



# Debra Olin

## Every Protection

*Exploring Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Jewish Pale of Settlement*

with text by **Nathaniel Deutsch**

University of California at Santa Cruz

# Every Protection

## *Exploring Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Jewish Pale of Settlement*

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Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery, Cowell College, University of California at Santa Cruz

Until 1917, most Jews of the Russian Empire were restricted to a region called the Pale of Settlement, where they created their own distinctive folk culture. In 1914, the writer, socialist revolutionary, and ethnographer, Sh. An-sky, produced a massive Yiddish ethnographic questionnaire to document this culture, including many questions concerning Jewish customs and beliefs connected to pregnancy and childbirth. In *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Harvard University Press), UCSC professor Nathaniel Deutsch has translated An-sky's questionnaire into English for the first time, placing it within a rich historical context. Collaborating with Deutsch and inspired by her deep interest in Jewish women's folk traditions, Debra Olin has created illuminating artworks that re-present and explore the dangerous, magical, and above all, powerful experience of pregnancy and childbirth in the Pale of Settlement. - *Nathaniel Deutsch*

### Artist Statement

For many years my experimental prints have been steeped in the exploration of Yiddish immigrant culture and my own personal history. The iconography I have used has come to include beliefs and superstitions in a number of seemingly disparate cultures. Using the Yiddish language, literature and folklore as a springboard, I have found commonalities between Eastern European Jews, Ancient Egyptians and Chinese Healers. From the first handprints, to alphabet and language, these distinct civilizations arrived at similar explorations and solutions to life's daily challenges; including ideas about death and higher powers, healing the body, and games and rituals.

In the fall of 2008, I read Professor Nathaniel Deutsch's article entitled, "A Total Account, S. An-sky and the Jewish Ethnographic Program" in *Pakn Treger*, the magazine of the National Yiddish Book Center. The article examines a questionnaire that An-sky had created to gather information on the lives of the Jews living in the Russian Pale of Settlement in 1914. I was immediately captivated by the project and contacted Deutsch in search of more of these questions which covered every aspect of life from birth to death and beyond. My particular interest was in those questions concerning pregnancy and childbirth. There are superstitions and precautions taken in every society to guard the pregnant woman and the newborn. An-sky's research included 283 queries on this topic alone. Some of them contained provocative phrasing such as "Is there a belief that one must not place a child in front of a mirror until he gets his first teeth?" An-sky's questionnaire reveals a familiarity and breadth of knowledge which charged my imagination and inspired me to create this body of work called "Every Protection".

### Acknowledgements

I am especially grateful to Nathaniel Deutsch for introducing me to the Jewish Ethnographic Program; his leap of faith and vision in proposing this collaboration; his acquiring the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery and for his insightful essay. I would also like to thank Linda Pope, Gallery Director for accepting our proposal and Faye Crosby, Provost of Cowell College, University of California, Santa Cruz for her generosity. I would like to extend my appreciation to linguist David Braun for his help with Yiddish translations and to Linda Goulet and Debra Weisberg for their advice and needed support.

Photography: Bill Kipp

Catalog Design: Alex Gerasev

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Some of the artwork incorporates illustrations from "Little New Angel" 1947, Sadie Rose Weilerstein, illustrated by Mathilda Keller used with permission from The Jewish Publication Society of America.

front cover: Every Protection, 2009, 37.5 x 52.5, monoprint collage, mirrors



**Totem of Questions**  
2011  
45.5 x 53  
monoprint collage, ribbon

# Every Protection

## *Exploring Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Jewish Pale of Settlement*

Nathaniel Deutsch

In the Jewish communities of the Pale of Settlement, the life journey of the person—the *mentsch*—did not begin with conception nor did it end with death. Rather, the individual's soul or *neshome* preexisted the body and, in some cases, had already gone through many incarnations or *gilgulim* before being placed in a particular fetus; similarly, when an individual died, both soul and body continued to exist in some form. Within this great journey, the period of pregnancy marked a critical stage in which the fate of the unborn person could be influenced for good or bad and childbirth signified the crossing of an important—and dangerous—frontier for both mother and child.

