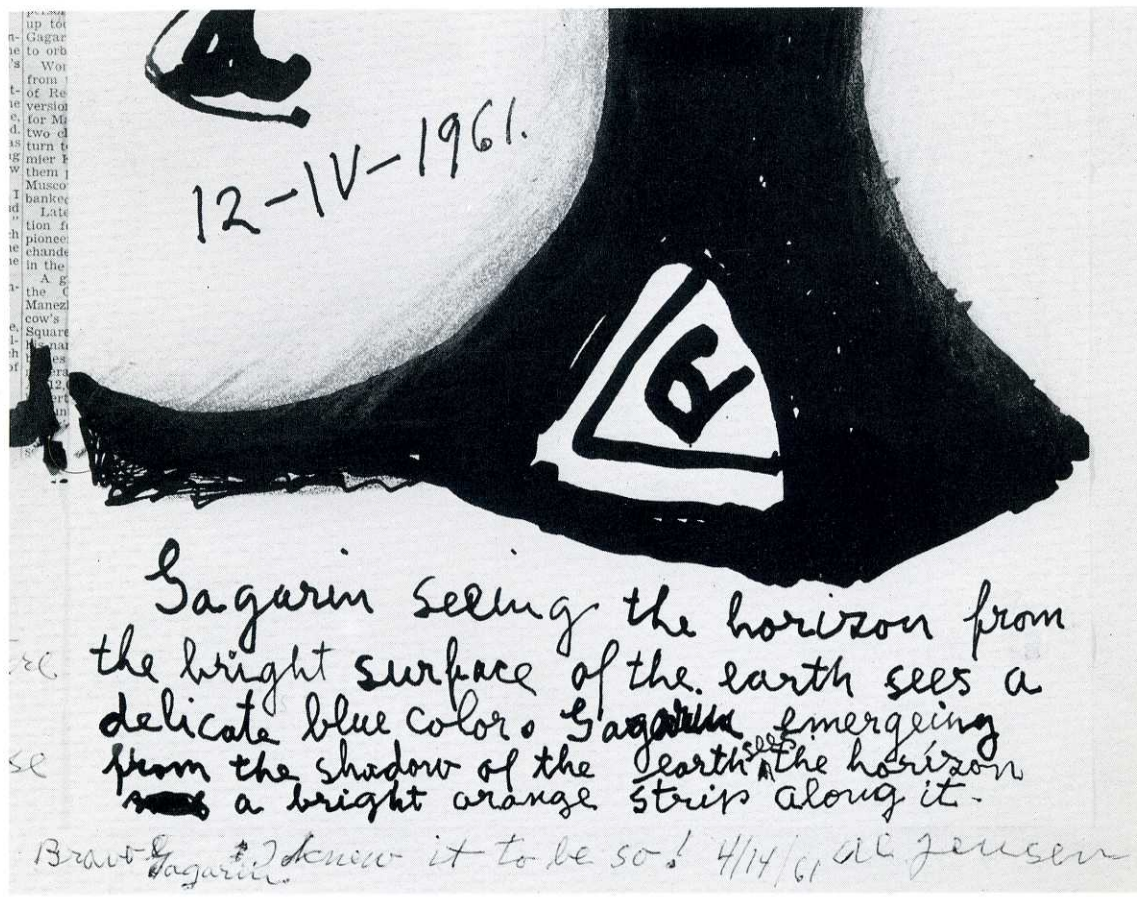
MYRON

STOUT

THEORY AND THE VISIONARY



1. ALFRED JENSEN, A FILM RINGED THE EARTH, 1961, 22" x 28"



2. ALFRED JENSEN, A FILM RINGED THE EARTH, DETAIL

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FORREST BESS

ALFRED JENSEN

MYRON STOUT

THEORY AND THE VISIONARY

CURATED BY
LAWRENCE LUHRING AND DAVID REED

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Tom Hudspeth
Lawrence Luhring
David Reed

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.¹

Rainer Maria Rilke
from "The First Elegy"

It is unfortunate the term "visionary" has been invoked so often. It should be reserved for the handful of solitary sojourners who have been both blessed and cursed with believing in the sanctity of the world. Visionaries not only discover the correspondences between the rhythms of the mortal body and those of the universe, but base all their actions on that knowledge. Once they establish links between the microcosm and the macrocosm, they shed the strictures of temporal time and recover the eternal—the timeless void from which the world sprang and to which it will return.

William Blake, Vincent Van Gogh, and (closer to home) Albert Pinkham Ryder are among the few artists who actually deserve to be called visionary. To this company I would add Forrest Bess, Alfred Jensen, and Myron Stout. Born during the decade prior to World War I, they are linked chronologically to the Abstract Expressionists. However, what separates them from their generation and, indeed, each other is the solitary path they took in order to clarify their vision. Holding counsel with themselves, they joined no groups and spawned no imitators.

Rather than attempting to evolve a stylistic uniqueness that would assure them a place in the art world, they searched for and found resonant symbols—ones embodying the particularities of their revelation, while revealing universal currents. Whether the vision is derived from extensive research into arcane branches of knowledge, an affinity with Ancient Greek literature, or an acute sensitivity to dreams, the focus of the work is on the structures of mythical thinking. Forrest Bess, Alfred Jensen, and Myron Stout all managed to reach back to the ground we grow from. They reveal the sources in so far as they can be known.

Forrest Bess (1911-77) believed he was "a conduit through which this thing, whatever it was, flowed." To insure nothing interfered with his pipeline to the source of his images, he kept a notebook at his bedside and dutifully represented his dreams. Out of these dream-inspired drawings came the paintings, all of which were done in oil on small canvases. The paintings convey Bess' urgent need to reestablish contact with original moment. Crude images and abstract symbols have been quickly laid down in thick impasto. The physicality stabilizes the dream images, makes them palpable. One senses that Bess must have wanted to reach out and touch the memory of what he witnessed.

Bess was born and died in Bay City, Texas, a poor fishing village near the southeastern coast. At the age of four he had his first vision, a Dutch village guarded by a lion and a tiger. A precocious child, he began copying illustrations from an encyclopedia. In college he studied architecture in order to satisfy his father's wishes, but later dropped out. These years were not wasted, however. For it was during this time that Bess was introduced to Havelock Ellis' pioneering study, *The Psychology of Sex*. Ellis' book made Bess aware of aborigine rituals of individuation. It was a concept that determined the course of his life. Bess was soon convinced that immortality was attainable through androgyny, that in order to recover wholeness we needed to embody it. The paintings were both a record and further proof he was on the right track; they aided in his research.

During World War II Bess was in the Army Corps of Engineers and suffered a mental breakdown in which he hallucinated images he would later paint. In 1947 he returned to his family's bait camp. For the next 27 years he lived in a converted barge, eking out a living fishing for shrimp and selling them for bait. The 100 or more paintings he produced during this time constitute his

life's work. They are modest in size, with some no bigger than a sheet of typing paper. Despite their scale, the paintings are neither charming nor humorous. When Bess reenacts his dream images, he does so with the blunt force of a boxer's fist.

Bess' dreams parallel the visions the ancient prophets had while alone in the desert. His paintings depict highly charged abstract symbols and images above an empty, arid landscape. The colors correspond to Bess' memory rather than to ones we would ordinarily find in nature. Some of the symbols and images echo ones found in pre-rational cultures, while others seem to have no counterparts. Neither kind is cloaked in self-consciousness. In fact, it is Bess' complete lack of self-consciousness that ultimately convinces us. The images in his strongest paintings never tell us more than they know. They are visitations: in some way they must have been as mysterious and eerie to Bess, as they are to us. *The Saints*, for example, depicts three figures. Each is floating inside a golden halo, which, in turn, floats above the landscape. The sky is white and solid, while the equally solid blackish landscape erupts into a jagged column. Like Bess' other paintings, *The Saints* resists interpretation. Its solipsism cannot be made to yield. Bess' androgyny pulled him inward—he had to find the “other” buried in himself. Eventually, this led to a final breakdown.

