

ARTLIES Issue #47 - 2005

Virgil Grotfeldt: *Remains of the Hand*

By Ileana Marcoulesco

Remains of the Hand is a poetic if cryptic title, suggesting that the act of painting-by-hand is here sandwiched between two layers of photographic processes like relics embedded within the rock of the final product. The seven large pieces in this exhibition refer back to two series of initial photographs: the first, aerial photographic maps of Rwanda during wartime; it is, if one wishes, the more "political" of the twain. The other has to do with the strangeness of nanoparticles. After scanning and printing, these particles appear as clusters of blobs, unrecognizable if you do not know what they are. The artist then paints over them—nonfiguratively and in condensed, wide-brush strokes—whatever tremendous mystery he "sees" as underlying. Always a "seer," Grotfeldt needs only a pretext—human or cosmic—to unleash his dynamic hand-eye continuum.



45.OKO.3.8.6, 2004
Inkjet print
47 1/4 x 37 1/4 inches

In a third move, he photographs these paintings based on photographs, with their cosmic, bluish tints and silver streaks, accented here and there by pinks and purples in a whirling, dizzying movement. Underneath the vertiginous volutes, some gray blobs remain intact.

Viewers are nonplussed if they can even feel the abyssal depths of the phenomena that occasioned these works, sucked in as if by a cosmic and psychological twister. In spite of appearances, Grotfeldt's work is not formalistic art; it contains not an ounce of mannerism or artificial beautification. He never strives for outer effects, letting instead the darkest strata of existence—or inexistence—hit us with a hammer and open our conscious brains to new levels of perception.

In the four pieces built over nanoparticles, the underlying ground is both scientifically and existentially extraordinary, yet the work unfolds with perfect visual coherence. In spite of the neutrality of a field of infra-atomic particles or aerial photographs, images transport us to worlds not directly accessible to the senses.

According to Grotfeldt's aesthetic, no painterliness was attempted here or elsewhere. Yet, if a hand is present, a painterly act ensues, pointing not to the visible or representable but at the level at which the artist plunges eye and hand into something destined to unveil a truth, all the while veiling the visible—a movement akin to what Martin Heidegger took truth to mean in Greek philosophy: an uncovering of the hidden in its hiddenness: a-letheia.

Indeed, none of these images point to a natura naturans, or nature in its spontaneous generation; no attempt whatsoever is made at depicting anything. Grotfeldt just delivers, aided by a hand-propelled materialization, a set of inner visions, reactions and imaginings—superabstraction, if one wills—thrice removed from object-uality. Like in his previous work, Grotfeldt creates a realm of the imaginary, most of the time inseparable from the retention of the vanishing memory of the seeing eye. This is Grotfeldt at his most earnest, taking a step further towards the absolute, operating at an infra-level of visual perception and bringing to surface depth experiences, which the participating viewer recognizes intuitively only as atavistic relics. In previous, biomorphic series, Grotfeldt explored dark waters, competing with nature in morphological creations; lurking underneath was always an anxious spirit at odds with realism.



100K.3.7.7, 2004
Inkjet print
47 1/4 x 37 1/4 inches

Creativity is lodged in the "third eye" of the artist, who sees what we can't discern. It's hard to guess what the artist secretly sees—or whether he wants us to indignantly partake in it. Take the massacre of the Tutsis, or the absurd, socially engineered world of a deadly tribal conflict in the twenty-first century, for example. Revel in the discovery of quasi-immaterial nanoparticles—the smallest objects of the universe—that look far more like "intentional entities" than "objects," in the earthly

sense. In this series, obviously, nothing is nature and nothing is depiction. Whatever is, is immediately reduced to its immaterial essence by the virtual sweep of the camera.

Calling himself a non-painter, Grotfeldt could have added, "I paint the absolute irreality." Maurice Merleau-Ponty found the invisible more convincing than the visible in his study of the phenomenology of perception. Remains of the Hand, yes...pointing to relics, residues, traces of implosions, processes almost virgin of cultural influences, which saturate the purely imaginary with psychological charge. In this double sense, "nature," or whatever we take it to be, practically disappears. Grotfeldt presents morphologically coherent structures but offers them in a contemporary language: wars, scientific discoveries...this accounts for the inordinate radiance of his works. Across a mountain of florid materialism and crass empiricism, Grotfeldt's work has slit a gorge for a cool, crystalline river to flow, deep and unsullied.

**Sicardi Gallery
Houston, Texas**