Pregnancy and childbirth in the Pale of Settlement represented latency and breakthrough; beginnings and endings; pasts and futures. Most of all, they were experiences of great power, meaning, and mystery—not only for the pregnant woman and her immediate family but for the entire Jewish community.

In her series “Every Protection,” Debra Olin has created magical works of art that are at once luminous and adumbral; in the tradition of the practical Kabbalah to which they may belong in some significant fashion, they illuminate *and* obscure, reveal *and* conceal, the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in the Pale.

Olin has drawn inspiration from a variety of sources, some longstanding such as her decades long interest in the lives of Eastern European Jewish women, the Yiddish language, and the folklore of different cultures, and some more recent, such as her fruitful encounter with *Dos Yidishe Etnografishe Program (The Jewish Ethnographic Program)*, a massive ethnographic questionnaire about Jewish life and death in the Pale of Settlement published by An-sky, the Russian-Jewish writer, revolutionary, and ethnographer, in 1914. Collaborating with Nathaniel Deutsch, the author of the present piece—whose English translation of the Yiddish questionnaire appears in *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Harvard University Press, 2011)—Olin has incorporated the Program's themes, motifs, and even some of the questions, themselves, into her artwork.

The integration of text and image has been a hallmark of Jewish art for centuries. In the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, one of the most popular and enduring forms of folk art was the paper-cut, a genre which combined Hebrew text with images drawn from the biblical imaginary, as well as broadly European and more local sources. A common type of Jewish paper-cut was the *kimpetbriv*—or amulet designed to protect the mother and new-born child—which was placed on the walls of the newborn's room in order to ward off the evil eye, the arch-demoness Lilith, and other harmful forces. Eastern European Jews also created numerous protective amulets (Yiddish, *kamiyes*) in other media, including folk prints known as *lubki* (sing., *lubok*). Collectively, these amulets represent an important element of the practical Kabbalah (Hebrew, *kabbalah ma'asit*), as well as one of the most widespread genres of Jewish folk art.

Many of the works in Debra Olin's “Every Protection,” gesture towards this rich Jewish tradition of protective amulets. Indeed, some of them—such as “Cradle of Safety,” “Do Signs Exist,” and the whimsical, “T-Shirt Totem”—even explicitly integrate pre-existing amulets into their tableau of images, while others, such as “A Totem of Questions” and “Consuming the Questions,” incorporate ribbons, which frequently served as protective charms or *sgules* when bound to the wrist of the child (the Hebrew word for “amulet” is connected to binding). Moreover, in “Considered a Charm,” Olin creates a visual reference to yet another type of *sgule*, namely the upside down hand or *hamsa*, still employed as a charm against the evil eye or *ayin ha-ra* in many communities.

In addition to incorporating these visual references to traditional amulets and charms, however, Olin has also done something else: she has improvised on this classical form by combining questions drawn from An-sky's ethnographic *Program* with striking images to create a new visual vocabulary. The resulting artworks—for example, “Floating Questions,” “The Importance of Language,” and “Eyelet with Angel”—extend and



provocatively reinvigorate the millennia old Jewish tradition of amulet production, even as their original motivation and primary significance are no longer prophylactic but aesthetic.

A century ago, An-sky was one of the first people to argue that the Jews of the Pale of Settlement possessed a material culture and that it was worth exploring and documenting this culture. Among the literally thousands of artifacts that he and his team collected during the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, which they mounted between 1912 and 1914, were traditional paper-cuts, *lubki*, and a variety of amulets in different media. An-sky hoped that these artifacts, along with the thousands of songs, tales, jokes, and other cultural creations that he recorded and collected, would become the raw material and inspiration for a vibrant modern Jewish culture that would integrate and transform—rather than denigrate or reject—the traditional Jewish culture of the past. To describe this process of cultural transvaluation, An-sky employed the Yiddish word *oyfleben* (literally, “to revive”) by which he intended “renaissance,” just as the European Renaissance had drawn on classical Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sources. In “Every Protection,” Debra Olin has brought An-sky’s cultural project full circle by creating new works of art that imaginatively riff on centuries-old Jewish artistic and magical traditions while alchemically transforming An-sky’s ethnographic *Program* into a work of art, in its own right.

