

## MAIRA KALMAN



*Maira Kalman, "Self-Portrait (with Pete)"*

Through February 13, 2011 at [The Skirball Cultural Center](#), West Los Angeles  
by Jody Zellen

Maira Kalman is a multi-talented, multi-media artist who is better known and more easily identified as an illustrator, children's book author and designer than she is as a visual artist. A retrospective exhibition that presents over thirty years of her work demonstrates how definitions that categorize these disciplines are irrelevant. Kalman is a visual artist who happens to use illustration to communicate her outlook on life and the world at large.



*Maira Kalman, "Self-Portrait (with Pete)," 2004-05, gouache on paper, 16 x 15".*



*Maira Kalman, "Woman with Face Net," 2000, gouache on paper, 17 x 14 3/4".*

The exhibition, which was shown at San Francisco's Jewish Museum this July through October and organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Philadelphia (where it originated), has landed in Los Angeles before it moves to the Jewish Museum in New York, its last stop on the tour. The exhibition is something of a collaboration between Kalman and ICA curator Ingrid Schaffner. Schaffner organized the works on paper that occupies the walls, while Kalman designed the installation of ephemera with objects drawn from her collections. The juxtaposition of drawings and objects provides insight into the expansiveness and complexity of Kalman's oeuvre.

Kalman has a whimsical style that is accessible and enchanting. The reductive drawings have a childlike simplicity, at once highly personal and universal. They come from acute observations of places, people and things that are then translated into quirky, colorful and deceptively simple line and gouache drawings that distill the original idea into its essential elements. Whether making an image of a dog, a bustling train station, or the planes flying into the World Trade Center, Kalman exhibits a sensitivity toward her subjects that instills them with personality and morality. Even when the subject is tragic, Kalman's images evoke a positive spirit. Language often accompanies the drawings, not only captioning the pictures but often adding additional commentary or, in some instances like in "Exaltations/Observations" (2006), dominating the image with hand drawn lists, numbers and observations. In numerous works Kalman makes reference to fashion. "Labs on Cheetah Print (Dolce and Gabbana's Yellow Labradors, Lola and Dali)" (2000) is a gouache that depicts two dogs sleeping on a Cheetah print couch. The vivid orange and yellow patterned couch engulfs the two sleeping pups in sweetness and contemplative quiet. "The Planes Attacked" (2002) depicts the twin towers and two planes against a deep blue background. The simplified image is commemorative.



Kalman is a keen observer of urban scenes, often favoring images of crowded streets or open plazas. In "New York Grand Central Station" (1999) disparate figures go about their lives, each unaware of the other's presence. The collage of types and attitudes becomes a summary snapshot of the great passageway as it might be at any given moment. Kalman often works from photographic images, and in the exhibition many original photographs are presented alongside the illustrations, so you can draw comparisons.

Kalman also makes drawings and paintings of objects and furniture in which she minimizes context so as to present these isolated "things" against a colored ground, thus elevating their importance. A gouache of a Snickers bar against a pinkish ground becomes more than just an image of the candy bar when transcribed by Kalman's hand. We can imagine her snickering alongside the image.

