**Matters of Life and Death**

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ASAPH BEN MENAHEM (b. Israel, 1940) has helped revive the art of the woodcut in this country in an extraordinary manner. His relatively huge works (many of them well over a metre by a metre and usually square), derive their considerable impact from a combination of startling image and powerful composition rather than their anyway impressive size; they look just as effective in the catalogue that accompanies the artist’s current show at the Israel Museum.

Ben Menahem deals with legend, terror, sex and death, not to mention subjects like castration (a group of blacks performing it on a white, seen only in the catalogue) and erotic crucifixion, without making any of it unpalatable. Here is convincing evidence of how literal or literary ideas can be transformed by art precisely because they are transformed into art, an art in which the ingenuity of the formal values is paramount. What makes so many of these prints really work is the marvellous combination of bold drawing and the extraordinary fine relationships between all the blacks and whites of the positive and negative shapes.

The artist is at his best when adopting an unusual point of view: either looking directly down onto his subjects, or, even more startlingly, directly overhead, like looking into a Tiepola ceiling; one image even seems to be that of someone looking up out of an open grave. Ben Menahem acknowledges a debt to Nolde, Kirschner and Munch as well as to his our own Hanna Levi and Jacob Pins, but his striking combinations of subject matter and almost cartoon like drawing remind me of an artist he has possibly never seen. Australia’s Brett Whitely.

These 14 large prints, which date from the last three years, are also unusual in that they preserve the quality of lively brush drawings, possibly the results of the artist’s rendering them in that manner before cutting into the plywood, a medium which both receives and prints ink in a relatively grainless manner more reminiscent of paper than wood. In any case, a marked calligrapher quality is preserved, one that somehow sets unexpectedly well with the act of cutting, the nature of which is also fully preserved.

This show, curated by Meira Perry-Lehman and mounted with simple good taste, is and almost uncanny mixture of art and life, depicted in near-primordial images, yet with extreme economy of means. It is a welcome reminder that real art is the act of making something out of seemingly nothing. Should be seen. (I.M. Cohen Print Gallery, Israel Museum).