

Constance Mallinson

"The process of writing art criticism has been extraordinarily helpful in my painting," states Constance Mallinson. "Writing teaches you to think of what you see critically." Mallinson has been critic for several national art magazines for the last six years. Three years ago, "thinking critically" began to affect her paintings, which previously had consisted of abstract fields of crosshatching in soft, muted shades.

Mallinson, 38, a native of Washington, D.C., was encouraged early to pursue her interest in art by her mother, "an artistic housewife," and her father, an inventor and electronics engineer. "From his scientific mind, I think I get a rationality that affects how I look at art," she says. By the age of nine, she was taking private lessons from a teacher she describes as a "professional illustrator, meticulously realistic."

In 1970, she received her BFA at the University of Georgia, where she had met her husband, screenwriter and novelist Eric Alter. For a decade, she collaborated on a series of commercial, industrial and government films, and painted in her spare time—until 1978, when the couple moved to L.A. to be closer to the film industry. It turned out to be a wise move for Mallinson.

"D.C. had good museums, but the art scene barely existed," she recalls. "Coming here brought me out of my shell. I felt I had cornered myself with my abstract

work. I spent so much time in the studio in this removed, abstract activity, that I began to not see a relationship between me and the world. I wanted a change." It wasn't long in coming.

In 1983, at the Ovsey Gallery, Mallinson surprised everyone who knew her work with a series of vast landscape paintings composed like patchwork quilts of smaller landscape details copied (free-hand) from magazine and travel-brochure photographs. The method of working had not changed—the surfaces were still obsessively detailed, though with waterfalls and mountains rather than abstract marks—yet the content of the pieces carried an inherent comment on their source material. "There is an implied criticism of the mass media and the way it has formed our ideas about nature," she says.

Initially, Mallinson's aim was simply to use the photos as building blocks for landscapes without illusionistic space, to retain the "integrity of the picture plane" that had been so important to her abstract work. But as critical reviews of her pieces began to appear, she realized that the photos had messages of their own. "I didn't set out to make a picture about received imagery, I set out to make a painting about a lot of landscapes," she says. "But I started dealing with mass-media landscape photography—from the image bank, so to speak—and it all came together. I used the found photographs the way assemblage artists used found objects, and subsequently I learned to manipulate them." The resulting paintings work on both levels: as richly textured formal surfaces containing a wealth of pictorial information, and as wry commentary on mass-media consciousness.

Mallinson's 1985 show at the Ovsey was more overtly critical, using her oversized signature as the form bearing the landscape details, thereby integrating language and image and examining the role the artist's name plays in the way we see a picture. The most recent paintings in her downtown studio are titled *Modern Man* and *Modern Woman*—nude figures composed of landscape and commercial-advertising images.

"They are made up of mass-media imagery," explains Mallinson, "because that, in a sense, is what makes us up as human beings.

"I like that complicated way of seeing," she adds. "What look to be simple, bucolic and escapist images become a profound statement of what we're made up of."

Hunter Drohojowska



Mask, 1985, oil on canvas

