*Everywhere Is Heaven, Stanley Spencer & Roger Wagner* (Stanley Spencer Gallery)

The artist Stanley Spencer was convinced that the Berkshire village where he lived, Cookham, evidenced heaven. Or rather, he found and painted heaven in his village, depicting Biblical scenes there, and incorporating people he knew into them. He had done something similar when he found himself in war zones and as a wartime artist-in-residence in the Glasgow dockyards. He also painted gardens and parks, mostly as sellable (but very beautiful) landscapes, and made several self-portraits and images of lovers that are as visceral and unsettling as anything by Francis Bacon: naked flesh as raw meat. Everything was considered sacred and godly in Spencer's world once 'the holiness of things began to strike' him. He imagined humanity living in harmony and made paintings on the theme of universal love for an unrealised Church House project, and he also painted a very literal resurrection (now in Tate Britain) where the dead of Cookham emerge, fit and well, from the church graveyard.

Roger Wagner imposes a Christian vision on what appears real too, his work juxtaposing nature and industry, and inserting angels and/or Biblical characters and events within them. 'Abraham and the Angels' at first appears to be a power station set rather too closely within nature: a small group of trees dwarf the building in the strange sun or moon light. Closer inspection reveals the titular characters within the landscape. 'The Harvest is the end of the World and the Reapers are Angels' seems to depict a similar world, but here the angels are foregrounded and are busy scything the corn which covers the landscape as far as we can see; whilst 'The Burning Fiery Furnace' sets the Old Testament story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in an industrial furnace. Elsewhere, T.S. Eliot's and William Blake's poetry is in the mix, along with echoes of de Chirico's haunting surrealist landscapes.

I have grown up knowing about Stanley Spencer, have attended several major exhibitions of his work (sometimes with other poets and artists), collected catalogues and books, and made several visits to the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham, which has organised this two-person show and produced the booklet under review. Roger Wagner's work has been on my radar since 1990 when his work appeared in the touring exhibition *New Icons: Christian Iconography in Contemporary Art*, which toured to Warwick, Exeter and Lincoln. Although his work was not included in other exhibitions around the same time, such as 1988's touring exhibition *A Spiritual Dimension*, *The Journey* at Lincoln Cathedral in 1990, or 1993's *Images of Christ* at Northampton then St. Paul's Cathedral, London, nor in Sister Wendy's book *On Art and The Sacred* (1992), he seemed very much part of the theological discussion about creative arts and belief at the time, much of which seems ridiculous now.

There were debates about whether Christians should only paint (or sing or dance or write about) particular themes or subjects, or whether it was okay to simple be an artist (or writer etc.) who painted (or wrote...) but had some sort of faith, perhaps in the way a plumber, whatever their spiritual or religious ideas, simply mends the pipes. Spencer and Wagner clearly do – in this exhibition anyway – make explicitly religious paintings, as a sample of the paintings' titles evidence: 'John Donne Arriving in Heaven', 'The Builders of the Tower of Babel', 'The Last Supper', 'Study for Christ Carrying the Cross' (Spencer); 'Ash Wednesday', 'Sacred Allegory: Apocalypse', 'Walking on Water III' (Wagner). But they are also part of a much wider and richer artistic engagement which has been going on since the Renaissance, and was evidenced by several other exhibitions which happened the same time as the projects I mentioned above. *The Tree of Life. New Images of an Ancient Symbol*, a 1989 South Bank Centre exhibition which toured nationally during 1989 and 1990 combined ecocriticism with mythology and religion, whilst Nottingham Castle's 2005 exhibition *Faith* was a multicultural and multifaith event. Roger Wagner's 2002 version of 'Abraham and the Angels' (the one at the Spencer Gallery is a 1986 painting) was included in *Presence*, a 2004 exhibition of 'Images of Christ for the Third Millennium' shown across six cathedrals, which included abstract images and light installations as well as figurative work.

Unfortunately, this new catalogue is a bit thin on the image front but it is, of course, possible to look at Spencer's art in many catalogues or online, and to visit Wagner's website. What this small catalogue does have is a superb introductory essay by Amanda Bradley Petitgas, comparing the two artists and explaining why they have been shown together; indeed, why the Spencer Gallery is exhibiting another artist alongside Spencer for the very first time, a theme that is picked up by gallery owner Anthony Mould in his 'Why juxtapose these painters', which follows a note by Wagner himself. Petitgas also provides the catalogue details and information for the 22 paintings in the exhibition, six of which are illustrated. Wagner, it turns out, is also a poet, and he writes articulately about 'the idea of an art that seeks to make sense of the whole of life by pointing beyond itself', an admirable ambition. Mould suggests that Wagner 'is perhaps at ease with Christianity in a way that Spencer never entirely was' but notes that '[b]oth have swum bravely in their own ways against the tides of conventional expectation.' This catalogue and exhibition allow us to see that for ourselves.

Rupert Loydell.

(900 words)