

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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HOMES

In My Home Office: Maira Kalman

Touring the illustrator's email-free creative headquarters



Maira Kalman FRANCOIS DISCHINGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Updated March 5, 2011 12:01 a.m. ET

Artist, writer and inveterate collector Maira Kalman lives and works in Greenwich Village, maintaining her painting and design studio just a few floors below her apartment. On Friday, the traveling exhibition "Maira Kalman: Various Illuminations (of a Crazy World)" opens at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan, providing the first definitive survey of more than 30 years of her paintings, drawings, photography and textiles.

MAIRA KALMAN'S OFFICE ESSENTIALS

1. Winsor and Newton paint brushes
2. Daler Rowney sketch books
3. Staedtler eraser and brush
4. Artemide desk lamp
5. Aeron chair
6. Pigma Micron Archival Ink pens
7. No. 2 pencils, any brand

Best known for her whimsical-neurotic take on modern life, Ms. Kalman has illustrated everything from Talking Heads songs to New Yorker covers, and this fall will publish both a children's book on Abraham Lincoln and an illustrated version of the "Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas."

A few days before installing the show's final touches, Ms. Kalman gave us a tour of her home office, exhibiting her expansive collections of

everything from Spanish orange wrappers to vintage hats, and described her approach to working successfully at home.

My workspace is defined by books, ephemera, quiet and light. I don't have a computer, telephone or a fax machine there. I have my cell phone, but no email, and three desks. One is a door on IKEA legs, one I bought from a designer 20 years ago. The third is a surgical table that I got from my brother-in-law, a surgical supply salesman.

The most inspiring objects are books. I have about 5,000 volumes in my home library. It's an unending source of visuals and ideas. I collect photography books, design books, art and fashion



Inspiring images above her desk FRANCOIS DISCHINGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

books. I started buying books when I was 18. When I was little we didn't buy them; we went to the library and read from A to Z—a wonderful, magical thing.

The one book I cannot live without is my 1971 Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged. It's a great pleasure to look at and completely indispensable.

On my desk I always have a lemon or a lime, drying. I love the fragrance. Also, a Staedtler eraser, a brush for the eraser and a pencil sharpener.

When I'm working at home, my bed becomes my desk and is laid out with all of my projects. Bed is a beautiful place. What is better than contemplating the world from a bed with crisp white linens and a stack of books nearby? It is a very hopeful thing.



Drying fruits as room fragrance FRANCOIS DISCHINGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

On my bulletin board I keep photographs and sayings that I change depending on my project. One says: "You make me shudder." I don't even know where I heard that. An opera?

My computer is an Apple. I don't know what model. I have top-of-the-line pencils and pens, but the computer,

I have no idea.

I correspond by typing notes on my typewriter. I use Verge de France blue paper or postcards. I have thousands. When I buy postcards I try to buy multiples so I can keep one for myself. The tools of writing really are lovely.

My uniform is black pants, white t-shirt, black sweater. So I can function in the world in a clean and nice way.



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Her next project, to be published Jan. 2012 by Nancy Paulsen Books/Penguin Young Readers. F. MARTIN RAMIN/WSJ

portraits of Kafka, Diane Arbus and Nabokov with his butterfly net. There's one of my dog and a photo of my lunch at Winston Churchill's house. And a great gift that someone sent me, an intact hummingbird's nest from California.

I adore collecting boxes of sponges for the packaging and the names, and paint rags, which I love madly. I have flat files full of antique fabric, photographs I've taken of breakfasts in Deauville and a candy bar called Cratch that I got in Cuba. It sounds like a venereal disease.

My favorite font is Bodoni, so I used it as my daughter's middle name.

If I could never work again and I could just listen to music and walk, I'd be very, very happy. My children got me the entire works of Glenn Gould and J.S. Bach. I am a piano player. I bought an accordion a few years ago and learned the Anniversary Waltz, and then decided it was enough and put it away.

I dream of two-hour European lunches but when I'm really on deadline, lunch is grabbed, not at my desk, but standing up in some corner of the room.

I don't think about changes in technology and how they affect illustrations. I'm just plodding on in my own Luddite way and hoping the content is what it's about.

I make a lot of lists. I handwrite or type them, and cross things off so I have a sense I've done it.

I steal linens from hotels or buy them at flea markets, and I often use them as paint rags. Somehow the best linen napkins come from Claridge's. But those I bought, not stole.

In an ideal world, work and life would be seamless. It's about finding your love and your work, and having them intersect all the time—my painting and writing is all about that. If you have a

Inspiring items above my desks include photographs I've taken and

vision that feels intensely physically correct to you, then it's true. When it's actually realized could be 20 years after that initial feeling.

When I'm having a mental block, I take a walk. Walking anywhere in New York for an hour, all your problems are solved. You're not trying to think of something, not trying to come up with an idea, you're just walking and observing stuff and it's a beautiful thing.

A major influence on me is the painter Charlotte Salomon. She was a Jewish woman living in Berlin before World War Two. She went into hiding and then was killed by the Nazis in her late 20s. She painted over 1,000 gouaches of her life, and a series about her crazy family. It's amazing that they survived, and they're glorious works. To me they're perfect.

The next projects I'm excited about are illustrating "The Autobiography of Alice B.

Toklas" by Gertrude Stein and "Why We Broke Up" by Lemony Snicket. Also next fall I'll be a visiting fellow at the American Academy in Rome. I hope to do nothing. The *dolce far niente*. The challenge is to come without a



Her favorite pen (Pigma Micron). F. MARTIN RAMIN/WSJ



Maira Kalman's vintage hat collection. FRANCOIS DISCHINGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

suitcase full of projects.

—*Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman*