In contrast to Bess' outwardly simple rather sedentary life, Alfred Jensen's (1903-81) was an intricate mosaic colored by extensive travel. He was born in Guatemala, and spent his early childhood with an uncle in Denmark after his mother died. Upon graduation in 1917, he worked first as a cabin boy, and then, intermittently, as a sailor until 1926. In 1924 he received a scholarship to study art at the San Diego Fine Arts School. Two years later he travelled to Munich to study with Hans Hofmann. The following year Jensen broke with Hofmann and moved to Paris. From 1929 to 1951 he was the companion to Saidie Adler May, a wealthy art collector and former student of Hofmann. They travelled widely, both in Europe and America, in order to put together her vast art collection, which was given to the Baltimore Museum of Art after her death in 1951. In 1934 Jensen established permanent residence in America. Shortly after May's death he settled in New York.

Jensen's ideas about art simmered over a long period of time. In the early 1930's he became familiar with the work and writing of Auguste Herbin: Herbin's interest in Goethe's investigations of color inspired Jensen to pursue his own course of study. By the late 1930's he was deeply involved in studying Goethe's color theory. Following Goethe's lead, he used a prism to investigate the properties of light. Like Goethe, he believed color was evidence of a mystical presence. Starting in 1944, he began making diagrams based on his reading and studies. A major breakthrough occurred unexpectedly in 1957, when he started using the diagrams as preliminary drawings for his paintings.

Jensen's paintings are complex diagrams. In order to grasp their symbolic structure, one must realize that Jensen saw no difference between fact and theory. The numbers, symbols, images, and colors are all interconnected: everything is of equal value. His colors are divided into two groups. There are the pure, unmixed colors taken from the spectrum: and there is black and white.

Jensen thought of white and black as the parents of all color. This notion of light and dark, day and night, is the basis of all mythical thinking. Numerous creation myths focus on the idea of light coming out of the darkness, the void. The prism, meanwhile, reveals the colors emanating from light. Both our origin and our destination are clearly on Jensen's mind. Whether it is the Mayan Calendar, the Book of Tao, or colors from the prism, the systems Jensen used in his paintings are indications of the way we have broken infinity down into manageable units. Consequently, all of them lead us back to infinity, our original source.

In *West Sun, Perpetual Color Motion*, Jensen connects the orbit of the earth around the sun to the sequence of colors in the spectrum. Noon is yellow, sunset is red. The sun sets in order to rise. At the same time, he uses arrows and positive and negative signs to connect electricity and mathematics to this phenomenon. For Jensen, all systems are interrelated. He never sets up one as more important than another. The encyclopedic complexity of the paintings is difficult to unravel for this very reason. The breadth of learning they embody is both vast and idiosyncratic.

Myron Stout was born in Denton, Texas in 1908. As a child, he studied classical piano. In college he studied ancient history and Greek literature, and seriously considered becoming a historian. However, at the end of his senior year he discovered painting and changed his plans. In 1937, he received an M.A. in art from Teacher's College, Columbia. At this time Stout was primarily a landscapist. He did not begin working in an abstract mode until after he was discharged from the army at the end of World War II. A brief period of study with Hans Hofmann both in New York and Provincetown, proved to be the decisive factor. Stout's subsequent, always modest sized paintings can be divided into two groups; multi-colored geometric abstractions, which resemble tilled fields or woven blankets; and checkerboard patterns made up of two or three colors. He also moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he has lived by himself ever since.

In 1952 Stout reread Aeschylus for the first time since college. In an attempt to express what he saw as the "tragic poignance," he painted two large black and white paintings. Although Stout considered these paintings unsuccessful, they were the first to depict an oval shape locked within a solid ground. Two years later Stout returned to both Classical literature and rounded abstract shapes. Within a short period of time Stout's concern with the rounded edge became an almost overwhelming passion.

Stout does not depict a shape, he elicits one. The process is long: and it is not uncommon for him to take ten years to finish a painting or graphite drawing. Precise, subtle adjustments and discovery are entwined. Assertion and restraint negotiate a taut balance. Stout's obsessive desire, his aching need to discover the resonant visual metaphor, is matched only by his monkish patience. These paradoxes, which are so evident in his approach, are transmitted to the work. The paintings and drawings are at once barren and full, austere and sensuous. Their regal starkness parallels our experience of a full moon on a clear, starless night. The work exerts a magnetic pull on us, while keeping us at bay. It embodies solitude.

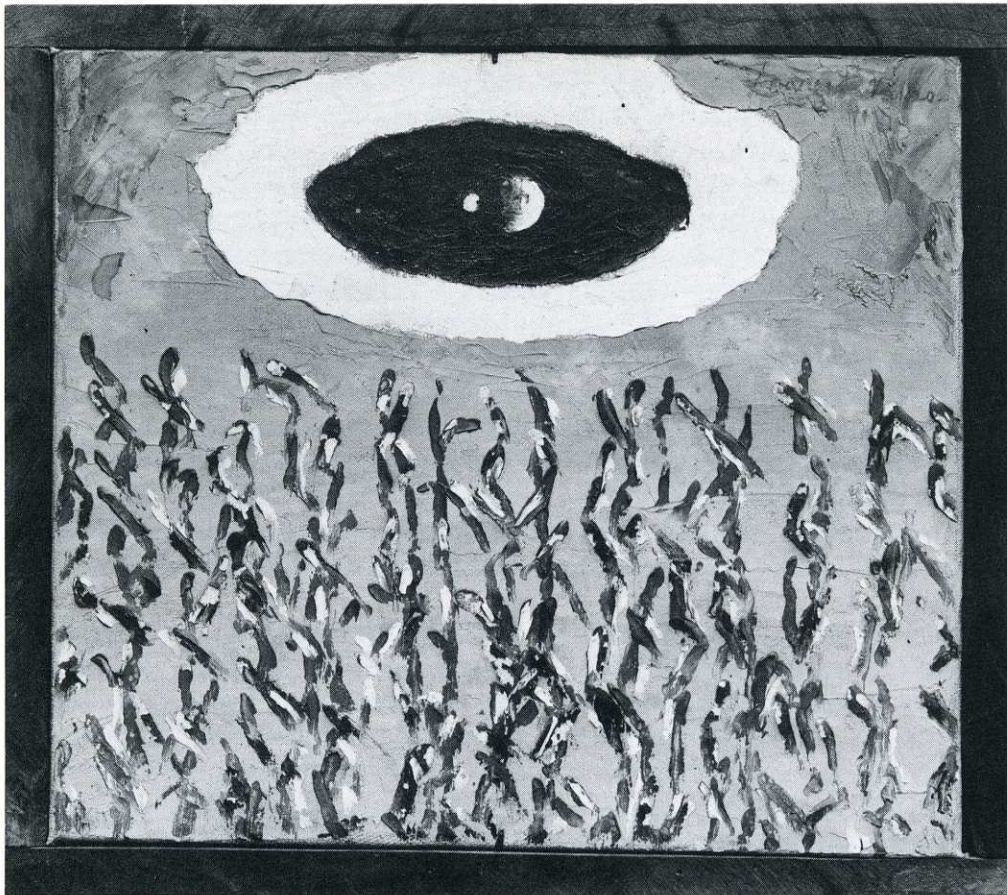
According to the Greeks, astronomy was a "Royal Science." The contemplation of the heavenly bodies was the noblest endeavor. Stout's paintings are offshoots of that tradition. Titles such as *Tereisias*, *Delphi*, and *Demeter* allude to the sources, rather than explain the image. Although the eyeless face with an open mouth in *Tereisias III* confirms all we know about the blind prophet, the drawing remains, like the moon, stubbornly beyond our grasp. In Stout's work time stands still long enough for us to gaze at the remote past that exists within us. What we sense is time's indifference, the stars' icy passion.

