

weird sculpture of an ostrich egg emerging from a brass flower (*Lotus*, 2020–21) that served as the canvas for a close-up portrayal of two hands supporting a thurible, upon which a bantam hawk has perched. Oh's choice of object uncannily echoed Bosch's imagery, giving the Northern Renaissance artist's work a tactile dimensionality. Bosch depicted glistening crystals and clamshells, and Oh finds real-world analogues to paint upon, heightening their strangeness. In *Communion*, 2021, vintage seed packets are stitched together and lavished with pictures of Boschian revelers, orgiastically gorging themselves on swollen blackberries and fleshy nectarines. The more memorable scenes here included a turnip slowly changing into a daisy chain, and people doing terrible things to golden wax beans. We also find figures metamorphosing into carrots, or see their limbs emerging from cayenne peppers and French breakfast radishes.

For the most part, Oh opted for Bosch's lighter imagery, eschewing the more hellish stuff (no pigs in nuns' habits or rectal impalements) and the biblical moralizing. Oh's art is devotional in another way, tracing the contours of Bosch's forms and reverse-engineering the Renaissance painter's hand—a game of exacting manual reproduction. But Oh frequently manages to honor Bosch's phantasmagorical spirit: Take the eerily arresting *Pulp/Brood*, 2021, a diorama built into the cranial cavity of a cracked-open, 3D-printed human skull. Nestled into a bed of faux moss inside the object is half an eggshell with a solitary figure painstakingly depicted on its inner well.

Oh's technical facility is mesmerizing—painting on the craggy surface of an amethyst crystal seems like torture. In less dexterous hands, such an exercise might come off as soulless shtick. Yet Oh's pictorialized objects captivate even as they sidestep the artist's peril of finding a fresh painterly style by largely ignoring the temptation to do so—in rendering his images so faithfully he remains content swimming in the self-replenishing waters of the past. Peter Paul Rubens obsessed over Titian, repainting dozens of pictures, trying to absorb their secrets, and effectively succeeding. Obsession can be its own reward. But when married to concrete form, its dividends are multiplied.

—Max Lakin

## Peter Berlin

### CLAMPART

One thing you have to admit about the recent photo exhibition of self-portraits by gay-porn icon Peter Berlin at ClampArt: It was well-hung. *Ba-da-bump!*

For those not steeped in horny homo history, Berlin was an underground legend in San Francisco during the hedonistic 1970s pre-AIDS era. Born in Poland and raised in Germany, he was an Aryan fantasy, almost cartoonish in his appearance, with a Popeye silhouette and a blond Dutch-boy haircut, who cruised the streets and bars in skintight sailor uniforms and motorcycle gear. His fame grew as he starred in X-rated films (his most famous is *Nights in Black Leather* from 1973) and posed for Robert Mapplethorpe and Tom of Finland. Lately, he has had a resurgence in popularity, thanks to a 2005 documentary (*That Man: Peter Berlin*) and a glossy coffee-table book published by Damiani in 2019, both hailing him as a kinky trailblazer. At age seventy-nine, he still lives in San Francisco.

Berlin thrived in an era before *selfie* was part of our everyday vocabulary, back when we didn't have the technology that now feeds the all-consuming desire to incessantly snap pictures of oneself. But as a one-man erotic machine he churned out scores of explicit self-portraits—nude or clad in his handmade fetish wear—which were sold via mail order to his turned-on admirers. The images in this presentation, “Peter



Peter Berlin, *Double Self-Portrait with Glowing Pink Background*, ca. 1970s, acrylic and masking medium on gelatin silver print, 24 × 20".

Berlin: One of a Kind,” were leftovers from the '70s, mostly in black-and-white and approximately headshot size, transformed with colorful airbrushed details by Berlin. According to the gallery's press release, the show's handpainted prints are the last of their kind remaining.

Nowadays, many gay guys have pumped-up bodies. But forty or fifty years ago the great majority of men, gay and straight, never set foot in a gym. Berlin stood out as godlike, with his toned, muscular physique; bulging crotch; and smoldering come-hither expressions. In a few of the soft-focus shots here, he radiated a gentle, hippieish aura. Those, however, are the exception: His true role is dominant top, primed for all sorts of deviant bedroom behavior and accessorized with whips, cock rings, harnesses, and other naughty playthings. No vanilla sex here—one depiction was titled *Self-Portrait with Riot Stick* (all works ca. 1970s). The titular object, gripped tightly in Berlin's right hand, seems an apropos stand-in for the club between his legs. His airbrushed additions—sometimes slick, others times a bit more ersatz—include exotic jungle plants; strobe lights; and glowing blue, peach, and purple backgrounds. A number of the artist's photographs could pass for lascivious and surreal album covers from the glory days of disco. In *Self-Portrait on a Pedestal*, the artist is awash in strobe lights as he flexes in assless chaps on what appears to be a Plexiglas go-go box. One can practically hear Donna Summer moaning and groaning in the distance.

