

Kalman's Sampler

An assortment of new projects from the queen of "New Yorkistan"

BY JANE MARGOLIES

MANNEQUINS (FOR PUGGI), COSMETICS BAGS (KATE SPADE), WINDOW displays (Sony), alarm clocks (the Museum of Modern Art): No question about it, for someone who isn't a designer, Maira Kalman, 55, has done an awful lot of design. In fact, the Israeli-born, New York-bred illustrator and author—perhaps best known for her humorous *New Yorker* covers and children's picture books—has made a practice of leaping over the boundaries between disciplines. "It's all about the love of making stuff," says this polymorphous talent, who might begin the day working on a gouache for her upcoming illustrated edition of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and end it constructing pyramidal candlestick holders out of a couple of blocks of wood.

Kalman attributes her appetite for trying new things to her open-minded mother. "She never judged me, never told me what to do," she says. Kalman was free to explore music at the High School for Music & Art and literature at New York University before finding her way to a fruitful career in illustration. She discovered a kindred spirit in the late Tibor Kalman, her soul mate of 30 years, who died of non-Hodgkins lymphoma in 1999. Neither of them had degrees in design (the Perverse Optimist, as Maira nicknamed her spouse, had studied history and journalism), but together they founded M&Co., the legendary design studio that brought wit and ingenuity to everything from album covers to paperweights. "We approached design with the curiosity and naïveté of people who don't know what the rules are—and a certain amount of that is critical to fearlessly plunging in and doing something just for the fun of it," says



Maira Kalman's Greenwich Village living room is both lounge space and showcase.

above Her ventures into product design include a lampshade that looks like a flip hairdo and furniture crafted with Rick Meyerowitz. **opposite** Kalman with embroidered linens and Pete



Among Kalman's recent experiments are a pink knit TV cozy (with pom-pom by Isaac Mizrahi), pot holders woven from recycled T-shirts (right), and ziggurat-shaped candlesticks (far right).



Kalman, who inspired the company's name and was involved in about half of its projects. "Of course, we always worked with people who knew the pragmatics, and we learned as we went along."

Today, six years after Tibor's death and five years after M&Co.'s offices were closed and its staff disbanded, the firm's designs continue to be strong sellers at MoMA and its name is still a powerful calling card. "If I have an idea," Kalman says, "there are people I can call up to see if there's any interest."

And ideas she has in abundance. All around her Greenwich Village apartment, where an angled wall of bookcases unites two former one-bedroom units into an unconventional space, there's evidence of her current interest in designing furnishings. In her living room, where tables her now-grown son and daughter made in elementary school keep company with an Eames chaise, you can also see a primitive-looking, child-size wooden chair that Kalman crafted with illustrator Rick Meyerowitz, her collaborator on several *New Yorker* projects (including their famous "New Yorkistan" cover) and on a set of M&Co drink coasters modeled on CDs. There is also a silvery lampshade Kalman fashioned out of aluminum sheeting, cutting and crimping the bottom edge so that it calls to mind a '50s flip hairdo.

Textiles have been a particularly fertile area of exploration. Kalman says she enjoys "the physical crafts, like sewing and knitting, that go back to how people used to do things." A decade ago she designed fanciful fabrics for her friend and neighbor, fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. And last year a major textile manufacturer asked her to try her hand at upholstery. The result: a colorful cotton and viscose blend populated by a very Kalman-esque cast of oddball characters. The artist has also crocheted a TV cozy with a Mizrahi-constructed pom-pom on top, and, with Meyerowitz, she's woven a series of pot holders made from old T-shirts—large-scale

versions of the pot holders children make with stretchy loops on toothy metal looms.

Then there's the needlepoint. On a lark last summer, Kalman and some friends visited the spiritualist community of Lily Dale, in upstate New York, where a psychic offered her this advice: "Don't cry over spilled milk." Kalman had a needle and thread with her that day, and on the way back to Manhattan she embroidered the saying onto a page of her journal. Soon she was gathering clichés and needlepointing them on linen napkins along with random illustrations. What will come of these enigmatic designs? Kalman is not sure. "Sometimes I do things without a reason, and then five years down the line it becomes clear to me." Or, to quote one of her needlepointed clichés: "Time will tell."

And that's okay with her. "The last thing I want to do is to prefigure what the market needs," she says. "With the children's books, I didn't sit down and try to guess what a five-year-old would like. Instead, I told a story I needed to tell." With these new creative endeavors, Kalman is simply sticking to her time-honored practice of following her own instincts. ★

Jane Margolies, a New York City-based freelance writer, is a regular contributor to I.D. Her feature on Springtime Design's while-u-wait recycling project appeared in the March/April 2005 issue.