Forrest Bess, Alfred Jensen, and Myron Stout embrace their spiritual loneliness. Unlike most of us, they neither look for distractions nor try to fill the void they feel within themselves. Instead, they turn inward and enter the emptiness that grows and grows. What each names then is their desire, the overwhelming longing that is indifferent to ordinary life. It is why a decade doesn't seem too long to Myron Stout. It is why Alfred Jensen spent years studying Goethe, why Forrest Bess felt he was, at best, a "conduit."

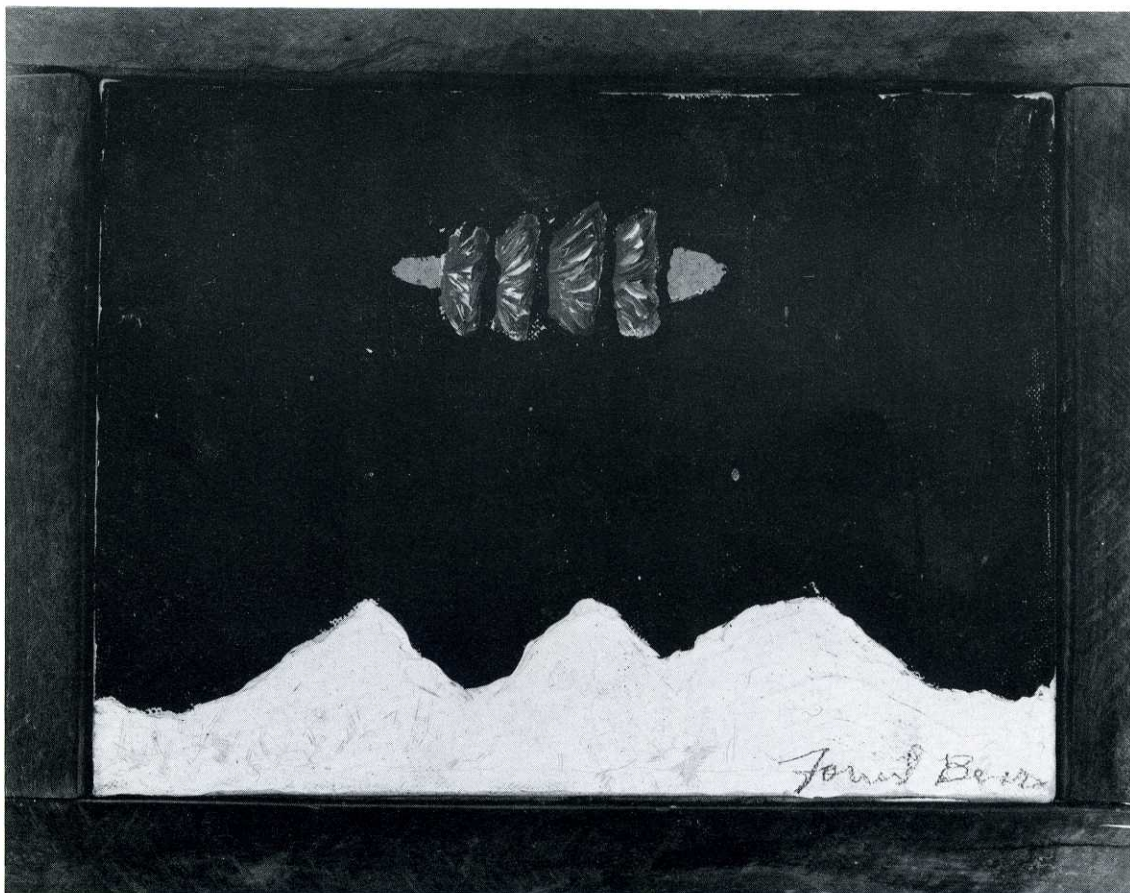
They could name their desire, but they could not own it. It is a desire for completion. Ultimately, it cannot be consoled. In turn, it is why their art does not console us. To contemplate their art is to be asked to look inward, to gaze at the void within ourselves.

John Yau

1. "The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke," edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell, introduction by Robert Haas, Vintage Books, New York, 1984, p. 151.



3. FORREST BESS, UNTITLED, NO. 16, 1949, 9½" x 10¾"



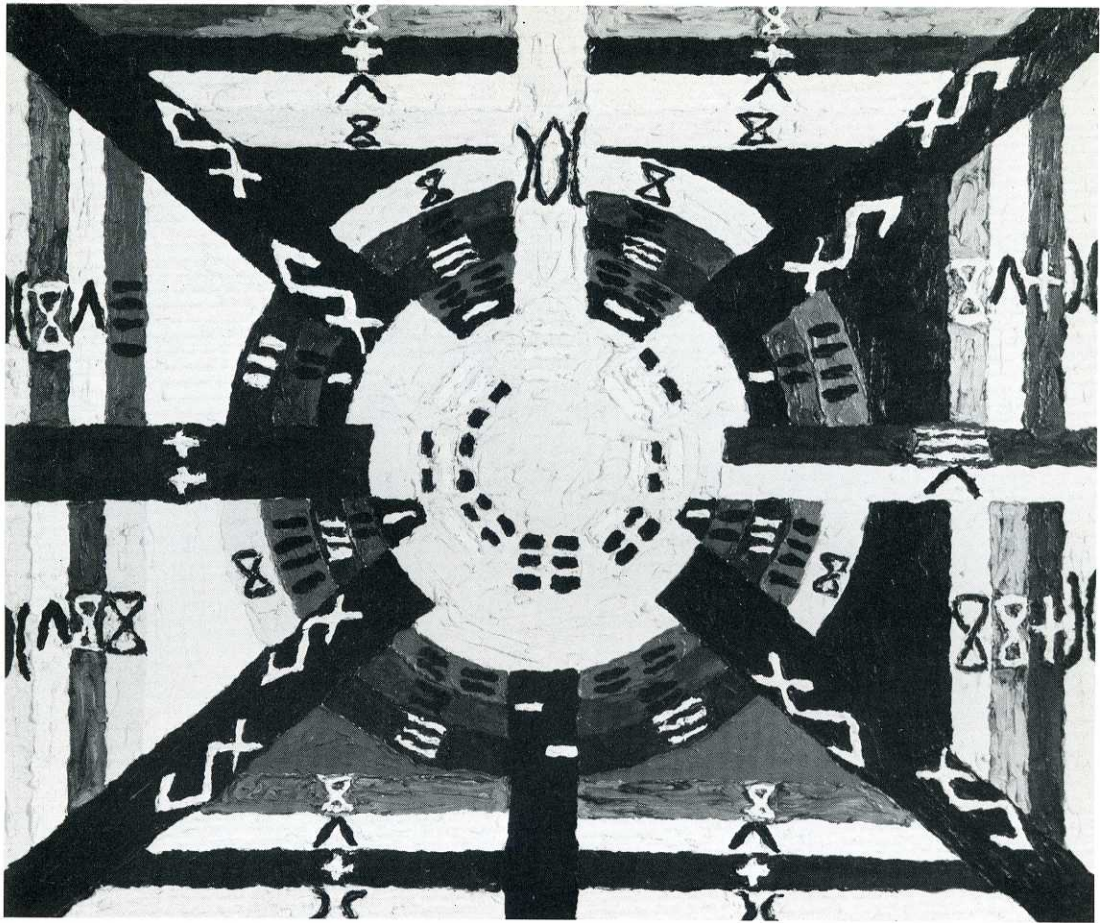
4. FORREST BESS, UNTITLED, NO. 39, 1950, 6" x 8¼"



