

Virgil Grotfeldt, 1948-2009: A Tribute

by Stephanie Buhmann

On Monday, February 23, 2009, Virgil Grotfeldt died after a long battle with cancer at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. He was sixty years old.



Virgil Grotfeldt, "All Things Constant #7," 2001.
Carbon and graph paper
11 x 14 inches. 27.9 x 35.6 cm.

Grotfeldt was a prolific artist, who, over the course of four decades, created an oeuvre unique in its take on biomorphic abstraction. While he was never identified with any particular movement, his work was based on, as he put it, "a love of gesture as voice." His embrace of immediacy certainly evoked Abstract Expressionism, but his strong interest in experimentation and the exploration of the subconscious reveals a lifelong involvement with Surrealism. When asked about particular artists who might have had a significant influence on his work, Grotfeldt drew on the 19th century, citing the Symbolist painter Odilon Redon and the writer/draftsman Victor Hugo above all. Interestingly, Grotfeldt came to abstraction through Photorealist painting. Though his mature period was devoted solely to the non-objective, his work continued to strive for the moodiness found in Redon and Hugo.

Virgil Grotfeldt was born in 1948 in Decatur, Illinois, and studied at Eastern Illinois University and the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. After a brief stay in Chicago, he settled in Houston in 1977, where emerging galleries and alternative spaces such as Diverse Works and the University of Houston Lawndale Annex were fostering a vibrant

new art scene. His last teaching position was at Houston Baptist University. Although Grotfeldt frequently collaborated with the Dutch artist (and former student of Joseph Beuys) Waldo Bien beginning in the late 1980s, and remained close to the artist community in Houston, he maintained a deeply personal sensibility.

It is impossible to sum up an oeuvre without addressing the multiple facets that develop over a lifetime, but speaking in the most general terms, Grotfeldt's project was no less than a search for the mysterious bond connecting all elements. In 1997, he wrote: "Consideration and study of elements that converged to compose planet earth is of infinite interest to me, especially within the context of the evolution of life, culture, and belief systems. The anthropological, sociological, and geological composition of our world is my source of truth." Grotfeldt's abstraction is deeply rooted in nature. His compositions often seem to transition between the microscopic and macroscopic. They can appear as dreamscapes, populated by underwater plant forms, or as elaborate cell structures. His imagery, rich in mystical and anthropological overtones, often seems just slightly beyond our grasp, like mist, constantly on the verge of physical transformation.

Preferring a monochromatic palette of earth tones, which contributed to his work's sense of timelessness, Grotfeldt emphasized texture as an expressive device. He experimented with materials, working with coal powder, clay, ground metal, acrylic, and metal dust on paper, which he combined with carbon, watercolor, or oil. He incorporated found letters, antique maps, and nautical charts to initiate a dialogue between conscious systems of order and the expressive freedom of the subconscious. One of Virgil Grotfeldt's last bodies of work, a series of sixteen oil paintings completed during the final year of his illness, was based on MRI scans of his brain. With utmost clarity, these works document Grotfeldt's key ambition to make sense of the many forces life entails, its contradictions, inflictions, and puzzles. By making the MRI scans his material of choice, he abstracted the records documenting the failing health of his body. But by painting on them as a point of departure, he was able to create something vivid and vibrant, a home for the imagination built by an undeterred spirit.

Grotfeldt had numerous national and international solo exhibitions. His work is part of the Menil Collection, Houston; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Chengdu Museum, China; and the Fritz Becht Collection, Amsterdam. In 2003, a major publication of his work, entitled *Virgil Grotfeldt*, with text by Patrick Healy, an introduction by Walter Hopps and designed by Waldo Bien, was published by Wienand, Cologne.