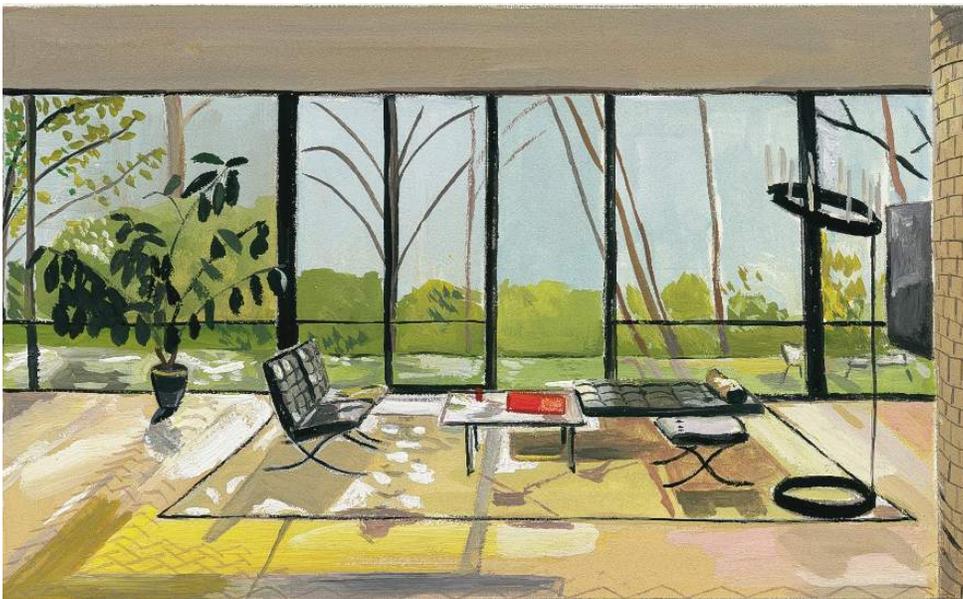


# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

## Maira Kalman's Irreverent Pictures for the Grammar Bible

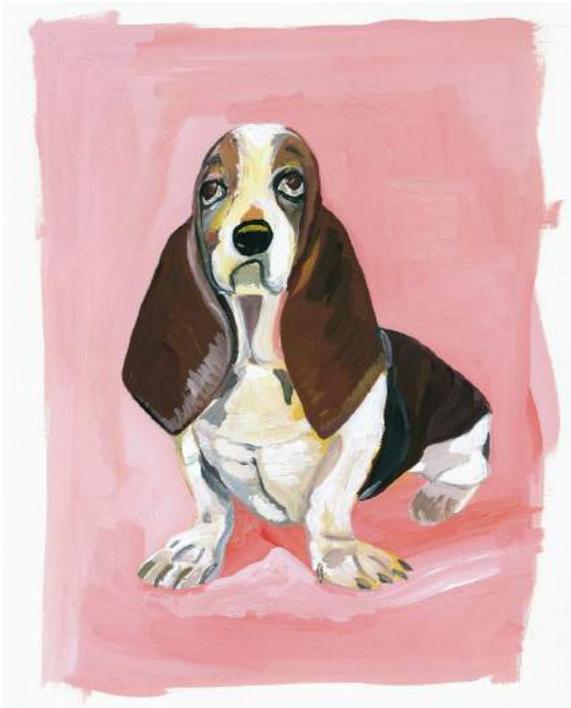
By ROBERTA SMITH | AUG. 17, 2017



Maira Kalman's illustration in "The Elements of Style" illuminates a section on restrictive clauses: "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." Credit Julie Saul Gallery, New York

Around 2002, the artist, illustrator and writer Maira Kalman came across a copy of William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White's "The Elements of Style" in a yard sale and decided that this legendary if sometimes contested guide to grammar and clear writing needed visual accompaniment. So she provided some, making 57 illustrations inspired by sentences and phrases selected from the book. All these images Ms. Kalman rendered in gouache in a delectably colored figurative style indebted to David Hockney and Florine Stettheimer. They were then sprinkled throughout a 2005 version of "Elements" based on its fourth edition, covered in exuberant red. Now all Ms. Kalman's illustrations can be seen — together for the first time in New York — in a smart, beguiling array at the Julie Saul Gallery in Chelsea.

Known to generations of American high school and college students as “the little book” or simply Strunk and White, “Elements” was originally written and, in 1919, self-published by Strunk, a professor of English at Cornell University, for in-house use. In 1959, the Macmillan company published a new edition revised and expanded by White, a former Strunk student and by then a prominent writer for The New Yorker, and he followed it with new editions in 1972 and 1979. The little book’s rules have often raised hackles among grammarians, and in recent years its detractors have been increasingly vocal, especially on the 50th anniversary of the book’s publication, in 2009.



Ms. Kalman’s illustration from “The Elements of Style”: “Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in.” Credit Julie Saul Gallery, New York

However you regard Strunk and White, Ms. Kalman’s illustrations match, exaggerate or skew the bits of its language that caught her ear, bringing out the book’s implicit wit while adding some of her own. Basically, she made visual illustrations of sentences that were themselves illustrations of different grammatical rules, with examples of both correct and incorrect usage. At every turn Ms. Kalman’s pairings remind us that language is a free-floating, malleable thing. They have aspects of Surrealism’s exquisite corpses, Conceptual Art’s deadpan humor and especially appropriation art’s penchant for repurposing existing images and genres.