5. FORREST BESS, NO. 18, 1952, 7½" x 10½"



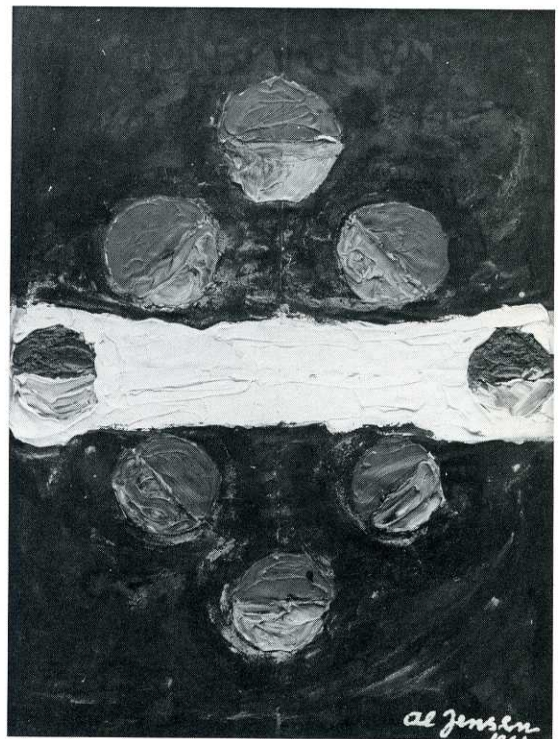
6. FORREST BESS, THE SAINTS, 1950, 6" x 10"



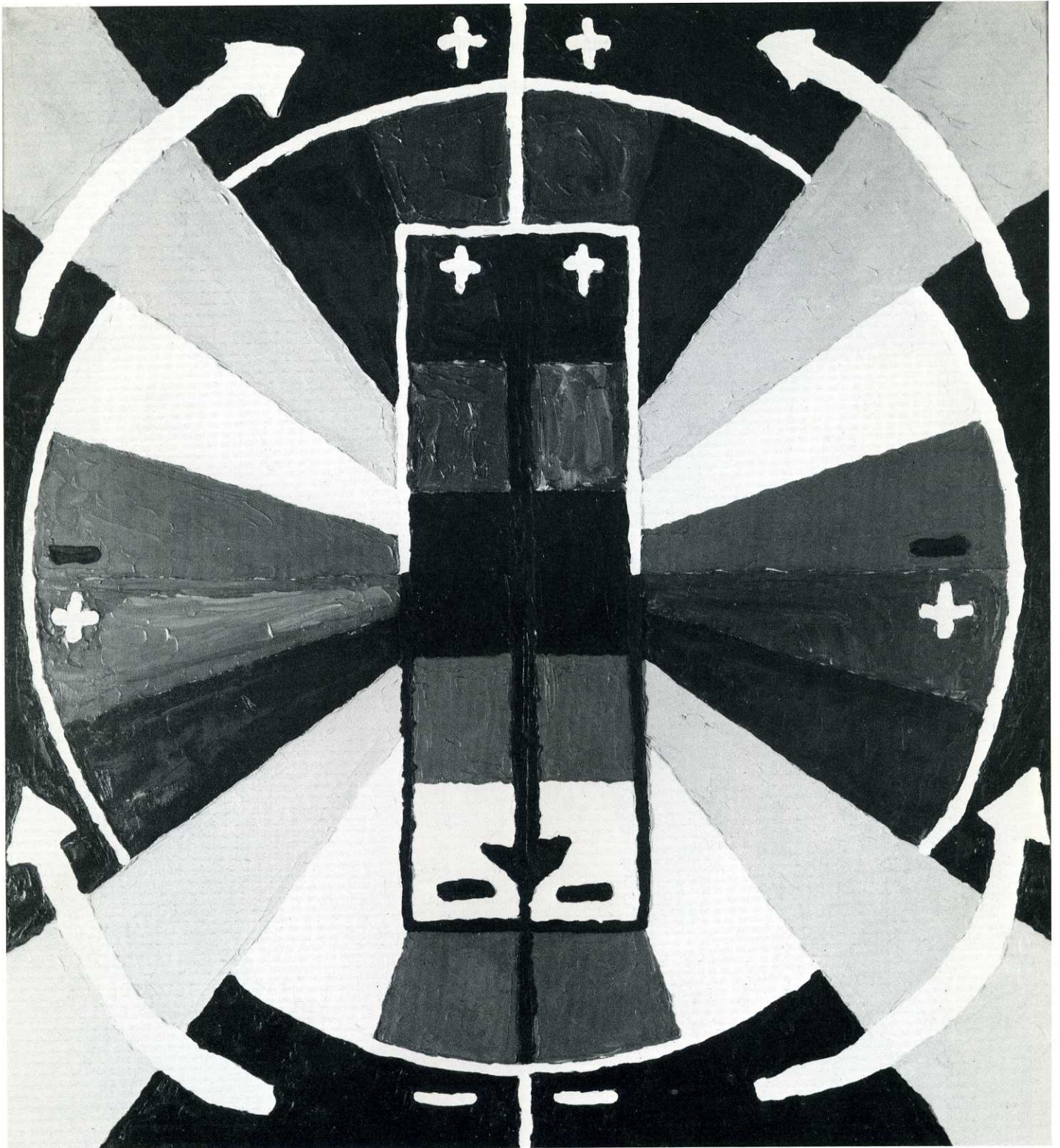
7. ALFRED JENSEN, HEAVEN AND EARTH, 1960, 42" x 50"