Beyond being a pioneer in the collection of Jewish folk traditions, An-sky was the first ethnographer to pay significant attention to the lives of Jewish women in the Pale of Settlement. Of the 2087 questions in *The Jewish Ethnographic Program*, many are devoted to how Jewish girls and women experienced important life-cycle events including pregnancy, childbirth, education (both in the home and in school) and marriage. In addition to exploring these life-cycle events, An-sky also documented a number of important roles that Jewish women occupied in their communities, including healers or exorcists (*vaybersher opshprekherkes*)—indeed, according to the findings of the Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, such women were more popular than their male counterparts—professional mourners (known in various places as *baklogerins*, *zogerkes*, *klogmuters*, *platshkes*, *klogvayber*, or *beterkes*), teachers (referred to as *rebetsins* in *The Jewish Ethnographic Program*), and midwives (including the folk midwife or *bobe* and the professionally trained midwife or *akusherke*).

*The Jewish Ethnographic Program* contains more than a hundred questions concerning pregnancy, childbirth, and its aftermath, including nearly twenty about Jewish midwives, alone, for example: “Is there a custom that when the midwife dies, all of the children whom she brought into the world accompany her funeral procession with candles in their hands?” In “Every Protection,” Debra Olin has created powerful works of art that give new life to these traditions of pregnancy, birth, and early childhood in the Pale of Settlement, and to the Jewish women who played critically important roles in their communities as mothers, midwives, teachers, healers, and mourners.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to briefly discuss a handful of the images that form the rich visual vocabulary employed by Debra Olin in “Every Protection.” My observations are in the mode of rabbinic midrash, which is to say that they are associative and inter-textual; evocations and elaborations in a literary key, here applied to an inter-connected set of images.

I begin with the inchoate figures that appear in many of Olin’s works, recalling the words of Psalm 139: “You have knit me together in my mother’s womb. . . when I was made in secret . . . Your eyes saw my unformed substance.” The Hebrew term signifying “unformed substance,” in the biblical text is *golem*, a word that rabbinic sources (see Leviticus Rabbah) would later apply to describe the biblical figure of Adam in his original, unformed state, and that Jewish mystical texts would employ to describe an anthropomorphic being created magically by reciting divine names over dust and water—most famously in the legend of the Golem of Prague. The golem-like figures in “Every Protection,” remind the viewer of the tellurian origins and incomplete state of all human beings.

In contrast to these inchoate figures, the multiple feet of Olin’s stunning “Dress of Unending Questions,” (an image that also appears in “Eyelet with Apron”) stand out in their delicate detail. The paper-like material of the dress not only invokes parchment—it actually is a kind of parchment upon which Olin has inscribed the Yiddish text of a question from An-sky’s *Program*: “Are there signs that indicate whether a woman is pregnant with a male or female [child]?” The Hebrew/Yiddish word for female—*nekava*—appears directly above the feet that form the hem of the dress. In Kabbalistic and Hasidic sources, feet are associated with the feminine

aspect of God known as the Shekhinah and the expression “feet of the Shekhinah” refers to wandering in exile—something experienced by the people of Israel, the wandering zaddikim or holy men of early Hasidism, the Shekhinah, herself, as she accompanies the Jews in their exile, and, indeed, by all human beings once we leave the womb.

