



Exhibition Change – Form & Nature

Bulgarian artists in a changing culture

Introduction

Artists in Bulgaria have a special background for the different generations. Their work and environment has changed and was influenced drastically throughout its history. Printing in art in its broadest definition has proven to work as a sensitive seismograph. This form of art plays an important part in historic societal changes and focusing attention on the needs of the individual in society. Though these elements are found in the work of all Bulgarian artists utilizing printing techniques, the form is chosen by the individual artist. This project serves to show how much influence changes in society influence two levels: development of the form and the development of (printing) techniques.

Historically, the fact that 30 years ago this year the iron curtain fell makes for an important moment to stop and look at these changes. What has changed? In what way have the printing artists been able to develop themselves?

Circumstances

From the 50s of the previous century, the several Biennales and Triennales (in cities such as Varna, Krakow, and Ljubljana) were very important for artist in the formerly communism dominated Bulgaria. To them, it was a chance, often the only chance, to encounter the art of other artists. If, for example, your work was featured in a catalogue, you became a copy. In this way, it was possible to encounter works that could not be seen in your environment.

Before the fall of the wall, the work environment was stable in a sense. Art was seen as an important means and as such, the (desired) art advanced. This can be found in the opportunities presented to the members of the Union of Bulgarian Artists: regular expositions in the many public museums, cheap workspaces, etc. The works could be sold for a good price, and an artist could live fairly well off their art. After the fall of the wall in 1989 this changed. As stated by Georgi Kolev: 'Because before, the communist time, it was the ideology and the socialist-realism who forced you to do something. After the change at last, it's the market.' After this shift, a place formed for private galleries and private collectors. The freedom of choice created in this for the new generation of artists does take time to get used to. The working conditions are less certain and stable, it is not easy to live off and work in art, there is no certainty. The new and greater influence of the western modern art is embraced, but the connection to the own sacral tradition remains.

Visual Language

In the same way that artists in the Netherlands are aware or unaware influence of the Dutch masters, such as Rembrandt, on their work, the Bulgarian artists cannot escape the influence of the countless icons found in the monasteries and churches of Bulgaria. In addition, traces of other elements of the Byzantine culture can be found.

The Bulgarian graphic artist Mihail Petkov is a clear example. He did a project inspired by the events surrounding the Kremikovtsi monastery near Sophia. This ancient monastery, first mentioned in the 15th century, plays a remarkable role in the history of Bulgaria and the ever returning and necessary

battle for freedom. The building, throughout history, keeps rising from the ashes. Until the fifties of the previous century it was a monastery for nuns. Unfortunately, afterwards it became the domain of soldiers, which the building and icons have suffered from greatly. Part of the building was set on fire, frescos were painted over and the priceless icons were used as target practice. Petkov responded to these dark times with his project 'In Sacris' (2004). 'In Sacris' (between the holy things) shows the holy power of the icons cannot be destroyed by damaging and destroying the material. The content of the icon is stronger than the shape: a message that resonates with the defilement of freedom that the Bulgarian people have had to endure time and time again.

Graphic art as an art in Bulgaria always had a leading role, in part due to the aforementioned circumstances. The graphic artists also knew how to cleverly use the circumstances by giving their works titles that fit with the desires of the established power, such as 'Factory' or 'Construction work', and other names in that vein. These 'limitations' resulted in a particular theme in the Bulgarian graphic arts. In contemporary Bulgarian graphic art there is a multitude of themes. In the exhibition we choose to present change in relation to two important trends: the human story and the nature. With these images we can introduce the artists with these works as an art form. The works will be placed in context, and as such will do right by the extraordinary history of Bulgarian graphic art, in their tradition of adaptation and change.

In the exhibition work can be seen from the following artists:

Mihail Petkov
Dimo Kolibarov
Vasil Kolev
Snezhina Bisserova
Aleksandra Dimitrova
Valentin Lekov
Kantcho Kanev

Special graphic techniques born from necessity

Due to a shortage on the academy in lithographic plates for education on graphic techniques, a special technique was developed. It is further designed by the artist and teacher at the academy Snezhina Bisserova. This 'waterless lithography' is called *siligraphy*, which uses silicon.

Partially due to these experiences, Bisserova has for some time been initiating a long-running international project on the use of digital techniques in contemporary graphic art and gives this shape by organizing exposition and exchange of artist between countries.

Expositions and masterclass graphic technique

For Grafiek2019, Grafein wants to request attention from the Dutch public for the work of a small but representative selection of Bulgarian artists, which are preeminent responders on the aforementioned changes. The remarkable quality of the work can be represented in the framework of the exceptional changes of Bulgarian graphic art.

By organizing a masterclass special techniques for (graphic) artists in the Netherlands, we also want to contribute to the exchange of experience and knowledge of different methods of lithography like *siligraphy* and the use of digital techniques in graphic art and artists' practice.