

ARTFORUM

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Maira Kalman

JULIE SAUL GALLERY

Despite its bone-deep elegance, Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* (1919/1959), familiar to many of America's editors and authors but demonstrably not to enough of either, seems an unpromising text for visual illustration, being, as it is, a brief guide to words and how to combine them. (That is, how to write.) Short of a series of rebuses, what could its images be? You would need a Maira Kalman to imagine and draw them, which in fact Kalman did, producing a celebrated edition of the book in 2005. This show offered a chance to see the original gouaches, along with a new set from this year, "Darling Dorset," a very British travelogue characterologically in keeping with the earlier group.

The White of Strunk and White, of course, was E. B. White, famously a writer for the *New Yorker* and the author of the much-loved children's books *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*. Strunk was William Strunk Jr., an English professor of White's at Cornell University just after World War I. His book, originally published privately to circulate among students, was short—"a forty-three-page summation of the case for cleanliness, brevity, and accuracy in the use of English," in White's description—and when White rediscovered it more than thirty years later, he expanded and republished it. It has since sold many millions of copies. Though engaging in tone, it is a rule book of a kind, and for rule books to find enemies is as unsurprising as for grammarians to find errors. Even so, it is a good deal more cherished than resented—but no one before Kalman seems to have seen it rather than read it. "Each sentence was so full of incredible visual reference," she told the *New York Times* in 2005. "I said to myself, how could anyone not have illustrated this before?"

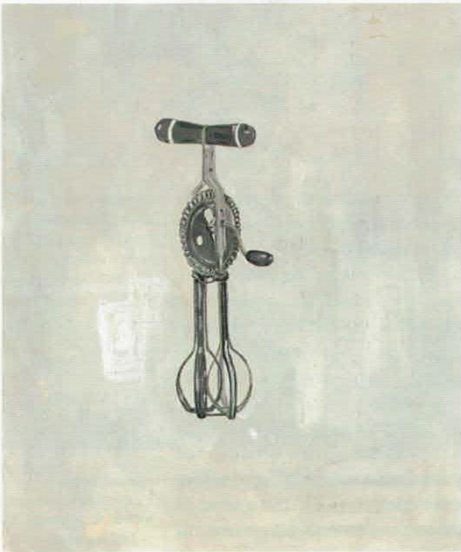
Most of Kalman's images relate to Strunk and White's exemplary phrases, bringing out their oddity through a striking range of approaches. She can be straightforwardly literal: For "It was a unique eggbeater," for example, she gives us just an eggbeater, isolated on

the page. It must be unique, though, to have won such interest. "Somebody else's umbrella" gets a woman covetously eyeing an umbrella, "It looked more like a cormorant than like a heron" gets a cormorant and a heron. Other scenarios are more baroque: "He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug" earns an Edward Gorey-type murder-mystery; "Her story is strange" a venture into dream, complete with weightlessness and Struwelpeter hair. The art writer notices sly art jokes: "She found only two mistakes" sets a Dora Maar type against her fractured Picassoid portrait; "She was part in, part out" is a Matissean scene of an artist and his model, who is more complete in Kalman's drawing than in the painting on his easel; for "A basic structural design underlies every

kind of writing" Kalman was surely looking at the pared-down thread sculptures of Fred Sandback. The illustration to a brief, where-did-that-come-from invention, "The temple of Isis," might combine one of Edward Lear's Middle Eastern watercolors with the nonsense imagery of his poetry.

"Darling Dorset" was made on commission in Southwest England for a travel magazine, and though *No-Nonsense Faucets*, *Sherborne Castle* has some of the focused peculiarity of the eggbeater drawing, the series overall is more conventional, an anglophilic ode to cream teas, tattered furniture, and lovely gardens. Its old-fashionedness, though, connects to *The Elements of Style*, making me wonder whether part of what attracted Kalman to the book was a certain pastness. Language is constantly changing, and a prescriptive manual such as Strunk and White's is by nature out-of-date the minute it is published, its basic mission being to defend and preserve an earlier standard seen as presently threatened. That's one reason *The Elements of Style* is criticized in some places, though the critics tend to get hung up on little things—the ban on split infinitives, say—and to miss the larger point. The surprise in Kalman's treatment of the book is her revelation of its eccentricity; illustration itself being an art under pressure in the digital era, she seems to have found in White a kindred spirit.

—David Frankel



Maira Kalman, *It was a unique eggbeater*, 2004, gouache on paper, 11 1/8 x 7 7/8".