Ms. Kalman’s images are almost invariably based, to some degree, on photographs — whether of art, events, accomplished people or famous monuments — sometimes taken by Ms. Kalman herself. Some sources are clear, like the news photo of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, which accompanies the sentence “The ceremony was both long and tedious.” Others may tease the brain. “Bread and butter was all she served,” portrays two children and a woman in a white, possibly their nanny, at a white-clothed dinner table. It vaguely resembles one of Matisse’s early familial interiors,

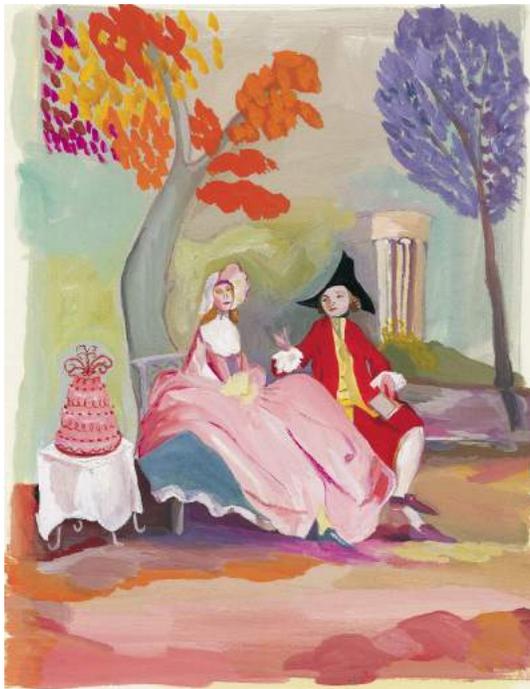
but is in fact a Kalman variation. The prevailing whiteness brings to mind Ms. Kalman's installation piece, in collaboration with her son, Alex Kalman, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Sara Berman's Closet," a homage to the artist's mother, who wore primarily white clothes that she kept in a strikingly neat and beautiful closet (at the Met through Nov. 26). Ms. Berman appears in the small group of people and animals in the illustration for "Here today," but is absent from the nearly identical group of its companion, "gone tomorrow." As is a large hare.



"Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating." Credit Julie Saul Gallery, New York

There are sly visual jokes and cross-references. The illustration for the sentence "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones" conjures Mr. Hockney's work, and is based on a well-known photograph of the living room of Philip Johnson's Glass House. Whether on purpose or not, the shadows and reflections on a pale rug levitate the scene, giving the Glass House a glass floor. Ms. Kalman's affinity for scattering varieties of figures around a scene, as she does in "The temple of Isis," can suggest an admiration for the disjointed performances of Pina Bausch. And indeed, the picture titled "Do you mind my asking you a question?" is based on a photograph of Bausch, looking austere and formidable.

One of the sweetest images is "Well, Susan, this is a fine mess you are in." The catastrophic possibilities are narrowed down by an image of a doleful basset hound, whose large ears form a kind of a cloak and whose mouth assumes a resigned curve that seems to say "Here we go again." "Susan" appears again in a photograph of William Strunk with his pet in his study, which Ms. Kalman recreates in the book's final pages, along with a portrait of White and a self-portrait of the artist (both with dogs).



Ms. Kalman's illustration for pronoun usage: "Polly loves cake more than she loves me." Credit Julie Saul Gallery, New York

In "The Elements of Style," the images coat the volume with a layer of capricious artistic intervention blind to regulation. At the gallery we see the images accompanied only by their titles, where they frequently evoke very oblique New Yorker cartoons and are larger and more luscious than in the book. You become more aware of Ms. Kalman as a miniaturist of action painting, especially in backgrounds and foregrounds. For example, there are the layers of pinks, yellows and oranges that shift about the feet of the 18th-century landed couple based on Thomas Gainsborough's "Conversation in a Garden."

The man is doing the talking, gesturing toward a lavish pink cake that Ms. Kalman added to accommodate the title: "Polly loves cake more than she loves me," which Strunk and White recommend as an alternative to the confusing "Polly loves cake more than me."

Ms. Kalman's pairings range from the hilariously literal to the nearly abstract. (For the rule, "Keep related words together," Ms. Kalman created the Stettheimerish group of sophisticates with what looks like a murdered guest at a cocktail party: "He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug." For abstract, the image of an artwork of nearly-invisible elastic lines by the Minimalist sculptor Fred Sandback seems apt for the first rule of composition: "A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing."

A gentle, slightly philosophical irreverence is the through-line of Ms. Kalman's sensibility. It should shortly be evident in a dance theater work based in part on "The Principles of Uncertainty," her yearlong blog for The New York Times. The piece is a collaboration with the choreographer John Heginbotham and will debut at Jacob's Pillow in late August and have its New York premier at BAM Fisher in late September, with Ms. Kalman a performer playing herself.

Maira Kalman: The Elements of Style

Through Sept. 16 at Julie Saul Gallery in Manhattan; 212-627-2410, saulgallery.com.