



In *Flotation Device*, 2006, Virgil Grotfeldt used washes of his coal-based pigments to evoke an undersea world.

Using carbon dust as his pigment, Virgil Grotfeldt makes sinuous, mystical paintings that evoke aquatic life and botanical specimens. In a process he likens to watercolor—every stroke is transparent and indelible—he lays down thin veils of finely graduated color. In *Spring Thaw* (2004), included in his solo show last winter at Wade Wilson Art in Houston, delicate floral shapes and snakelike lines seem to float on the canvas like ghostly emanations. He achieves this rich translucent effect with his signature carbon dust, whose seemingly infinite tonalities have an “endless voice,” he says.

Grotfeldt often paints on maps and on ledgers bearing fragments of handwriting; recently he has been working with oils on MRIs of his own brain. Modifying the blue-black film with primarily white pigment, he variously enhances or obscures the shadowy images, which to him have profound implications. “The brain is where creativity and ideas of the self reside,” says Grotfeldt, who is 60.

Born in Decatur, Illinois, he focused on photorealism as a student at Eastern Illinois University, and later at Philadelphia’s Tyler School of Art, where he earned his M.F.A. Grotfeldt is a superb draftsman, but he began to grow disillusioned with photorealism and what he saw as the genre’s overemphasis on technical virtuosity. Settling in Houston in the 1970s, he set up his studio in a former church and began producing increasingly abstract paintings. He had stopped looking at contemporary art, unmoved by any artists except Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, in whose work he sensed an expression of the human spirit that spoke to his struggle to find a meaningful voice. A visit to Mexico in the ‘80s was the turning point, Grotfeldt recalls. His conversations with artists there strengthened his resolve in his new direction. “For the first time in my life, I felt that what I was doing was actually genuine and real,” he says.

Grotfeldt, who is represented in New York by Jason McCoy, will exhibit new work in a group show next month at Houston Baptist University, where he has taught full-time since 2002. The position allows him to emphasize the creative process over pure technique, says Grotfeldt, whose paintings on canvas range from \$7,000 to more than \$25,000 at Wade Wilson. His students are not necessarily art majors. But, adds the artist who works with coal, “in my six years here, I’ve learned that you never know where the diamonds come from.”

—Patricia Covo Johnson



Patricia Covo Johnson, formerly art critic for the Houston Chronicle, is the author of *Contemporary Art in Texas* (1995).