

The Daily Beast, November 14, 2014

THE DAILY BEAST



**The Singular Artist of New Yorkistan
by Lizzie Crocker**

The home of Maira Kalman, one of the country’s most celebrated illustrators, matches her aesthetic: organized chaos. Her loves include the Sixties, flea markets—and donuts.

Maira Kalman greets me in her Manhattan apartment wearing a white, waffle-knit bathrobe. Charmingly informal, I think, and perhaps part of the artist’s aesthetic: untethered to an office, she wakes up late and slips into her version of a kimono. My fantasy unravels when she opens the robe, revealing a sling around her broken arm.

She recounts the accident in exquisitely piercing detail: a few missteps on the sidewalk and the thrill of defying gravity before landing on her left arm and then her face, her cheek pressed against the pavement. “I was winded and moaning, and then all of these good looking men in their TriBeCa suits rushed to see if I was okay,” she tells me. “It was kind of nice, lying immobilized on the sidewalk for a moment and watching the world go by.”

It’s a scene straight out of Kalman’s books, which alight on fleeting moments in everyday life. Even the most mundane experiences seem extraordinary when lovingly rendered by Kalman. The award-winning illustrator, author and designer’s witty, idiosyncratic drawings have appeared on numerous *New Yorker* cover—most famously, the “New Yorkistan” cover of Dec 10, 2001 in collaboration with Rick Meyerowitz—and in 18 children’s books, including *Stay Up Late*—which illustrates the lyrics of the Talking Heads song—in collaboration with David Byrne.

But it is Kalman's books for adults that have made her a celebrity author, including *And the Pursuit of Happiness*, a visual essay about democracy in America, and her wildly popular memoir, *The Principles of Uncertainty* (both based on year-long illustrated blogs for the New York Times). For her latest book, *My Favorite Things*, Kalman illustrates a curated selection of objects from the newly renovated Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

In 2011, Kalman began poring over hundreds of pieces from the museum's permanent collection, finally settling on 43 objects for a forthcoming exhibit, *Maira Kalman Selects*, opening on December 12. "The only criteria is that they evoke, as I say in the book, a gasp of delight," she says of the things on display: hats, shoes, doors, a kylix from ancient Greece, a mourning handkerchief, Abraham Lincoln's pocket watch.

For Kalman, objects are receptacles of history. "They all evoke reactions to human endeavor, to the inventiveness and fantastic optimism that goes into making these things, whether it's a tapestry or a spoon or a chair."

Interspersed among the museum's pieces are treasures from Kalman's personal collection, including a pair of pants owned by Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini, which she won at an estate auction last year, and an early 20th century French camp bed.

"Whoever invented the bed was a genius," Kalman writes in *My Favorite Things*. "When you get up from bed, get dressed. In pants and socks."

When I ask about her apparent bed obsession, she swoons and offers to show me her own—"It's a pretty good bed"—as one might offer to disclose a delicious secret.

"I always scream with delight when I get into bed at night and then I scream with delight when I get out of bed to get a cup of coffee in the morning, so I'm screaming a lot," she says, grinning. "But it's also about linens, the connection between everything being ironed and pressed and the idea that there's this history of people from my family in Russia getting into a wonderful white bed with beautifully pressed linens that they washed by the river."

Kalman's Jewish parents fled Russia after the revolution for Israel, where Kalman was born. Her father, a diamond dealer, moved the family from Tel-Aviv to New York when Kalman was four. One of her earliest memories of life in the Bronx is visiting the library with her mother and sister.

"It was really the temple of our being," she says. "Libraries often have very large windows with wonderful chairs, every inch of wood is polished. Going to the library was like a treasure hunt, an expedition. To dwell in books is really a wonderful thing."

