



Terry Allen, *Dugout II (HOLD ON to the house)* (detail), 2004. Installation view.

LOS ANGELES

TERRY ALLEN

LA LOUVER/SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

How did Los Angeles come to host what amounted to a Terry Allen festival? The Lubbock-raised, LA-schooled, and Santa Fe-based visual artist, musician, and writer was the subject of simultaneous solo exhibitions at LA Louver and the Santa Monica Museum of Art; the Skirball Cultural Center produced his new play; and LACMA organized a conversation between Allen and art criticism's great Texan Dave Hickey. Perhaps Allen's completion of a multimedia opus several years in the making converged with a broadly felt need for a practice that, though inconsistent, is also genuinely unpredictable; maybe LA was finally ready for some hot and bothered grit with hints of Ed Kienholz's and Wallace Berman's complicated humanity and politics. And perhaps at a time when insidious federal policies are masked by talk of patriotism and traditional values, we can really use a storyteller like Allen, who knows from good old boys and the good old days.

At its best, Allen's work is like a collection of great country tunes—able, in a way that feels both familiar and mysterious, to tell about what could be specific torn hearts, dashed dreams, or troubled times, while situating these tales within broader human themes. At LA Louver, a hodgepodge of small stage set-like tableaux suggesting the actual sites or psychological

spaces of stories passed on to the artist by his parents, along with drawings that resonated with this material, came together under the title of *Dugout I* (all works 1994–2004), a reference to where Allen's baseball-player father spent countless hours and to the dirt-floor house in which Allen's mother was born. Tales of the wonders, confusions, and disappointments of an emerging modern nation are heard in what sound like radio plays, intercut with Allen's own country/ragtime blues; their texts are scrawled across drawings, illuminated in neon, and stamped into sheet metal. "All his fingers were broke a hundred times, but he stayed in the game," begins one ode; elsewhere: "She says a person has to dig into the heart of everything . . . and what gets dug out is all there is." We watch and listen as the father, a man of few words thanks to a hot-poker tonsillectomy who played the national pastime way past his prime, is drawn, built, written, and spoken of. And we see the mother who, as a young piano player, flirted with the temptations of jazz in a place and time where those musicians were viewed (and in Allen's work visualized) as black-skinned devils. Though the proliferation of faux-aged surfaces, quasi-Expressionist smears of color, and old-timey props can at times seem overbearing and gratuitous, Allen's open theatricality and generous humor win out in the end.

At the Santa Monica Museum of Art, *Dugout II (HOLD ON to the house)*, 2004, an installment of more recent drawings and "stages," built around memories

of the artist's adolescence and the early cold war, was haunted by the sound track from Allen's play *Dugout III (WARBOY and the backboard blues)*. It included a tableau for every room in the artist's boyhood home, each overlaid with video projections of atomic tests and other vintage footage that deftly realized a fusion of paranoia, militarism, optimism, and home sweet home. A figure called Warboy—part robot, part teenager—commanded center stage in the incarnation of a large puppet. He recurs in Allen's drawings as both self and other, a strange embodiment of the fears, fantasies, and follies that come with confronting an enemy that's both actual and imagined. In our present climate, which may be with us for as long as the cold war was, Allen's country-crooner wisdom comes through, telling the small and tall tales of a few characters whose stories reverberate on civilization's stage.

—Christopher Miles