

VIRGIL GROTFELDT: MEMORIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas
On view through March 20

Virgil Grotfeldt created otherworldly landscapes recording flora and fauna as if from a dreamscape. He used coal dust suspended in acrylic medium or tinted with watercolor to create mysterious velvety black forms, actually pushing or pulling the mixture across the page with the palm of his hand, his fingers, sticks, or brushes. Grotfeldt's biomorphic abstraction related to both his interest in Surrealist Arshile Gorky and Symbolist Odilon Redon.

In fact, his work often seems out-of-time. He favored materials with history, like discarded ledger pages, old letters, maps, and battle plans, conversing with them by layering spontaneous paintings over them. His choice of muted earthy colors reiterate the nostalgic look of his work, even in pieces started on fresh canvases or when he completely overpaints the source materials. Like Max Ernst's frottage or decalomania techniques, Grotfeldt invented a way of manipulating his materials that immediately felt almost supernatural, mystical even.

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While Grotfeldt was firmly grounded in the traditions of the West, his work clearly has an affinity to certain schools of Chinese painting: monochromatic spontaneous gestures often floating on an empty ground. Grotfeldt trained as a photorealist in the 1970s and while his style evolved radically, he was always the master of his own hand as seen in the crisp lines and deliberate application of even unconventional materials. His signature technique was developed after a meeting with artist Waldo Bien, a former student of Joseph Beuys, with whom he shared a long and productive series of collaborations.

This exhibition features almost thirty works on paper and canvas from the last 15 years of Grotfeldt's very prolific career. Grotfeldt, a resident of Houston, died of cancer in 2009.

— ANNE LAWRENCE