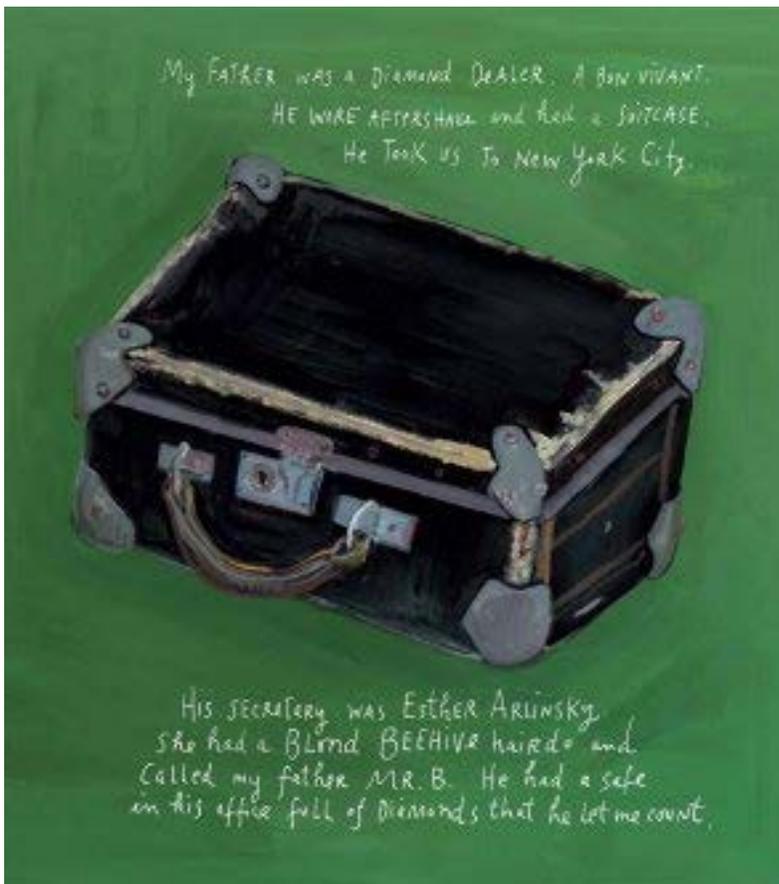
Kalman talks like she writes, frequently flying off on tangents. Her style is more whimsical than rigorous: she avoids traditional narrative arcs, challenging herself to craft cohesive stories from “things that are episodic and unrelated,” she says, like William Strunk and E.B. White’s *Elements of Style*.

In 2005, Kalman published an illustrated version of the definitive writing guide, which she discovered at a church yard sale in Provincetown, Massachusetts one summer.

Most of Kalman’s books are “like journals or diaries of my life with a plot as an excuse to riff on the endlessly interesting and funny things that happen during the day.”

While Kalman tends to mine the past for material, she is as irreverent as she is sentimental. She tackles weighty subjects with a naive sensibility and faux-innocence, but skillfully avoids dumbing them down. “If it isn’t funny and doesn’t address different audiences, then it isn’t interesting.”

Indeed, whether writing for children or for adults, Kalman’s voice is alternately trenchant and wistful, so much so that her children’s books have been criticized for their existential references and blunt worldly wisdom deemed too heavy for young, literal-minded audiences. Yet her work is all heart, her flights of fancy rich with nostalgia without being mawkish.



Maira Kalman

And nostalgia covers every surface of her West Village apartment: on the wall in her living room, a large, black-and-white photograph of her mother, Sara Berman, on a horse in Palestine as a young woman; a lamp shade designed by her late husband; L-bracket bookshelves installed in 1989, groaning under the weight of Kalman's "reference library" of art, architecture, photography, fashion, and design; wooden furniture made years ago by her two children, Alexander, now 29, and Lulu, 31; a vintage manicure table and 1930s bed tray, both found at flea markets.

She turns to a small desk by a fireplace in the bedroom to sort through souvenirs from a recent trip to Tokyo: numbered gold clips, stationery ("I always thought I should be a buyer for a stationary store"), postcards, and a book about the Chichu Museum on the island of Naoshima—Kalman's favorite part of the trip. "It's this fabulous underground design museum with slashes into the earth that allow light in in the most eccentric way."

"My mother only wore white, especially as she got older," Kalman says, pointing to a picture on the mantel of an older Sara Berman wearing large round sunglasses and a white suit. "She was so completely stunning and chic, she looked like Marlene Dietrich. We spent a lot of time in the back room at Loehmann's trying to find the bargains."

