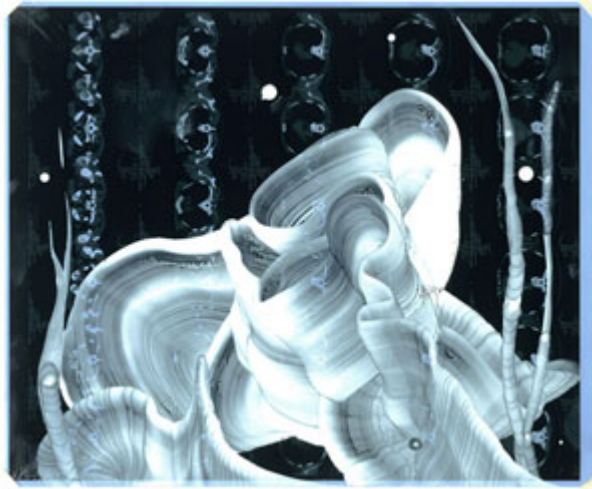


## Remembering Virgil Grotfeldt

by Meredith "Butch" Jack

April 2009

*Houston artist Virgil Grotfeldt died on February 23, 2009 after a sixteen-year battle with cancer. He was 60 years old. An exhibition of his last works, **Virgil Grotfeldt, 274296**, is on view at the Art Museum of South Texas from April 17 - June 21, 2009.*



### **Virgil Grotfeldt, “Man of Mystery” or Good Ol’ Uncle Bill**

by Meredith "Butch" Jack

The late Virgil Grotfeldt (a.k.a. Uncle Bill) was a mystery and an open book at the same time. I never saw him gamble, but he always said that if he was going to, he'd bet everything on a single turn of the card. He lived and died that way.

As an artist, he experimented with anything at hand. He did a lot of work in coal dust that his best friend Waldo Bien gave him. During his first bout with cancer, Virgil used the dregs of the medicinal tea that a shaman in Austin gave him; he said that it had iridescence about it as a pigment. He fashioned sculpture from the palm fronds and sticks that fell in his yard after a storm. And, although he complained about how difficult it was to stretch, he would use the finest linen canvas. The image was everything; the material was just stuff. He would only explain his images by saying that he had done too many drugs when he was young and didn't know what the images were. I always thought of him as a “magic realist”; that somewhere in the cosmos all the forms he saw existed. Maybe he was just an accurate reporter of something that we couldn't see.

Virgil was extremely supportive of other artists; while he was living in New York he would say that he “had to make it before he could help others to make it”. He never felt he had “made it” in New York, but his dealer would send him bolts of linen canvas to work with and younger artists, with careers that seemed to him far more successful than his, would come to him for

advice. He wasn't a social butterfly, but he made a point of attending openings to support young artists.



At the same time, he was extremely critical of younger artists' preoccupation with the "market". He complained constantly that nobody talked about the art, only the business. He was passionately interested in an artist's intent with their work, but not with whether they could sell it. His son Andy was a case in point; he is an aspiring young artist who is often frustrated with the lack of support for his work. Virgil was supportive of Andy's efforts, but Virgil questioned him the same as he would have any young artist about what

he was trying to do in his work.

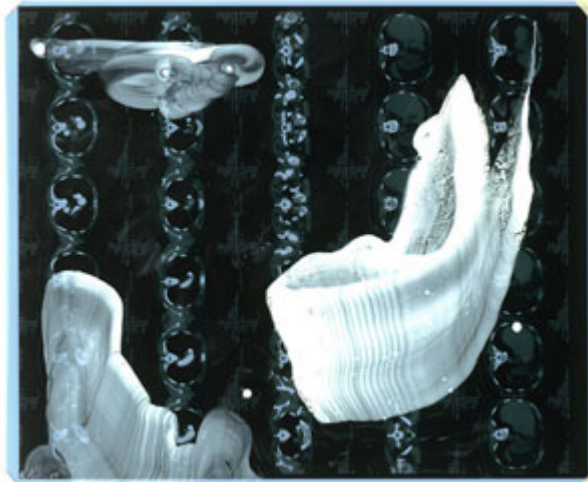
And family meant a great deal to Virgil— he was supportive and perhaps even too protective at times. He was proud of his children; he often told me stories about them, how his daughter Jessie had met so many people at a New York party that she introduced him to Frank Stella or that Andy had done a particularly good painting.

Virgil liked knowing things; he read for information from the art magazines or biographies of his favorite artists, but he didn't read much for pleasure. He read the newspaper every morning and would quote stories from the back pages of the business section as well as the art reviews and front page. At the same time, he was a Luddite who wouldn't check his emails and had the secretaries at HBU type up his syllabi because he wouldn't write them on a computer.

Virgil could and would argue anything. He was particularly incensed about farm subsidies; he maintained that the farmers in the area of Illinois that he grew up in only worked a third of the year and then sat at the café and complained about how poor they were before going home in their new pickup trucks. He was equally aggravated that workers in the local tire factories, who made twice his salary, thought that he made too much when he taught college. As an avowed socialist, he could move through every economic strata effortlessly, but he categorized Marfa, TX as a gated refuge for the excessively wealthy, who were motivated by

the fear that the proletariat would come after them when the revolution came.

He argued this and everything with a straight face, and you could never be certain when he believed something or was just arguing for the sake of arguing. You found out when he felt that he had won because then he would change places and argue the opposite. The only defense I ever found when he would become too outrageous was to just tell him that he was full of crap and to stop it, but even then he never smiled.



So, here was this man, a series of contradictions, and, even after playing pool with him most weekends for close to 15 years, I'm sure I didn't know the entire person. There was always more, zigs and zags of behavior or interests, whatever was foremost in his awareness at the time.

In the PBS series *Power of Art*, Simon Shama opined that Picasso had peaked when he painted *Guernica* and had to spend the thirty-some years of the rest of his life knowing that he never made another work as powerful as *Guernica*. Virgil hadn't peaked when he died; his last show of paintings on MRI scans at Houston Baptist University were the best things he had ever done and hinted at more to come. We'll never know what astounding pieces he would have made.

If you never had the opportunity to experience the whole man, you definitely missed something; we're all diminished by his passing. He'll leave a hell of a hole in my life and yours, even if you're not aware of it.

His nephew spoke of him as "Uncle Bill" when talking about the things he learned from him. And his wife has an incredible etching hanging on her wall that is inscribed to "Bill & Debbie." I finally figured out that "Uncle Bill" was the alter-ego of the person most of us knew as Virgil Grotfeldt. His name was William Virgil Grotfeldt, but I didn't know that until the week after he died.

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