Like the feet, the bird is a common symbol of the Shekhinah, as well as the kabbalistic sefirah known as Binah, the supernal divine mother, whom the Zohar describes as hovering protectively over the lower sefirot or divine aspects like a mother bird over her nest. Similarly, in her groundbreaking autobiography, Glückel of Hameln (c. 1646-1724) relates a tale in which a male bird serves as a model of parental devotion and sacrifice. One of the birds which appears in Olin’s works is the stork, whose Hebrew name *hasida*, is the feminine form of the word *hasid*, which means both “kind” and “pious.” According to the Talmud, the stork received this name because of its reputation for kindness towards its young; a reputation that helps to explain the widespread folk tradition that storks bring babies into the world.

Another image that appears throughout Olin’s work is the jug, a motif of fecundity that recalls the scene in Genesis 24, in which the biblical matriarch Rebecca greets Abraham’s servant by graciously drawing water for him and his camels with her jug. As a result of this hospitality, Rebecca will be chosen to marry Isaac and eventually she will give birth to Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. In “Out of Harm’s Way 1,” and the “Importance of Play,” Olin has transformed the jug into a surrogate womb. In both works, a figure lifts a jug holding a child to the heavens, as if making an offering. Olin takes the identification between jug and womb even further in “Eyelet, Vessel, Birds,” where the jug has literally been assimilated to the womb.

In “Do Signs Exist,” multiple jugs appear. We are reminded here of the *kelim* or vessels whose shattering—a process known as *shevirat ha-kelim* in Hebrew—was the primordial event that gave birth to the universe according to the Lurianic Kabbalah. And, indeed, Olin depicts one of the jugs as containing the world, itself. In “Eyelet with Angel,” the implied connection between womb and world is fleshed out in a globe-like form cradled protectively by two arms, like a mother holding her pregnant belly; while in “Cradle of Safety,” what looks like an ultrasound of a fetus is superimposed over a globe, creating a striking new image in which the outlines of the human body and those of the earth’s continents appear to merge, begging the question: Are we a microcosm of the universe or is the universe a macrocosm of us?

Throughout Olin’s work, whimsical images of innocence and childhood—the winged fairy of “T-Shirt Totem,” the cherubic angel of “Cradle of Safety,” “Signs of Protection,” “Eyelet with Angel,” and “Do Signs Exist,” and the little lamb of “The Importance of Play,” “Do Signs Exist,” and “T-Shirt Totem”—mingle with more foreboding images—the bat-like shadows that surround the unborn children in “Every Protection” and “Eyelet with Angel”; the jagged darkness that seems to penetrate the children’s heads in “Eyelet With Apron,” “Eyelet, Vessel, Birds,” “Out of Harms Way,” and “The Importance of Play”; and the cobwebs that envelop the womb-like globe of “Eyelet with Angel.”

And so, we return to the fundamental truth with which we began, a truth which both An-sky and Debra Olin have profoundly understood and revealed to us in their now intimately interconnected work: light and shadow, life and death, are not opposites but, instead, two aspects of one reality; two overlapping stages in one journey.



**Out of Harms Way 2**

2010

39.5 x 57

monoprint collage, fabric, grommets, ribbon, thread



**Bird Dream with Questions**

2009

38 x 52.5

monoprint collage, wax





**Considered a Charm**

2009

42.5" x 47"

monoprint collage, string, wax



**Do Signs Exist?**  
2009  
39 x 55  
monoprint collage





**Cradle of Safety**  
2009  
38.5 x 55.5 x 2  
monoprint collage



The paper-like material of the dress not only invokes parchment—it actually is a kind of parchment upon which Olin has inscribed the Yiddish text of a question from An-sky's *Program*: "Are there signs that indicate whether a woman is pregnant with a male or female [child]?" N.D.