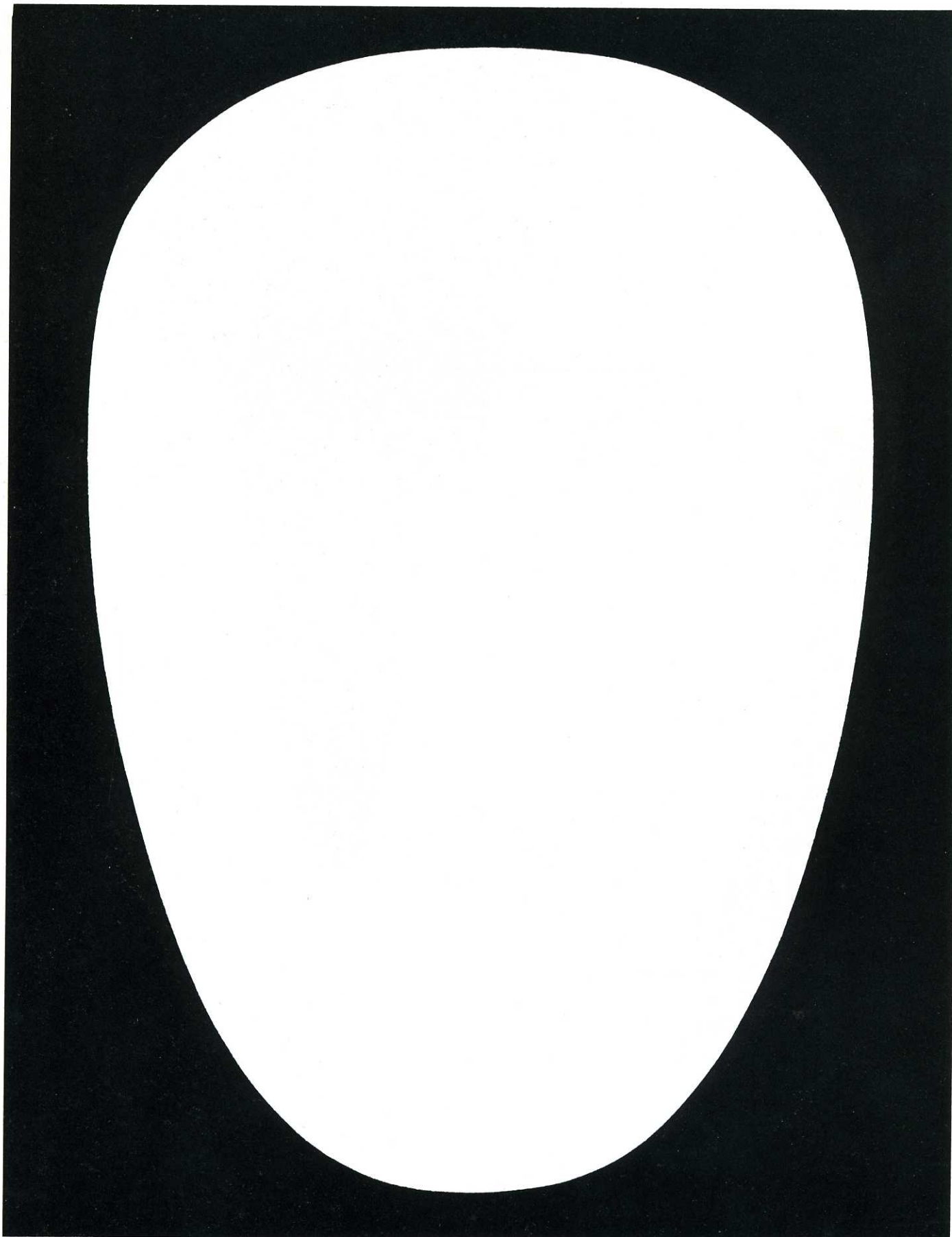
8. ALFRED JENSEN, HEAVEN, CA. 1955, 17" x 14"



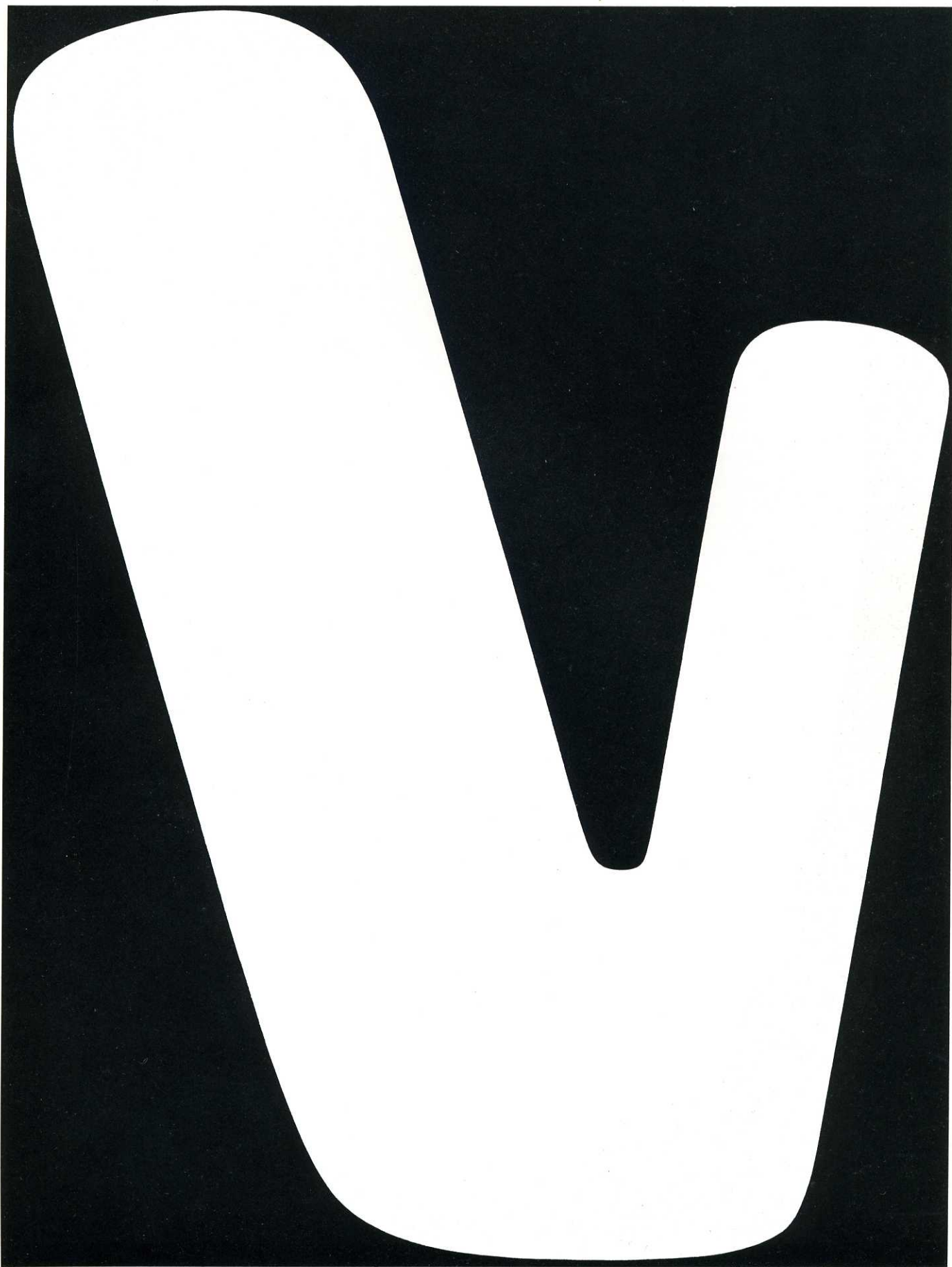
9. ALFRED JENSEN, UNTITLED, 1961, 18" x 13"



10. ALFRED JENSEN, WEST SUN, PERPETUAL COLOR MOTION, 1962, 50" x 46"



11. MYRON STOUT, UNTITLED, 1959-80, 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 20"



12. MYRON STOUT, UNTITLED, 1955-68, 25" x 19"

“I KNEW IT TO BE SO!”

Often I see art students reach an uncomfortable place in their development as painters. I remember when I was there. I was painting the landscape near Oljato on the Navajo Reservation, but the paint was leading me away from the objects I was painting. The forms, the paint strokes, wanted to take on a life of their own. During the heat of the day, when I couldn't paint in the sun, I tried painting these emerging forms and movements. Every painting was a failure. They seemed meaningless.

It's an unnerving, frustrating experience. One feels lost, entering a world one knows nothing about. How can an abstract painting, broken off from representing the world, have meaning for the painter or a viewer?¹

To answer that question I thought it would be useful to examine the work of the three artists in this show. One feels from each of their works a specific content. It may be hard to verbalize, but it's there. These artists have been considered outsiders and eccentrics because of their insistence on an idiosyncratic content that has specific meaning. What is this content? How does the viewer understand it?

