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**FOLK BELIEFS OF A VANISHING COMMUNITY
TAKE FORM IN NEW EXHIBITION**



The Importance of Play. Monoprint collage with fabric, buttons, ribbon.

Debra Olin: Every Protection features mixed-media collages
in historic Eastern European Jewish synagogue

New York, NY – A new exhibition at the Museum at Eldridge Street explores haunting and provocative folk beliefs about womanhood and childbirth in Jewish Eastern European at the turn of the 20th century. *Every Protection: Folk Culture and Motherhood in the Jewish Pale of Settlement* features nine large mixed-media pieces and a site-specific installation by artist Debra Olin. Her artwork is inspired by the 283 questions posed about childbirth and child-rearing by ethnographer S. An-sky for an ethnographic survey documenting vanishing ways of life in the shtetls in the years just before World War I. The exhibition opens at the Museum at Eldridge Street on Thursday, October 14th with a free ticketed reception with the artist.

Is it considered a charm for a pregnant woman to wear an apron?

Is there a belief that one must not rock an empty cradle?

What medicines, precautions and other means are employed in order to have clever children?

Queries like these from An-sky's survey are at the heart of Olin's work, which includes the questions themselves in English and the original Yiddish. Olin combines the words with her own symbolic language, pairing a question about children's games with hands playing cat's cradle. A sonogram image becomes the modern equivalent of a traditional amulet, a token of protection and safety. Olin's work explores the superstitions, precautions, religious practices, and observations that can be translated, recognized and appreciated by people from every culture. For generations, humans have attempted to make sense of the mystery of motherhood and childbirth with a vivid mixture of science and superstition. Proven data has largely won out in developed societies today, but in the impoverished and isolated shtetls of late-19th and early-20th century Eastern Europe, these folk beliefs were canon.

The exhibition's large-scale collages are paired with a hanging installation made specifically for this show. Entitled "From the Oral Torah," the piece is comprised of women's robes hanging from the celestial ceiling of the Eldridge Street Synagogue's women's balcony – the only section of the historic sanctuary where women were permitted to sit when the landmark building opened in 1887. With feet dangling and An-sky's Yiddish questions draped over their shoulders, the garments span the divide between the everyday and the sacred. For what could be at once so commonplace and so miraculous as giving birth?

The show is accompanied by an audio guide in which artist Debra Olin comments on the origins of the *Every Protection* series and explores the symbolism that appears in her works.

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The Museum at Eldridge Street is housed in the historic Eldridge Street Synagogue, a magnificent National Historic Landmark and New York City landmark. The building was nearly lost to neglect before a 20-year, \$20 million project restored the National Historic Landmark to grandeur. The Eldridge Street Synagogue is our nation's first great house of worship built by Eastern European Jews, and stood, even then, as a proud symbol of immigrant ambition and success. Today it is one of the few remaining marker of the great wave of Jewish migration to the Lower East Side.

Upon restoration, the Museum received nearly every major preservation honor, including the prestigious National Trust for Historic Preservation 2008 Preservation Award and the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America's Restoration Award. In the words of New Yorker architectural critic Paul Goldberger, the project was conducted with a "combination

of rigor and affection.” And in 2010, the stunning modern addition of a stained-glass window by artist Kiki Smith and architect Deborah Gans ushered the historic space into the 21st century.

Today the Museum is reimagining how a historic sacred space can foster community and culture. Since its re-opening, more than 300,000 people from around the world have visited art exhibitions, tours, cultural festivals and educational programs. The historic space has become a one-of-a-kind art gallery, a place of cultural collaboration, and a laboratory for new thought on immigration and cultural preservation. The Museum’s signature event is June’s Egg Rolls, Egg Creams and Empanadas Festival, celebrating the diverse communities of the Lower East Side through food, music, folk art, and cultural customs.