### Dress of Unending Questions

2011

24 x 20 x 70

monoprint construction, hoop, wax, string, button, ribbon







**Signs of Protection**

2011

38.5 x 67

monoprint collage, buttons, thread, string



**Consuming the Questions**  
2011  
38.5 x 64.5  
monoprint collage, ribbon



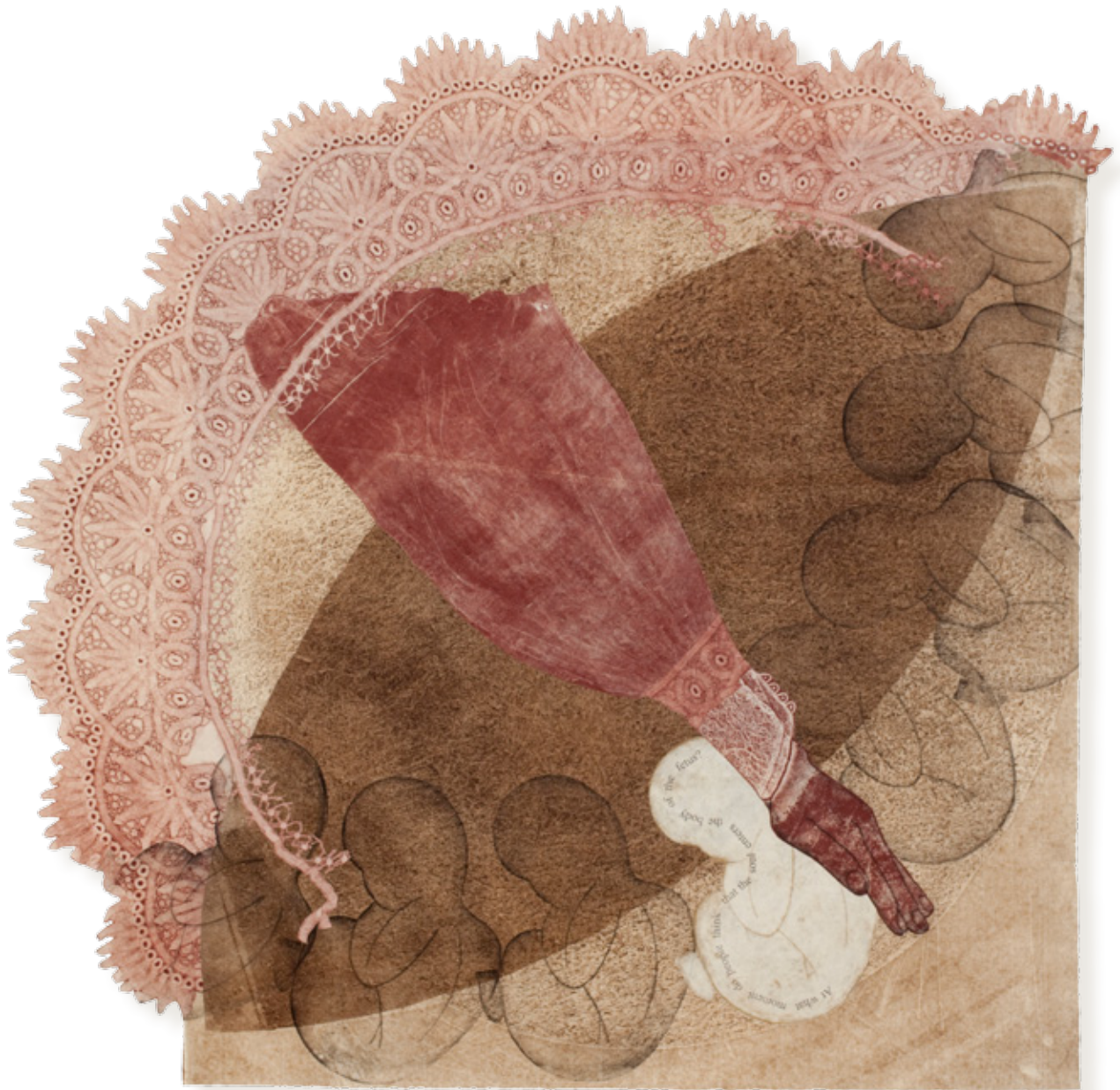


**The Importance of Language**  
 2010  
 28.5 x 81 x 2  
 monoprint collage, wax, raffia, string, thread



**T-Shirt Totem**  
 2010  
 24 x 69  
 monoprint collage





**The Pendulum**  
2011  
43.5 x 44  
monoprint collage



**Eyelet with Angel**

2011

38.25 x 48

monoprint collage, wax





**Eyelet, Vessel, Birds**  
2011  
34 x 46  
monoprnt collage, ribbon



**The Importance of Play 2**  
2011  
38.25 x 48  
monoprint collage





Eyelet with Apron  
2011  
38.25 x 48  
monoprint collage



**The Importance of Play**

2009

26 x 62

monoprint collage with fabric, buttons, ribbon



**Out of Harms Way**

2009

24 x 64

monoprint collage, mirrors

DEBRA OLIN [www.debraolin.com](http://www.debraolin.com)

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

University of California, Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery, Santa Cruz, CA, 2011  
National Yiddish Book Center, *Mama Loshn*, Amherst, MA, 2010-2011  
Tychman Shapiro Gallery, *Inspired by Yiddish*, Minneapolis, MN, 2008  
Carol Scholsberg Alumni Gallery, Monserrat College of Art - Beverly, MA, 2005  
The Art Complex Museum, On Their Own Program, Duxbury, MA, 2003  
Starr Gallery, *The Stories We Hold*, Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center, Newton, MA, 2003  
Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, 2000

### SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

Trustman Gallery at Simmons College, Boston, MA, 2011  
First International Printmaking Triennial of ULUS, Belgrade, Serbia, 2011  
Attleboro Arts Museum, *Celebrating Diversity*, Attleboro, MA, 2010  
DeCordova Museum, *Approaches to Narrative*, Lincoln, MA, 2006-2007  
