

Sefer Hana

by Ellen Holtzblatt

September 6 - November 9, 2012

The Arnold Rissman Family Kol Ami Museum is a unique collection of Jewish art, artifacts and ritual objects. In addition to preserving significant objects for posterity, the museum seeks to develop programs and exhibitions that are designed to educate the congregation and promote an appreciation for works of Judaica.

Artwork from the *Sefer Hana* exhibit is available for purchase. Contact Rachel Kamin at rkamin@nssbethel.org or 847/432-8903 x 242 for more information.



*North Suburban
Synagogue*
Beth El
בית כנסת בית אל

The Arnold Rissman Family
Kol Ami Museum

About the Artist



ולדתה אין ילדים

Ellen Holtzblatt is a Chicago-based artist, working in the media of painting, drawing, printmaking and artist books. Her latest work focuses on ritual and biblical themes, in which she makes

emotional and experiential connections and explores cultural, personal and archetypal imagery. *Yizkor* images the Jewish memorial prayer and examines the relationships among memory, death and birth; and *Hamabul* is a series of woodcuts that are feminist and reflective interpretations of the biblical flood. Both of these projects were funded by Community Arts Assistance Program grants.

Holtzblatt has exhibited her work internationally and nationally at diverse venues, such as Inselegalerie in Berlin, the Lancaster Museum of Art, Chicago Artists' Coalition, Chicago Cultural Center, University of Illinois at Chicago, and Woman Made Gallery. Her work is included in public and private collections, including the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection in Chicago and The Center for Book Arts in New York, who selected her book, *Sefer Hana*, for an exhibition of works from their permanent collection in 2011. Holtzblatt received degrees in visual art and art therapy from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

For additional information about the artist and her work, please visit her website at www.ellenholtzblatt.com.

Artist Statement

היה פתקתה ימים רחוקים
היה חלומה בן תלמידיה את
עטותיהם כי יחיה עשיתי



Underneath, in between, and around the surface details of prayer, ritual and biblical narratives, I find layers of personal and spiritual meaning. The literal tales are spare; emotions are

missing or hinted at, and character traits are only suggested. This frugality of language permits delving beneath the outer coats of the stories into a deeper and more mystical realm. The empty spaces on the written page become as important as the words themselves.

Birth and death are recurring themes in the Bible. In Samuel I, the biblical narrative mostly belongs to Hana - her barrenness and subsequent birthing. She is lost in the desire that originates in her body, to carry and give birth to a child. Instead, each month Hana experiences

death, as her womb flows out the potential for life. The emotion of her infertility is raw, as is the satisfaction of childbirth.

In *Sefer Hana*, Hana's experiences and emotions are expressed through images of fetuses. We all began here, and at times of despair and extreme vulnerability, return to our primal consciousness. The final image in the book merges birth and death into one figure, questioning the cycle - where do we begin and where do we end? As a woman who has given birth, miscarried and moved through cycles of fertility, feminine intimacy, which transcends border and time, compels me.

The Printmaking Process

Sefer Hana is an artist book of woodcuts, hand printed on *washi* (Japanese paper). The accordion-fold book is a limited edition of thirteen with three artist proofs. Each individual print is also available in editions of seven.



The most important part of the process is the inspiration and conception of the images. The physical act of producing the woodblock print involves several steps. I create the image by drawing directly on the block with pencil, and then tracing the pencil marks with permanent marker. I then apply a light layer of shellac to the block to prepare it for cutting. The carving of a block takes many hours, days, and sometimes weeks, depending on the size and complexity of the design.

Although not employing purely traditional Japanese printmaking techniques, many of my materials and implements originate from Japan. I work with *shina*, a plywood that is made specifically for the purpose of woodcuts, Japanese carving tools and paper. However, traditional Japanese block printing uses water-based inks and my inks are oil-based.

I roll out the ink onto the block with a brayer and then register the paper with the block. I utilize a variety of instruments - several *barens* and a wooden spoon - to press the paper onto the wood block and make the impression of the image. A *baren* is a handheld Japanese printing tool that traditionally is composed of twisted cord and bamboo sheath, although modern ones are also made out of plastic or ball-bearing metal discs. I choose to print by hand rather than with a printing press because I appreciate the immediacy and sensitivity of the practice, which is evident in the completed print.