Most importantly, Berlin's work is a fascinating mix of narcissism and liberation. His sole object of desire is himself, and in several retouched portraits he stands side by side with himself; the doppelgängers check out one another's rock-hard abs and erections. Yet this lusty self-obsession isn't cringey or distasteful, but rather powerfully defiant and celebratory. Beyond the confines of San Francisco, New York, and other urban safe spaces, access to gay eroticism was nearly nonexistent at the time. Berlin's mail-order biz was a sexual lifeline to closeted men worldwide. His painted images are glorified portrayals of a proud homosexual

as a mighty hypersexualized warrior and macho savior, leading the way with his throbbing penis—a vision of gay liberation at its finest.

—Linda Simpson

## MONTAUK, NEW YORK

### Forrest Bess

#### THE RANCH

Even now, more than forty years after his death and some seventy years after his first exhibition at New York's Betty Parsons Gallery, no one really knows what to make of Forrest Bess. The alluring legend of the visionary fisherman painter from Bay City, Texas, always threatens to overshadow his intense and quite inward art. Consider his Wikipedia entry: The section on "Painting" is barely half the length of the one titled "Surgery"—referring, of course, to his painful efforts toward becoming a pseudo-hermaphrodite, which he hoped would lead to immortality. It would be tempting to put the ostensibly crackpot philosophy on the back burner and just contemplate the paintings. But



Forrest Bess, untitled, date unknown, oil on canvas, 4½ × 6".

for Bess, his thinking (an amalgamation of Carl Jung's teachings, Kundalini, and Australian Aboriginal beliefs, among other far-flung systems) was the substance of the paintings.

The recent unearthing of a previously undocumented batch of Bess paintings made for a good opportunity to see and consider his art afresh. The fourteen canvases had been found, we were told, in boxes salvaged years ago during the clear-out of a disused house that belonged to one of Bess's close friends. And a couple of the works, most of which were undated and untitled, suffered grievous damage. Yet even those retain their power, which resides above all in the blunt factuality with which his symbols impose themselves on the canvas. There is nothing misty or elusive about these apparitions: They arrive with the implacability of unexpected truth. Or at least most do. A couple of the pieces in this show were more figurative than one would have expected—perhaps representing an earlier phase of his artistic journey—and feel less immediate, though they, too, are fascinating. I find Bess most convincing when he gets closest to a kind of small-*m* minimalism—for instance, in one work, a golden-yellow circle, triangle, and square were tidily aligned above another row consisting of an equal sign, a second circle, and an x, all on a baby-blue ground. Luminously, something very basic is being communicated here. And what that is remains tantalizingly ungraspable.

Not that Bess didn't assign specific meanings to the symbols in his paintings—but since there is no syntax to relate them to one another, their relationships can only be visual, not semantic. In one piece, a somber-gray field was sown with a multitude of glyphs resembling two-pronged forks. According to the undated "Primer of Basic Primordial Symbolism" that Bess drew up, these must be trees. Fine. But then what's that flurry of pink and white paint dabs that floats above them, just left of center? Unsymbolic pigmented matter, if you ask me. Anyway, we should take seriously Bess's assertion that he was merely transcribing what he saw when he closed his eyes—which is to say, his works are not statements of his ideas; rather, his ideas were merely attempts to interpret the forms, colors, and patterns he'd seen or, rather, experienced. In this, Bess is much like his close contemporary Agnes Martin, another member of the Parsons stable who likewise painted, as directly as she knew how, the inspirations that appeared to her inner eye. I was tickled to learn, from a statement in the gallery's press release by Chuck Smith—director of the 1999 documentary film *Forrest Bess: Key to the Riddle*—that Martin took Bess to buy a jacket for one of his New York openings. The two artists shared a glimpse of something promising, as she put it, "more perfection than is possible in the world."

—Barry Schwabsky

## HOUSTON

### "The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse"

#### CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM

"The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse," a sprawling survey that features the work of ninety artists, investigates what the exhibition's curator, Valerie Cassel Oliver, calls the "philosophical landscape" of the Black American South through an intergenerational roster of figures working across art, music, and various other forms. The show debuted at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond before arriving in Houston (its current iteration was coordinated by the Contemporary Arts Museum's Patricia Restrepo)

View of "The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse," 2021–22. Photo: Sean Flemming.