An insight or revelation was the turning point in the development of each artist. Bess abandoned expressionist canvases in Van Gogh's style and painted from his hypnagogic imagery. Jensen realized that his diagrams of Goethe's color theory were more his true painting than the expressionist canvases he had been making. Stout after rereading Greek dramas and myths painted two unexpected images to which he returned several years later when he began the 14 canvases that were to be his life's work.

To speak of insight or revelation in this way could be misleading because the illumination didn't occur just once, but was a necessary occurrence for the making of each painting. It's as if the artist caught a glimpse of something and then with each successive painting saw a little more.

Each of these artists then developed theories based on his vision. In other times there might have been a shared, public, system that could incorporate their personal visionary experiences. Christianity was such a system for Giotto and Caravaggio. Bess, Jensen and Stout did incorporate some aspects of science and psychology, but basically had to build their own private systems. Their vision gave them assurance. That apodictic moment compelled them to act.

Bess' hypnagogic hallucinations followed the same morphology as do dreams.² Bess claimed he often didn't know what the images meant, but just painted what he saw on the insides of his eyelids. Can art that means something to the rest of us come about in this way? Can images which only had unconscious or preconscious meanings to Bess have meaning to us? Bess believed in Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. Is this the mechanism of meaning in this case or is there some alternate explanation? From painting to painting in Bess' work the forms mutate and transform as do dream images, developing in time. A tree emerges from the ground (“Untitled, No. 6”, 1951 and “The Saints”, 1950) and changes into a chalice (“Untitled”, 1950) or roadway (“Untitled”, 1960). There is a bug image which he called the gene of creation and insanity which seems the root image of a number of paintings (“Untitled”, 1950 and “Untitled, No. 33”, 1950). At first Bess didn't know what his images meant. Then, he formed theories. How did the theories affect the images? I suspect that as the paintings became more about known symbols they were less compelling as paintings. There are, however, some very good late paintings. More of his paintings need to be found. We need at least a summary chronological survey.³

Beginning in the late 1950's Bess became more and more obsessed with a theory which he felt was revealed to him by the images in his paintings. He recognized in his images alchemical symbols referred to by Jung. Bess believed the goal of alchemy was not the creation of gold from a base metal, but the creation of a pseudo-hermaphrodite. He believed that the remnant in the male urethra of the female sex organ was the Vas Hermetica of the alchemists and advocated an operation creating a hypospadias to gain access to the organ. Bess called this operation the re-creation of Adam and he believed the operation would end all hostility and lead to immortality. I

think the source of this delusional theory was a desire to understand female sexuality (despite his difficulties relating to women sexually). Bess believed the female orgasm and sexual experience to be different than the male's and wanted to experience them not vicariously but directly. Endocrinology, the anatomy of the sexual organs, and his operation give Bess a set of signs for his sexual experiences and related emotional states. He even made a glossary of signs. Some of these signs like the moon and stones, waves and trees, bear their traditional meanings. Other signs like the triangles, squares and circles which he used as symbols for cutting and stretching do not have specific traditional meaning and one can't tell what they refer to by their appearance. They are however adequate vehicles to convey his emotion ("Untitled, No. 13", 1967). In his loneliness and isolation Bess wanted to believe that his signs were self evident and despaired when they weren't understood. What we get from his paintings is Bess' feeling toward the signs. Where he places them, how they are painted, the plastic force of the colors. Thus the system, though mad, is transparent in the paintings and through them we can see the emotions at the root of the theories. Jung warned Bess against taking his theories too literally. But I feel Jung's way of thinking can easily lead to such literal thinking. Are there universal, innate, symbols which can emerge from our unconscious or preconscious? I feel that this is a dangerous way to think. The dream symbols can be explained just as well as coming from experience or cultural influences. We now have many psychological tools to use in understanding such symbols. We know such symbols have communicatable meanings without having to resort to a notion of the collective unconscious.

Jensen's mature work began with his use of Goethe's color theories to structure his paintings. Most artists base their system on drawn forms and then create their color subjectively. Jensen is unusual in that he makes color the base of his system. By virtue of this his theories could expand and become comprehensive.

Goethe's color theory came from seeing the colors created by looking through a prism at a contrasting black and white edge. "Eternity", and "Color's Direction" are direct translations into painting of the color sequences one sees looking at black and white edges through a prism. Newton had treated color as objective optics. Goethe treated color as an experimental event. For Goethe color is a subjective event which occurs in the mind. Jensen used Goethe's theories but took them further. He used them to explore how the mind is constructed. His painting reflects the mind and delves into it's nature.

One of the most exciting things about Jensen's work is its connection to science, the effective belief system of our society. In his triumphant declaration after Gagarin's flight, "Bravo, Gagarin. I knew it to be so!" Jensen exalts in the confirmation of an aspect of his and Goethe's color theories from Gagarin's observations of the earth from space. In fact, the colors Gagarin saw may have other causes.⁴ It's the audacity of Jensen's connection that astounds us.

These are not just decorative paintings despite their beautiful color. Without Jensen to explain them to us we must try to reconstruct from his notes and the paintings the specific meanings of each work. Onto his color sequences he layered systems based on magnetism and electricity, then numerical, architectural, calendric, and genetic systems. There are many themes and subjects in his work that would reward thorough study. Of all the artist's I know, his work would be best served by a study center where artists, scientists, and scholars could go to reconstruct the meanings of the paintings.

Jensen's system is more conceptual and at first seems more objective than those of the other artists. It really isn't.

"It all began when as a seven year old boy I faced death's tragic implications. My mother had died; and on a sunny afternoon I stood before the orange colored oblong box ornamented with its kneeling silver angels, their praying hands each pointing towards the Cardinal directions.... Preoccupied with my early encounter with the mystery of death my painterly efforts have centered around a square, a circular space with directional environments pictorially determined."⁵

The energy in Jensen's paintings comes from roots just as personal and deep as do Bess'.

Stout is the least theoretical of these three painters. More than the others he insists on insight occurring during the process of every painting. He works on the painting or drawing until he understands its emotional source. His reticence and modesty keep his work open and fluid for himself and for viewers. His mythical references are helpful, but to take them too specifically detracts from one's experience of the work. The specificity reduces meanings and removes some of a viewer's emotional connections.

Stout's paintings are based on the edge between black and white as are Jensen's. He doesn't create color at that point as Jensen does, but instead a strange, sensitive, modulation. In "Untitled, ca. 1958/59-80", the inside edge of the central white form seems mysteriously lighter in value, even modeled, giving the egg form a flickering 3-dimensionality. Our brain, because of its evolutionary programming, acts as an image enhancing device, automatically increasing the contrast at value differentiated edges. This helps us to visually separate an object from its surrounding background. In Stout's paintings this distortion is used for an effect opposite of evolution's purpose. His flickering edge fuses the background and the form together by creating forms that alternate between being positive and negative shapes. The egg form in "Untitled, ca. 1958/59-80", for example, suddenly isn't solid, but is the opening of a cave. Or in "Untitled, 1955-68", the central black form, which at first seems to be background, suddenly becomes a positive form between the two white vertical shapes. This perceptual alternation of forms from positive to negative and back again connects Stout's forms to male/female imagery and themes.

How can a reference to maleness and femaleness come about from these perceptual experiences? We recognize spatial events while viewing his paintings that refer us to deeply felt sexual and other experiences which we all have in common.

I'm amazed at the extent to which each of these artists base their system on dualities. Are the dualities caused by properties of the painting medium? Black and white, complimentary colors, straight and curved lines. Possibly, but many systems outside of painting are also based on dualities. Are the dualities a reflection of the nature of the world? No, the world is made up of gradual, almost imperceptible, gradations and shifts. When we divide, we simplify. Are the dualities a reflection of the structure of our mind? I think so. Our brains process our perceptions with a system of dualities and we force the world into that pattern. These paintings are mirrors reflecting the mental world. That is why they are so compelling.

