

Art and Cake, June 30, 2017

Constance Mallinson

Unmade

Jason Vass

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By Jody Zellen



Constance Mallinson is a collector and she has amassed a huge archive of discarded materials — fragments and detritus that has been lost, left behind and forgotten. To collect, Mallinson walks. She keeps her eyes down as she roams the streets, alleys, pathways of her Los Angeles neighborhood, otherwise the treasures she seeks might pass her by. Although focused on the task, she never loses an awareness of her surroundings. Mallinson picks up colorful knick-knacks, bottle caps, action heroes, fast food containers—really every imaginable object or paper fragment, that she can easily carry home. Back in her studio, she examines these miscellaneous *things* and wonders how their formal qualities — shape, color, size— can inform her composition. But more importantly, she intuits relationships and quasi narratives between these objects.

The noted cartoonist and comic theorist Scott McCloud has spoken about visual acuity and in a recent lecture at the Santa Monica Public Library showed numerous photographs that personified random places and objects— through his lens, two circles plus one line found in the landscape became a face. McCloud’s exercise relates to Mallinson’s series of small paintings entitled *Picasso’s Bastards* (2014-2017), as in these works she slyly arranges her fragmented objects to suggest found faces nestled within the dirt and rubble. These are created by juxtaposing round items like bottle caps or can tops with open ovals layered over food containers and other objects that allude to a head. At first glance, these small paintings elicit a smile of recognition. But, that soon gives way to an understanding that Mallinson is depicting something deeper. According to Mallinson these works suggest “the human face is making its imprint everywhere in the ongoing environmental degradation.”

Large works including *Mountain* (2017) and *A Short History of Painting* (2015) depict carefully composed and compositionally balanced heaps of colorful “trash,” similar to the random piles one would see at a dumpsite. Mallinson’s arrangement, however is anything but arbitrary. Each object is purposely chosen from her archive of detritus and specifically placed in the array to form a visual pathway through the debris. Reading a painting like *Mountain* from left to right, the eye moves from a neon green bucket to a deflated pinkish ball over which sits a tangled blue wire. From there the eye bounces between pink objects—a flamingo, a plastic pumpkin, vacu-formed packaging, a happy birthday balloon, noticing various other colors, types of objects and ironic juxtapositions along the way. While *Mountain* is densely packed, in *The Large B-lasst* (2016) the objects are dispersed as if disseminating from an explosion, floating above an ambiguous field of earth-toned clouds. The title not only references a “blast” but also Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*— as a counter point to his ready-made content.

The exhibition opens with *Lost Balls* (2017) a sculpture of found balls of various sizes that appear like an unstable column wiggling up the wall. This work is Mallinson’s reveal, as she exhibits the actual objects rather than their painted image. She explores the difference between the Readymade and the unmade— combining the natural and the manufactured in her densely painted compositions. A series of smaller paintings entitled *Unmade Objects*, (all 2017) depict clusters or isolated objects amongst fallen leaves and plant debris and function like punctuation in relation to the larger works.

Mallinson’s meticulously painted piles and mounds of trash call attention to consumer culture and the proliferation of waste. Her work is concerned with how this impacts the environment. However, Mallinson is first and foremost a skilled painter who captures the aura of each object, beautifully rendering this clutter and debris in exacting detail using the techniques and precision found in Old Master paintings. Like her precursors, Mallinson paints from life, which provides her flexibility in depicting perspective. Though realistic, the paintings display multiple angles and are more Cubist than photographic. Mallinson is interested in the ways abstraction and representation can co-exist on the picture plane and draws from myriad art historical referents simultaneously — Dutch Still Lifes, Romanticism, Cubism, Surrealism, Appropriation, etc. That ruins and decay can be beautiful goes without saying and although Mallinson creates aesthetically pleasing works, her paintings are also complex and multi-layered investigations that reflect upon and critique the overabundance of excess and waste in contemporary society.

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