"When she died, my children and I were always talking about her closet and how everything was in order and beautifully lined," she says. Alexander, who currently is running "the smallest museum in the world" downtown—"an installation of odd ephemera and weird collections of life, eccentric and humanistic"—is opening the Sara Berman Underwear Closet Museum which will house his grandmother's linens. "I'm hoping it will be open at the same time as the Cooper-Hewitt, and that everyone can go there and get a free donut. See, that would make me so happy: if I sold donuts and pencils there and helped him."

Kalman admits to being particularly enamored of donuts. On top of her Japonica pile is a clip from yesterday's *New York Times* of the best donut shops in the city.

Kalman is drawn to the obituaries and the "odd stories, like one I read recently about a man who was killed by a construction worker on the 40th floor of a building in New Jersey, did you read this?" she asks, wide-eyed. "His tape measure fell out of his pocket and bounced off a pole and landed on the man's head 40 stories below who was just getting out of his car?" She elongates the word in disbelief.

We pass the reference library and several pieces from M&Co., her late husband Tibor Kalman's seminal design firm (Maira is the "M" in M&Co.), including one of their large, graphic wall clocks and a lampshade printed with the words, "I'm not sure."

"When Tibor died we did a retrospective of M&Co., and the lamp was the last thing you saw," she says. "The text on the light bulb read, 'But I'm optimistic,' and that was very Tibor."

Maira and Tibor met when they were students at New York University. ("He was involved in politics. I was involved in poetry.") Kalman studied literature and wanted to be a writer, but thought she lacked talent. "So I decided to tell a story in narrative illustration."

She was a freelance illustrator when Tibor founded M&Co. in 1979. Several of the couple's enduring designs—a crumpled-sheet-of-paper paperweight, a black umbrella with a cloud-dotted blue sky on its underside, watches and wall clocks—are still sold at the MoMA design store.

“I knew that he respected my ideas beyond measure, but I definitely was behind the scenes more,” Kalman writes in a later email. “The late sixties was a time of great turmoil and change obviously, and everyone was on a journey to discover who they were. It was not always fun, by any means. We would break up and get back together a number of times. But looking back on it, it was a profoundly rich time, art, architecture, music, film, literature, feminism, Eastern philosophies, LSD—these were some of the ways to try to find out what it all meant, to look at all the possibilities of a woman's identity and how a couple could navigate a complex world.”

Kalman began writing children's books when she started a family and had published 10 by the time Tibor passed away in 1999 from Non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

“When he died, I was sure that my life was over. And in some ways, of course, that was true.”

But it also marked the beginning of Kalman's solo career. In addition to her books, she has since collaborated with designers like Isaac Mizrahi and Kate Spade, as well as Michael Maharam, whose eponymous company is the country's leading supplier of textiles to commercial architects and interior designers.

Kalman's apartment speaks to her singular aesthetic: organized chaos. This is someone who collects things for a living, after all, like the quirky dolls on her mantel made by Mexican nuns in the 1930s—a gift from Maharam.

On thin shelves flanking the mantel: a William Klein photograph of a girl dancing in Brooklyn and miniature chairs designed by Vitra (a large, white Eames chair sits in the corner of the living room). Hanging on the opposite wall is a photograph of Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B Toklas, whom Kalman has been researching for her next project, an illustrated version of the *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*.

“Alice was the cook and the keeper of their homes in Paris and the countryside, and Gertrude was the genius. Alice would wear these wacko outfits—she'd have a mustache and a crazy hat and a perfect little suit and polished shoes. I'm a little bit obsessed with Gertrude and Alice.”

Kalman is planning a trip to their home in the South of France, “because you never know which dog you're going to see along the way that will be a part of something—not to hijack the story, but it's all about those little surprises.”

She has also mapped out a patisserie in Paris that Stein frequented “when she was trying to decide whether to buy a particular Cézanne or not, some controversial painting, and would have a profiterole pondering.”

That sounds as delicious a prospect as Kalman's roving eyes alighting upon random treasures—if they are like the rest of her work, more bittersweet than saccharine—in Paris itself. “The two things in life that we must have are love and work,” she says. “It takes a long time to find the right balance, and things keeps changing, but that is at the heart of it all.”