I wonder what a system would be like with more intermediate and transitional stages. Perhaps that's why there's also the theme of cycles or changing time: Jensen's later calendric paintings, Bess' works such as "No. 11A", 1958 and "Variations in Time", 1967, and Stout's drawings such as "Untitled", 1964 and "Moon Lady", 1964-71.

The dualities of their systems led all three of these artists to study the male/female duality. This seems natural given the nature of their systems and assumptions all of us share, but is also dangerous. Male and female are placed next to two lists of opposed attributes. This is a disruptive, harmful, and erroneous way for us to think. Perhaps the androgynous themes are a way to overcome this. As well as to show that their systems are really about unity.

The covert theme of many paintings from the Renaissance and the Baroque is the power struggle between the sexes. One reason painting was such a good explicator of the Christian narrative was the shared interest in dualities, including sexual. Bess, Jensen, and Stout's paintings are religious in feeling because they deal with sexual struggle or its resolution in androgyny.

People used to look to visionaries to discover the future. The visions of the Biblical prophets had meaning to others because they were a part of a larger common system. These artists aren't in that position. Yet their private symbologies have meanings for us. How can this be? Through their systems these artists remind us of our common humanity.

Can a painting still be meaningful if you give up the necessity of representation? Can one give meaning to a painting using one's own invented, personal symbols? These artists show three possible ways. Bess uses a mixture of traditional symbols and his own partially decipherable, arbitrary symbols. We now know enough about the psychology of dream states that when we have

enough information about his work we can make an appropriate interpretation of meaning. Jensen's symbols are not traditional, but reflect the structures of our minds. With our intuitions and Jensen's explanations we can interpret his paintings. For Jensen truth was many-sided and we may not find in each work all the sides he intended, but we can find much of the intended meaning. Stout's paintings work from perception alone to reach meaning. The symbols we interpret onto his paintings come from our common experiences.

David Reed

1. *A student needn't become an abstract painter at this point. He or she simply sees that the plastic forces in painting are more important than representation.*
2. *Freud, Sigmund, "The Interpretation of Dreams," translated and edited by James Strachey, Avon Books, pp. 65-67.*
3. *I'm trying to locate and catalogue all paintings by Bess. Please contact me at the New York Studio School if you know of work.*
4. *Davies, Paul, "Other Worlds, a Portrait of Nature in Rebellion.—Space, Superspace and the Quantum Universe," Simon and Schuster, pp. 77-79.*
5. *Letter from Jensen to Kornfeld in catalogue "Ausstellung Von Ölbildern," Kornfeld und Klipstein, Bern, October-November, 1963.*

THEORY AND THE VISIONARY

"I think you are right not to try to put your answers into your work, but to meditate your own work for answers. Perhaps in the end through your fidelity to the vision, the answers that you gradually discover will become a real part of the vision, will even enter the vision, although without your proposing to do so."¹

Meyer Schapiro

"The American painter necessarily works with an eye to our need for both specificity and idealization."²

Theodore F. Stebbins, Jr.

"This belief in the revelatory power of painting is characteristic of American art."³

Kathy Halbreich

The sub-title for this exhibition, *Theory and The Visionary*, is an attempt at exploring these antithetical notions which coexist, are crucial to the work of Forrest Bess, Alfred Jensen and Myron Stout. Mark Rothko explained the relationship thus, "ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur."⁴ In the work of these three artists this relationship is more complex.

Forrest Bess, in a letter to Meyer Schapiro on Van Gogh, perhaps best expresses the need for theory to balance the excesses of the visionary, "Van Gogh's symbols restimulated him until tremendous forces of unconscious flooded in and swept him away. If he had intergrated the symbol through intellect he could have come to an accord with the unconscious."⁵

Bess himself was concerned with the unelaborated recording of his own dream images. He believed that through these unconscious dream symbols the viewer would experience an androgynous union.

Bess likened his paintings and their desired effect on artist and viewer to that of the medieval alchemist and his transmutation of base metals into gold. In the case of Bess, the transformation of dream and paint into vital images acting as conduits parallel the alchemists' quest. Bess also saw a common link in the preoccupation with 'the work' as a preparation of the elixir of longevity, the eternal youth of fable and myth.

One can thus understand Bess' emulation of the tradition of the alchemist with its joint quest of physical and spiritual union through complex theoretical exercises performed with the sanctity of religious rite.

"His [Jensen's] paintings are a sustained dialogue between a sensuous, expressive, deeply poetic use of pictorial elements, and investigations into non-aesthetic systems of knowledge upon which the sensuous elements are based."⁶ "Research, synthesis and observation has always been my method of working."⁷ Like Bess with his exhaustive medical studies of suburethral incisions and Jungian psychology, Jensen and his work were propelled in the mid 1950's by studies of Goethe's color theories, the workings and observations of the prism and the writings of Leonardo.

Jensen somehow managed in his paintings to wed his overriding interest in arcane systems of knowledge with the resultant profound revelations. Whereas Bess sufficiently and Stout achingly disguise their theoretical underpinnings, Jensen seems to proudly display them, risking the often cited criticism of his work as esoteric, obscure and undecipherable. It is precisely this aspect of Jensen's work that is its great source of strength and directness.

This relationship of theory and the visionary is less easily defineable in the work of Myron Stout. Sanford Schwartz calls Stout a "visual sage", placing him in the tradition of Cezanne. Stout's concern is revelation through acute perceptual awareness. Through the dualities and contradictions in Stout's work: the light and the dark, the black and the white, concrete and symbolic, concave and convex, male and female, profundity leads to revelation, singularity to universal meaning, as in Greek myth.

Lawrence Luhring

1. *Letter of Bess quoting letter from Meyer Schapiro to Forrest Bess, 1951.*
2. *Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., The Lane Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1983.*
3. *Kathy Halbreich, Affinities: Bill Jensen, Myron Stout, Brice Marden and Terry Winters, Committee on the Visual Arts, M.I.T., Cambridge, 1983.*
4. *Mark Rothko, Possibilities, No. 1, Winter, 1947-48.*
5. *Letter from Forrest Bess to Meyer Schapiro, October 29, 1954.*
6. *Marcia Tucker, Alfred Jensen: Paintings and Diagrams From the Years 1957-1977, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo and The New Museum, New York, 1978.*
7. *Alfred Jensen, Alfred Jensen: Paintings and Diagrams From the Years 1957-1977, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo and The New Museum, New York, 1978.*

While Forrest Bess, Alfred Jensen and Myron Stout developed pictorial vocabularies distinct and independent from one another, they are linked together as artists through a common bond. Each shares a mutual interest in a kind of imagery we may call visionary. In turn, all are essentially abstract painters whose work was and is somewhat independent from the mainstream of European modernism. The "means" of the craft of painting never superseded the issue of visionary content and symbolic meaning for these three artists.

Visionary imagery may be defined, in part, as a kind of imagery based on an experience in which an image, or series of images, appears vividly or credibly to the mind, although not actually present in reality. An inherent aspect of such images is their fundamental connection, at least for the artist, to some kind of divine or spiritual revelation. Through them the artist is provided a key to the understanding of the divine order of the universe.

