

Mad About Maira

Illustrator, author, product designer and all-around creative spirit Maira Kalman tackles *The Elements of Style* and other labors of love.

Photograph by ANN WEATHERSBY

Ask Maira Kalman about a box labeled FRUIT WRAPPERS high up on the shelves of her painting studio, and the trim, Birkenstock-clad 55-year-old will climb up on a sofa to retrieve it. Inside, very neatly stacked, is her collection of 100 or so crinkly, multicolored squares of cellophane that once protected individual oranges and lemons. "You don't see these around so much anymore, except in Europe," she says thoughtfully, pulling out the exquisitely designed ephemera. "There are some really beautiful ones here that I'm nuts about!"

Laid out near Kalman's desk are five or six candy bars that she recently picked up in Cuba. "Aren't these great? Look at this one, it's called Cratch," she says. "It sounds like some kind of a disease!"

If it's true that individuals are best defined by their enthusiasms, it could take an entire *Merriam-Webster's* to describe Kalman, who is, by her own admission, "nuts about" lots of stuff. "I'm crazy about boxes and string and packages," she says, pointing to a cardboard box tied with cord. She also loves shoes, fezzes, dogs, old notebooks, spools of colored thread and modernist chairs, examples of which are displayed throughout both her studio and her apartment (just a few floors upstairs in the same Greenwich Village building).

"I get passionate about a lot of different things," she says, her blue eyes gleaming behind cherry-frame glasses. "Whether it's a person or an object, I just fall completely in love and then I want to do something about it." Often that means painting it, in her exuberant, unself-consciously naive style.

Over the past 20 years, Kalman has had a hand in an impressive range of projects. She has written and illustrated nearly a dozen children's books—including a lyrical series about Max, a dog poet, that has a devoted adult following—and painted covers of *The New Yorker*. She has also designed fabrics for Kate Spade and Isaac Mizrahi; sets for Mark Morris; and quirky clocks,



Maira Kalman in her apartment with Pete, her Wheaten Terrier

coasters and other objects for M&Co, the legendary design company founded by her late husband, Tibor Kalman.

"She's a poet trapped in the body of a designer," says her friend and neighbor Mizrahi. They have lived in the same building for the past 13 years, and Mizrahi regularly pops upstairs to Kalman's for aesthetic consultations. "Whether it's about a sketch or a color, she's like a touchstone for me. She has this incredible ability to tell you if something is good or bad. I don't make a move without her."

Though her fans would describe her as an artist, Kalman, who paints in gouache on paper, says she thinks of herself as an illustrator. "Wonderful illustration tells a story and makes you think about things," she says. "Artists usually take themselves more seriously. You're allowed to be more of a jerk when you're an illustrator—I'm an illustrator! I didn't know any better!"

About two years ago, Kalman was poking around a thrift shop on Cape Cod when she came across a copy of *The Elements of Style*, the classic writing manual by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White first published in 1959. Kalman, who had never used it in school herself, says that she plunked herself down and read it almost cover to cover. She was immediately taken not only by the book's sage rules ("Omit needless words") but also by the delightfully absurd sentences and phrases used as examples throughout the text, which struck her as ripe for illustration. Kalman obtained permission from White's granddaughter to illustrate the book and began translating her favorite examples into images. She notes that Strunk, the book's original author (White was his student, who edited the book for publication after Strunk's death), had a subtly subversive sense of humor.

"I think he was a deeply funny man, and he enjoyed coming up with these sentences," she says. Some of her illustrations are literal

renderings of Strunk's words, while others add another layer of humor to them. The sentence "He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug" (demonstrating Rule 20, "Keep related words together") is accompanied by an image of guests decorously sitting around a living room, all but one oblivious to a man lying in a pool of blood.

The Elements of Style Illustrated (Penguin Press) is just one of a handful of Kalman projects debuting in October. The textile company Maharam, which has commissioned designs from such talents as Hella Jongerius and Bruce Mau, is unveiling its first collaboration with Kalman: a fabric made up of about 200 of her tiny hieroglyphic-like drawings, depicting everything from a rhinoceros to a jacket on a hanger.

Textiles are also the basis of her second gallery exhibition, opening at the Julie Saul Gallery on October 27. The show, titled "I Can't Stand All the Excitement," will consist of about 30 works of embroidery. "My mother and my aunt embroidered, and I love cloth," says the artist. The pieces, all based on photographs, have a meditative, homespun feeling and were born in part from the mourning of her mother, Sara, who passed away last year.

"A lot of this kind of work is critical commentary about women's work, and that sort of thing," says Julie Saul, who mounted Kalman's first exhibition—works on paper—in 2003. "But Maira's is very natural, very unself-conscious."

Kalman says that she's busier now than she was 10 or 15 years ago, which she attributes partly to the death of Tibor, her companion of 32 years, from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 1999. "There's this myth of a widow

whose grief is so overwhelming that she can't do anything. But sometimes the opposite is true," she says. "Sometimes your grief is overwhelming, but you have a million things you want to do."

Tibor Kalman was one of the most influential figures in graphic design throughout the Eighties and early Nineties. He and Maira met as undergraduates at New York University while working for Leonard Riggio, who then ran the campus bookstore. When Riggio later bought Barnes & Noble, he hired Tibor as his creative director. Tibor went on to form M&Co, and then to edit Benetton's controversial *Colors* magazine.

"He was a force," says Kalman. "He was incredibly intense, phenomenally alive, with the energy of 20 people."

"My grieving was permanent," she adds. "But I was really loved, and it enabled me to use my energies in a productive way and not be annihilated."

Her cheerful apartment, where she and Tibor raised their two children (Lulu, 23, and Alex, 20) is part modernist showcase, part quirky aunt's attic. There's a La Chaise chair by Eames (a gift to the Kalmans from the president of Vitra), but there's also a funny-looking lamp she and artist Rick Meyerowitz (her boyfriend of the past five years) made together, a floor-to-ceiling display of fezzes and a few examples of one of her all-time favorite



From left: Kalman's self-portrait from *The Elements of Style*; a piece from Kalman's gallery show; an illustration from *Elements* inspired by the sentence "Bread and butter was all she served."

obsessions, shoes. An exaggeratedly long men's shoe by Junya Watanabe for Comme des Garçons is on the mantel, as is a Helmut Lang clog covered in long, fuzzy black hair. "It's like Cousin It!" she says, holding up the latter specimen. (She's planning to include it in her next children's book, tentatively titled *The History of My Shoes*.)

One of Kalman's favorite expressions is "Wouldn't it be great if," and this open-ended way of thinking has long shaped her creative life. By asking herself this very question not too long ago, she came up with the idea for her fourth major project coming out in October: a musical production of *The Elements of Style*.

"I found that when I was painting, I was singing the words," she says. Composer Nico Muhly was commissioned to write a series of songs set to the text, which will be performed by singers and musicians on October 19 in the main reading room of the New York Public Library. "The audience is going to sit at the tables, and the musicians will stand on the balcony," Kalman says excitedly. "And I hope that the last song will have everyone singing everything together in one big cacophony."

It would be very much in the spirit of the last spread of *Elements*, which features a happily chaotic painting of broken doors and windows beside all of the book's copyright information, printed in dizzily askew strips of text.

"It's really about, 'You know the rules, you know the rules,'" she says. "And now—if you have any brains at all—you'll break the rules."