Gotthelf Gallery, *Shmatte Nouveau: Textiles Through the Wringer*, La Jolla, CA, 2006  
DeCordova Museum, *Recent Print Acquisitions: The Workshop Portfolios*, Lincoln, MA, 2006  
Danforth Museum of Art, *The New Landscape: Alternative Approaches*, Framingham, MA, 2006  
The Boston Printmakers, *North American Print Biennial*, Boston, MA, 2005  
Tisch Gallery, *Juried Summer Exhibition*, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2004  
The Jewish Museum of Maryland, *Weaving Women's Words: Baltimore Stories*, Baltimore, MD, 2004  
Wiggins Gallery, *Women Artists from the BPL's Collection*, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA, 2003  
Galeria Espacio Abierto, *Una Comunidad de Talleres de Grabado*, Havana, Cuba, 2003  
RAV, *Artist Proof Portfolio Project Exhibition*, Randse Afrikaans Universitate, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2000  
DeCordova Museum, *10 Artists/10 Visions*, Lincoln, MA, 1997  
Ellis Island Immigration Museum, *Artists View Ellis Island*, New York, NY, 1995-96  
Fogg Museum, *Power, Pleasure, Pain: Contemporary Women Artists and the Female Body*, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, 1994

### AWARDS

Gottlieb Foundation, Individual Support Program Finalist, 2010  
MA Arts Lottery, Somerville Arts Council Fellowship Grant, 2008  
Rappaport Prize, funded by the Jerome Lyle Rappaport Charitable Foundation, 2004  
The MacDowell Colony, Residency program, Peterborough, NH, 1993-94  
Millay Colony for the Arts, Residency program, Austerlitz, NY, 1992

### COLLECTIONS

Boston Public Library, Boston, MA  
DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA  
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA  
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, NY

For complete resume, visit [www.debraolin.com/pages/bio.html](http://www.debraolin.com/pages/bio.html)

back cover: *Floating Questions*, 2011, 22.25 x 46.25, monoprint collage, ribbon





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