While this interest in visionary content serves as an aesthetic foundation for their painting, Bess, Jensen and Stout, were and, in the case of Stout, are, concerned with establishing a theoretical matrix for their art as a means of helping to explain the artistic motivation behind their painting. Vision and theory for Bess, Jensen and Stout, operate in tandem, in a mutually supportive manner, each helping to ratify and clarify the other. This dialogue between vision and theory may be viewed as a modernist reinterpretation of the nineteenth century preoccupation with the ideal and the real. The interrelation between an ideal vision substantiated by pragmatic theory, allows the artist to achieve a meaningful interaction between subjective and objective knowledge.

Historically, visionary imagery has its roots deep in the romantic movement, addressing equally utopian idealism and the transcendental nature of man. The art of William Blake immediately comes to mind. However, it is in the late nineteenth century Symbolist movement, and its development and evolution within the context of twentieth century American art, that we find the primary historical foundation for the visionary imagery of Bess, Jensen and Stout.

Both Symbolist artists as well as writers reacted against what they believed to be the crass materialism of contemporary culture and society. By placing emphasis on the internal, subjective world rather than on the external, objective one, artists such as Albert Pinkham Ryder and Ralph Blakelock shifted the focus of painting in America from an empirical realism to a conceptual, individualized personal statement, with a highly subjective, iconography. This approach to painting allowed for the development of highly individualized techniques of painting and in turn, for the ultimate disolution of the realistically depicted object.

It is from this context that the American abstract symbolist painters emerged, artists such as Georgia O'Keefe, Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley. As Charles Eldridge has pointed out in his book *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting*, it is in the early work of these artists that we first encounter, within American art, "forms without concrete reference, and sense or meaning without objects. . . . By making the Mallarmean break-through to non-mimetic, anti-illusionistic evocation of image and meaning (the abstract symbolists) drew upon the significant heritage of late nineteenth century Symbolism to achieve (their) decidedly twentieth century abstraction."¹ These early twentieth century abstract painters provide the most immediate historical and artistic precedent for the paintings of Bess, Jensen and Stout.

Thomas Hudspeth
Muhlenberg College

1. Eldridge, Charles. *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting*, (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 1979). p. 117.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

FORREST BESS

1. PREMONITION (BLACK FORMS), 1947, OIL ON CANVAS, 14" x 16", COLLECTION OF ROSALIE BERKOWITZ.
2. UNTITLED, NO. 16, 1949, OIL ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON WOOD, 9½" x 10¾", PRIVATE COLLECTION.
3. THE SAINTS, 1950, OIL ON CANVAS, 6" x 10", COLLECTION OF MARGARET LEWIS FURSE.
4. UNTITLED, NO. 5, 1950, OIL ON CANVAS, 8" x 10", COLLECTION OF ROSALIE BERKOWITZ.
5. UNTITLED, NO. 39, 1950, OIL ON CANVAS, 6" x 8¼", COURTESY OF JACK TILTON GALLERY.
6. UNTITLED, 1950, OIL ON CANVAS, 9" x 12", COLLECTION OF ROSALIE BERKOWITZ.
7. UNTITLED, NO. 33, 1950, OIL ON CANVAS, 9" x 12", COLLECTION OF ROSALIE BERKOWITZ.
- *8. BROWN GRASS, CA. 1950, OIL ON CANVAS, 7" x 8", COLLECTION OF HENRY AND MARIA FEIWEL.
9. UNTITLED, NO. 18, 1952, OIL ON CANVAS, 7½" x 10½", COURTESY OF JACK TILTON GALLERY.
10. BEFORE MAN, 1952-53, OIL ON WOOD, 9½" x 23", COLLECTION OF ROY R. NEUBERGER.
11. UNTITLED, 1957, OIL ON CANVAS, 12" x 18", COURTESY OF JACK TILTON GALLERY.
12. UNTITLED, 1963, OIL ON CANVAS, 8" x 10½", COLLECTION OF MRS. WILLIAM ARTHUR THOMPSON.
13. THE GOLDEN MOUNTAIN, 1966, OIL ON CANVAS, 10" x 14", PRIVATE COLLECTION.
- *14. UNTITLED, NO. 13, 1967, OIL ON CANVAS, 12" x 12", COLLECTION OF EDITH GOULD.
15. RAIN OF COLOR #3, 1970, OIL ON CANVAS, 12" x 14", COLLECTION OF JEANETTE BONNIER.

ALFRED JENSEN

1. UNTITLED, CA. 1955, OIL ON PAPER, 19" x 15½", COURTESY OF PACE GALLERY.
2. HEAVEN, CA. 1955, OIL AND COLLAGE ON PAPER, 17" x 14", COURTESY OF PACE GALLERY.

3. MAY 7, 1957, OIL AND COLLAGE ON PAPER, 22" x 30", COLLECTION OF EDWARD R. DOWNE, JR.
4. OCTOBER, 15, 1957, OIL AND COLLAGE ON PAPER, 22" x 30", COLLECTION OF EDWARD R. DOWNE, JR.
5. ETERNITY, 1959, OIL ON CANVAS, 46" x 36", COURTESY OF PACE GALLERY.
6. HEAVEN AND EARTH, 1960, OIL ON CANVAS, 42" x 50", COLLECTION OF EDWARD R. DOWNE, JR.
7. A FILM RINGED THE EARTH, 1961, INK AND COLLAGE ON PAPER, 22" x 28", COURTESY OF PACE GALLERY.
- **8. UNTITLED, 1961, OIL ON PAPER, 18" x 13", COURTESY OF PACE GALLERY.
9. WEST SUN, PERPETUAL COLOR MOTION, 1962, OIL ON CANVAS, 50" x 46", COLLECTION OF EDWARD R. DOWNE, JR.
10. COLOR'S DIRECTION, 1962, OIL ON CANVAS, 64" x 54", COURTESY OF PACE GALLERY.

MYRON STOUT

1. UNTITLED, 1963, GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 6" x 5¾", COLLECTION OF RICHARD BELLAMY.
- *2. UNTITLED, 1955-68, OIL ON CANVAS, 25" x 19", COLLECTION OF RICHARD BROWN BAKER.
3. UNTITLED, CA. 1958/59-80, OIL ON CANVAS, 25¾" x 20", COURTESY OF RICHARD BELLAMY, OIL AND STEEL GALLERY.
4. TEREISIAS III, 1972, GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 5¾" x 4½", COLLECTION OF PARASOL PRESS, LTD.
- *5. UNTITLED, 1976, GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 4½" x 7½", COLLECTION OF CELIA ASCHER.
6. UNTITLED, 1966-79, GRAPHITE ON PAPER, 4¾" x 7", COLLECTION OF DR. AND MRS. AARON H. ESMAN.

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**MUHLENBERG COLLEGE EXHIBITION ONLY.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

FORREST BESS

UNTITLED, NO. 16

THE SAINTS

UNTITLED, NO. 39

UNTITLED, NO. 18

ALFRED JENSEN

HEAVEN

HEAVEN AND EARTH

A FILM RINGED THE

EARTH

A FILM RINGED THE

EARTH, DETAIL

UNTITLED, 1961

WEST SUN,

PERPETUAL

COLOR MOTION

D. JAMES DEE

D. JAMES DEE

BILL JACOBSON

BILL JACOBSON

D. JAMES DEE

ELLEN PAGE WILSON

D. JAMES DEE

D. JAMES DEE

D. JAMES DEE

ELLEN PAGE WILSON

MYRON STOUT

UNTITLED, 1955-68

UNTITLED, CA.

1958/59-80

BRUCE

McCANDLESS

D. JAMES DEE

STEVEN SLOMAN

NASA



13. BRUCE McCANDLESS, THE FIRST SOLO VOYAGE BY UNTETHERED ASTRONAUT

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