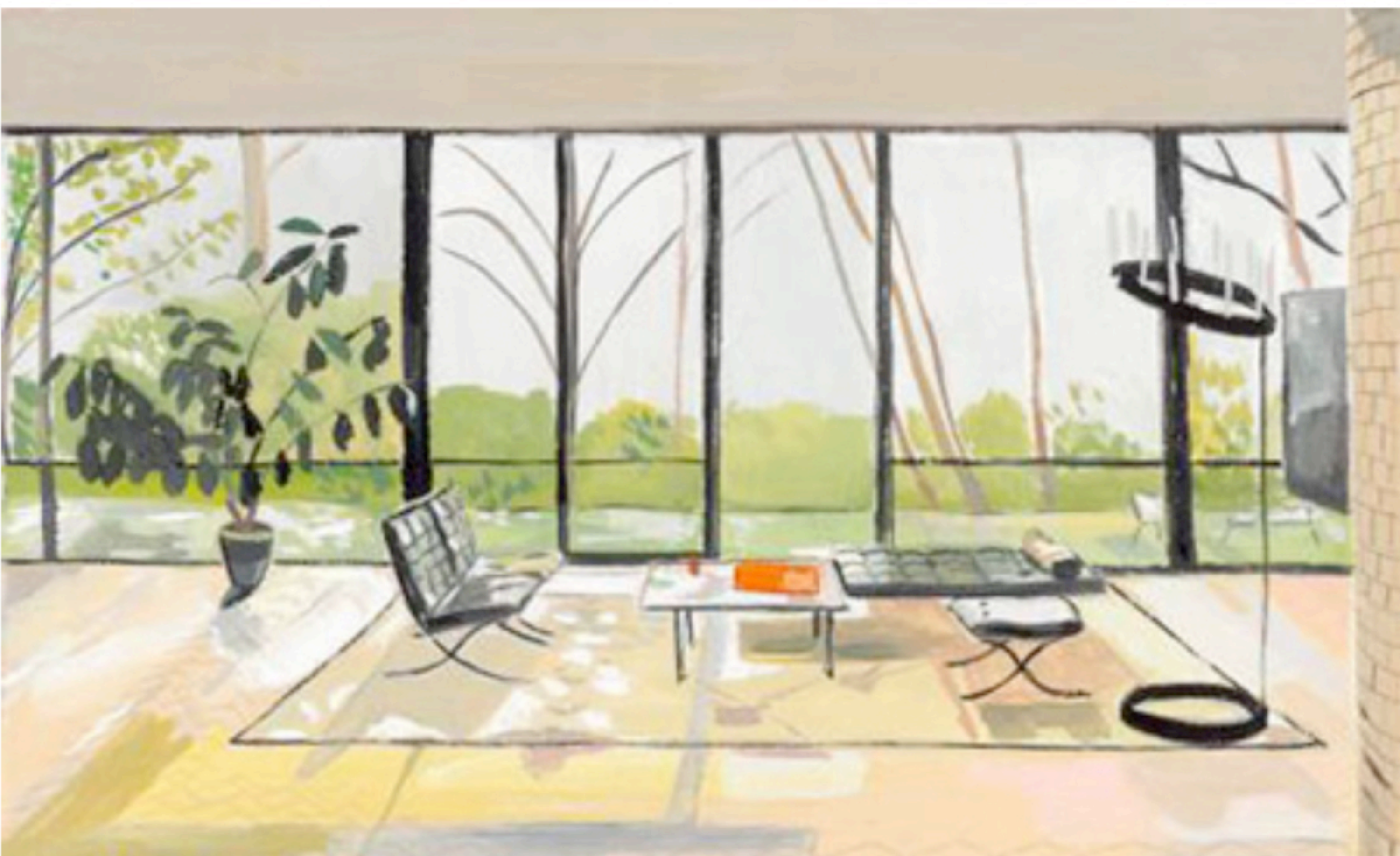


*Maira Kalman, "New York, Grand Central Station," 1999, gouache and ink on paper, 15 3/8 x 22 1/4".*

Kalman has illustrated at least twelve children's books. Her first was published in 1985, a collaboration with Talking Heads musician David Byrne. Together they created an illustrated version of the song "Stay up Late." Others include stories of Pete and Max, the dogs. As books are an integral part of her work, they are presented in such a way as they can be held in one's hands and read rather than looked at under glass. In 2005 she illustrated "The Elements of Style" the classic writer's reference manual. Many of the original drawings from these books as well as from her *New Yorker Magazine* covers and her illustrated blogs for the *New York Times* are included in the exhibition. For "The Principles of Uncertainty" (May 2006 – April, 2007), "And The Pursuit of Happiness" (January – December, 2009) she posted drawings and hand written commentary to her blog that documented her relationship to the changing world. These collections were later made into books, which are also included in the exhibition. Kalman's pictures are editorials, opinions, referents and fantasies. If they are delightful and upbeat, they are also poignant illustrations of the ups and downs in life. She states, "What happens in my life is interpreted in my work. There is very little separation."

Kalman was born in Tel Aviv in 1949 and has lived in New York since she was four years old. While she claims no formal training as an artist, she studied literature at NYU and while there her life was immersed in art and design. Her late husband Tibor Kalman was the founder of M & Co. and was himself an influential designer who became well known for not only Colors Magazine, but also for his design of the Talking Heads Album covers, the New York cafe Florent, as well as watches and other products that are still distributed by the Museum of Modern Art. Kalman began her career as a magazine paste-up artist, but immediately began establishing herself as an illustrator.

Her works on paper are presented as a narrative sequence in which people, places, objects, and events are hung together on the gallery walls independent of their chronology or material. In Kalman's world there is something for everyone.



*Maira Kalman, "The Glass House," 2004-05, gouache on paper, 9 x 11".*