

Hyperallergic, June 13, 2014

HYPERALLERGIC

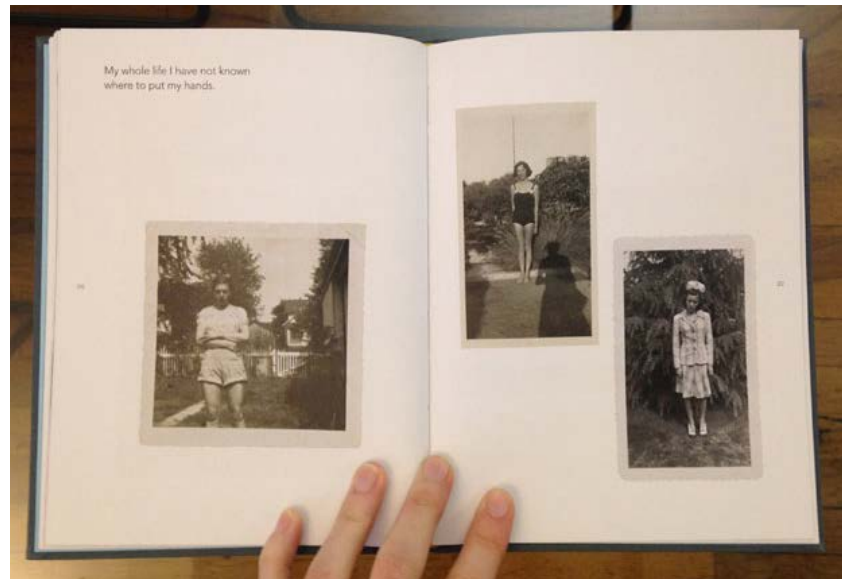
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

BOOKS

Maira Kalman's Empathetic Portraits

By Jillian Steinhauer

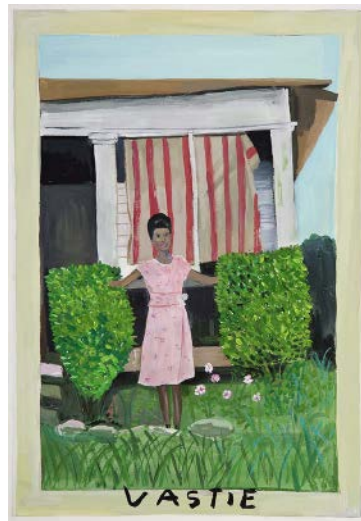
The girl stands awkwardly, her arms crossed over her stomach. Below them she wears high-waisted shorts, wrinkled through with creases and rolled at the bottom; above them she wears a frilly top. And above that, her deeply furrowed brow, mirrored by the part in her neatly done hair. She looks out, but not at us; her gaze falls to our left, focused intently, unkindly on some unseen figure — maybe a parent (or two) who's forcing her to stand here awkwardly, to pose for a photograph in the yard. She didn't want to wear this outfit and she doesn't like her stomach and this whole picture is foolishness.



Maira Kalman and Daniel Handler, spread from *Girls Standing on Lawns*

This small, square, black-and-white photograph was taken in 1955. Its photographer and subject are unknown. Yet it's in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), one of many so-called "vernacular photographs" owned by the institution. As such, it has recently been reproduced in a slim book called *Girls Standing on Lawns*, a collaboration between artist and writer Maira Kalman and author Daniel Handler. The text they've given this pretty, unhappy girl, floating at the top of the page where her picture is featured, reads, "My whole life I have not known / where to put my hands." Me neither.

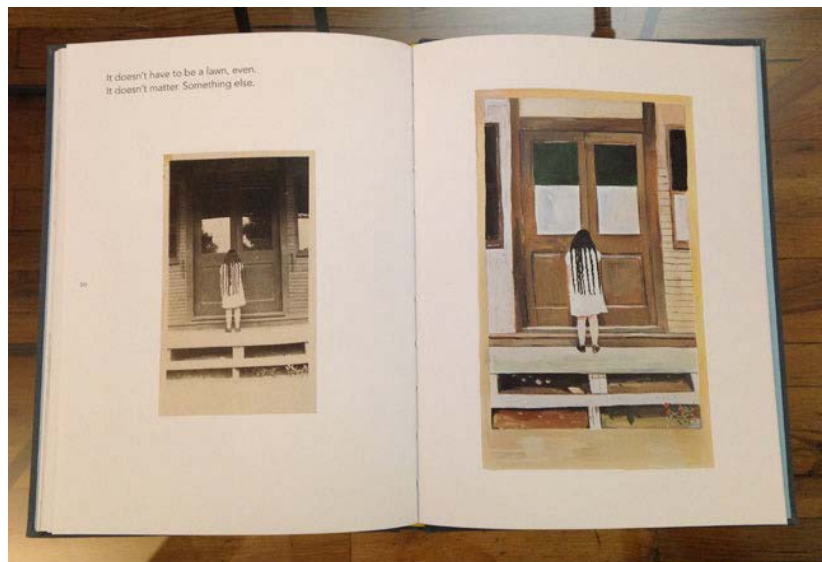
To say that Kalman is an artist interested in the everyday is an understatement; Kalman's artistic *raison d'être* is the transformation of the everyday into something worth holding onto. (Her son has taken up her mantle, at least in part, as a co-founder of Mmuseumm.) So, it's no surprise that many of the found photographs (plus one by Diane Arbus) of girls standing on lawns (plus a porch here and there) now in MoMA's collection came from Kalman herself. For the current project, she painted a number of these photographs as gouaches on paper. They're on view at Julie Saul Gallery (along with selections from another Kalman series, *Robert Walser: Microscripts*, which also has its own book).



Arbus, *Girls Standing on Lawns*, 2013, 9 x 9"; *Girl with Hands in Hedge*, 2013, 10 x 7"; *Girl in White*, 2013, 10 x 6 ¼"; gouache on paper

The gouaches are unmistakably Kalman: colorful, vibrant, delicate yet gripping, shot through with humor and warmth. But the most appealing aspect of the exhibition is that it offers a welcome opportunity to take in the texture of Kalman's art, which is most often shown in books and the pages of *The New Yorker*. Although her brushstrokes are always visible, seen live in the gallery they convey an intimacy and liveness that's only hinted at in reproduction.

The strength of the book, which it doesn't turn to enough, is the play between the original photographs and Kalman's re-creations. In one spread in the book — the only of its kind — one of the photographs and Kalman's painting of it are laid out side by side. The black-and-white photograph, dated c. 1920, shows a girl standing on a porch, her back covered in long braids and facing us. The girl is small; the top of her head barely reaches the windows of the giant doors she faces. It is, in many ways, an ominous picture, with the frame of this house bearing down on this diminutive girl.



Maira Kalman and Daniel Handler, spread from *Girls Standing on Lawns*

Kalman's interpretation of the image transforms it in subtle ways. She adds color, albeit muted, and enlarges the scene, thereby seeming to enlarge the little girl. She mutes the reflections visible in the doors' windows, filling them in with simple color so that our focus will shift back to the girl. And she plays up the flowers, leaves, and twigs visible under the porch steps, making them pop in pinks, greens, and white. The scene has shifted before our eyes, from potentially threatening to almost entirely loving. The opening of these doors has become a rite of passage. Ninety-four years after the moment happened, Kalman has adopted this unknown girl as her own. Her art is a gesture of empathy worth learning from.