

Jörg Heiko Bruns

The graphic artist Winfried Wolk
On the exhibition at Galerie erph

Winfried Wolk is a political man; Winfried Wolk is a painter and a graphic artist. With his works on paper, especially his drawings and his prints, he is repeatedly being discussed; his involvement and his participation in numerous solo and joint exhibitions are noticeable and visible. "The Dragon" (Jevgeni Schwarz), "The Representative", "The Sinking of the Titanic", Carousal, Noah's Ark and the Ship of Fools are explosive metaphors and multi-layered, contemporary themes that, freely grasped, have again and again stimulated him to devise his own pictures.

The tortured creature, man enslaved, these in the last resort are what determine Wolk's examination of human existence and shape the works of a committed artist motivated by Christianity. For instance, his 12 aquatintas for the Latin American Psalms of Ernesto Cardenal, the priest, poet and minister of culture of in the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, are undoubtedly among the most important works in his extensive oeuvre. These could be regarded as the highlight of his graphic art, long in gestation and continually growing.

Winfried Wolk completed his studies in Leipzig in 1969, and since 1971 has lived and worked in Gädebehn, not far from Schwerin. One of the first graphic works to penetrate the public consciousness was the etching "The Representative" after Rolf Hochhuth (1971). The graphic artist took up the questions posed by the dramatist, producing his version about the responsibility of the Pope and the church in a four-part etching akin to an altar with Predella. The main section is a narrative commentary, while the lower section of the work is stirring, where "only" the bodies of innocent murder victims lay scattered around as a grey landscape, the result of the do-nothing policy of God's representative, who was unwilling to take a stand against the persecution of the Jews and the murderous activities of German fascism. At the VII. Art Exhibition in 1972-73, this marked Winfried Wolk's entry into the graphics landscape of the GDR, which he was able to represent again with the same print at Intergrafik '73.

The same etching was also subsequently present at the Berlin exhibition to mark the 25th anniversary of the GDR. Winfried Wolk's committed contribution could no longer be overlooked. The motivation and structure of the three-part etching "Country, your children or a postscript to Vietnam" (1972) were similar, but were taken farther back in their narrative flow. The separate parts of the etching plates are impressive, here still standing together as cumulative rather than under any compelling

graphic link (e.g., the child's head and the landscape). Winfried Wolk clearly recognized these problems of design and now took the stage with large-format coloured silk-screen prints. "The victims' cry" (1975), "Everyday fascism" (1975) and "What remains is mourning and sadness" (1976) are works in which the intention is for the form to be disciplined by working more in surface areas, in which narrative is reduced to a minimum, but not entirely discarded. In later graphic works he again opts for his joy in creating fables, for instance in the works based on poems by Becher, Bobrovski, Fürnberg, Hesse, Kunert and others. In all his work, one may detect his need to communicate his feelings, his knowledge about the state of the world, through human errors and weaknesses. Founded on his humanist responsibility as an artist, and using his pictures as warnings and reminders, he aims to take part in changing the world, and to help humankind's dreams to move a step nearer to fulfillment.

Nor can it be overlooked that unbounded sadness on the score of an ever-recurring idiocy can turn into ironic distance or even annoyance and silent rage. Here the artist found a fundamental motif in Jevgeni Schwarz's "The Dragon" that he interprets in his very own way, namely with the figure of Icarus, thus penetrating the roots of everyday - and even today, still everyday - fascism. In his drawings, etchings and silk-screen prints on this topic he pitilessly reveals mentally crippled and deformed human beings who blindly and cravenly pursue the striving for power of 20th century dictators, themselves craving a little slice of the action. These asslickers, with Winfried Wolk the print naturally has a more decorous name, but one that is also more complicated: "We all want to move upwards - or the Icarus-like surge towards the great people's international community while duly observing the hierarchical principle" - are only a drastic example of bitter satire. In these and other works, Winfried Wolk is not always able to resist an admonitory undertone of a kind that painting does better without (?). His formal exaggerations, e.g., in "A party game generally played and very popular" ("Allgemein geübtes, sehr beliebtes Gesellschaftsspiel" - 1981) or "When the great art critic was decked out with laurels" ("Als der grosse Kunstkritiker mit Lorbeer geschmückt wurde" - 1983) very closely resemble Karl-Georg Hirsch's figurations and Rolf Münzners line drawings, respectively.

Winfried Wolk is happy to recognize his Leipzig provenance, which in another respect is hard to overlook. Even today, he regards himself as a seeker, and that is his advantage. Man is at the centre of his feeling and thought, reason than self-forgetful sensuousness tends to determine his output, yet it is a reason that while sustained by emotions, also generates emotions. The "Uninvolved because wholly apolitical person" (pencil, 1981) and the identically titled aquatinta/drypoint (also published in 1981 as "Geschlagener Alter" or "Downtrodden Old Man") lend very significant graphic emphases that go beyond political satire. That artist here

succeeds with works that even untitled do not fail to make an impact. The uninformed because apolitical man is the downtrodden one! The viewer cannot escape reaching his own conclusions that Wolk's sarcastic formulation definitely makes an impact. The aquatintas on Cardenal's Psalms follow immediately. These are reduced to very simple shapes, with little drama, barely any scenic element, exploiting the possibilities of aquatint with its rough patches, achieving prints that are truly great in their impressive calm. The Chile prints of 1975, the works based on the dragon, the red Christ - dedicated to Che Guevara - played their part in paving the way for the cycle of twelve prints (nine being selected by Union-Verlag of Berlin for publication with Cardenal's Psalms), although there were neither direct connections with any similar forerunners or links with Wolk's works at the same period. Wolk's journeys, most recently to India and Nepal, are reflected in various ways in his oeuvre. The beauty and the size, the poverty and the distress of the Indian sub-continent, were initially captured by the artist in around 2000 documentary photographs and in his sketchbooks. Yet much remains to be processed, much work remains. It is pleasing that Winfried Wolk allowed himself to be inspired by the frank eroticism of these peoples to produce beautiful etchings and sculptures inspired by Indian and Nepalese temples. That the artist has in recent years repeatedly taken the Ship of Fools and the Sinking of the Titanic (recklessness and end of the world), Noah's Ark and the circus (look out!) as his subjects has again and again been related to Wolk's basic mission of seeking opportunities to resort to pictures as a means of intervening in the stagnating evolution of society, giving the individual the gift of seeing and thus serving the community. His solidarity is thus primarily and repeatedly with the human being. Here one sees an artist as a seeker after people, paving the passage of his search with small mosaic stones.