

Stepping into an artist's memory

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“Your life just turns into a bucket full of stories with a little bitty hole in the bottom,” reflects one of the many characters in Terry Allen’s “Dugout,” a multimedia, multi-venue production based loosely on the lives of his parents.

“Or a bucket full of holes,” suggests another, “with a little bitty story at the bottom.”

Scrawled alongside a drawing of just such a bucket, this unassumingly existential exchange cuts to the heart of the whole sprawling project. We are the product of the stories we tell, the artist suggests. The pleasures and problems of telling them are the pleasures and problems of living.

Allen has stories aplenty — enough, in this case, to fill a stage production (performed by LA Theatre Works at the Skirball in early March) and two concurrent exhibitions (at LA Louver Gallery and the Santa Monica Museum of Art), as well as a LACMA-sponsored conversation with critic Dave Hickey (also early March) and a book on the project (due out next year). And if we interpret “holes” to mean modes of expression, he’s a veritable sieve: painter, sculptor, musician, poet, playwright and more.

The result of this fortunate combination is a rich, many-textured and extremely entertaining pair of exhibitions. It’s worth considering what might have been gained from a tighter focus — whether fewer venues or fewer media — but an element of sprawl no doubt befits the meditations of a New Mexico-based artist on his west Texan upbringing. After stepping into the boundaries of Allen’s territory, the sense of it unfurling in so many different directions is undoubtedly part of the pleasure.

Allen has stated in interviews that the work is less about characters than it is “climates”: spheres of emotion that the memory of his parents and their stories evoke. It is a compelling distinction and emerges with particular eloquence in “Dugout I,” the LA Louver exhibition.

The show revolves around five “stages” — rickety wooden tableaux of painted and handdrawn images, fragments of text, bits of neon and various found objects, including a number of taxidermied animals. (The most striking of the latter is a wolf entwined in burning red neon that looks down on viewers near the entrance.) Each revolves around a porch-like platform and a straight-backed chair — nostalgic icons that mark the works from the outset as spaces for storytelling.

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Each tableau is accompanied by a set of eight 22 by 30 inch works on paper (gouache, pastel, graphite and ink), each of which combines image and text to convey a particular piece of a story.

One's first impression of the exhibition is iconic and atmospheric, with each tableau evoking a vague, collective memory of small-town America. In the drawings, however, one begins to delineate specific personalities, principal among them a baseball player and a barroom pianist — Allen's parents.

Slogging through text can be a trying experience in a gallery setting, but here it's rewarded by strong, fluent prose and potent anecdotes. For those who prefer to listen, the texts are also read aloud on a recording that issues continually through the gallery. This lends ambience but can be difficult to follow, out of step as it is with one's own progression.

Moving through these drawings, whether listening, reading or looking at the images, one is slowly woven into a broader narrative. There are no names, chronologies or family trees, but the shape of it emerges quickly and with striking clarity. From this vantage point, the images and objects in the tableaux — the juxtaposition of a broken glass and a torn, blood-red baseball, for example — also take on a deeper meaning.

The father emerges with an air of melancholic reverence: a hard and stoic figure whose body is gradually broken by baseball, work and age.

In one drawing, rendered in a severe cartoon style, we see him as a boy having his tonsils burnt off with a hot poker. (A true story.) "After that night," the text reads, "He never said more than he had to to anybody."

Later, in a text on one of the tableaux, we see him as an adult, trying unsuccessfully to save the life of a batter (he'd been hit in the throat with a ball) by shoving a pencil through his tongue, attempting to dislodge it. (An accompanying image portrays a man with a baseball mitt covering his eyes and a hummingbird — a frequently recurring motif — hovering around his mouth.) The text, speaking of the father, concludes: "He was 46 years old and he hurt all over and it was 1932 and he would never play ball again."

The mother is an irresistibly dynamic figure: plain-talking, free-spirited and adventurous. Perhaps because she was 20 years younger than Allen's father (40 when Allen was born), the focus here tends not toward her decline but her coming of age, primarily in the musical and sexual senses.

One of the most beautiful pieces of writing in the show is a poem describing her experience in a club after "discovering jazz" and being kicked out of her Methodist university for playing with a black band.

"Down in the bottom of deep ellum," it reads, "in the lavender room at the oasis lounge / on gin and powder that night in 1924 / she's playing / with the big blue negro's horn / moaning in tongues / fluttering like wings / his rage at love." After learning of the man's death — he's shot in the head by a wealthy white woman "in

the sheets of the bed in a suite at the Fairmont hotel” — she “cried all afternoon at the thought of it / of life’s sweet upside-downedness and tragic silly loss / and how, just exactly, that is music.”

In “Dugout II (Hold on to the House),” at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the focus shifts from the early 20th century stories of Allen’s parents to the 1950s and his own adolescence — or, in his words, to “the new, paranoid, post-atomic bomb wilderness, and the unexpected Outer Space arrival of their teenage ‘WHATSIT’ son (WARBOY).”

The centerpiece of this installation is the hollow frame of a generic house, about the size of a tool shed, which hangs askew at the center of the gallery alongside a large, floppy puppet (the son). Spinning out from this center, as though hurled by a tornado, are an equally generic bedroom, dining room and living room, all made from thin, white board, onto which a stream of 1950s-era found film footage is projected. The only idiosyncratic elements are three real or reallooking animals: a wolf in the bedroom, a blue rat on the dining room table, and an overturned turtle in the den.

Drawings of various sizes, similar in style to those in the other exhibition but devoid of text, hang around the perimeter of the gallery, offering assorted snippets of memory and imagination. (One of the most amusing, “Sniper,” portrays a boy lying flat on the ground and pointing a laser beam gaze up the skirt of a woman walking by.)

The introduction of Warboy — part puppet, part robot and part teenager — is an intriguing development, but on the whole the second exhibition lacks the specificity of the first and thus falls short of its complexity.

Both installations have the somewhat vacant quality of stage sets, but the effect is countered in the first by the text, which supplies a rich cast of characters to fill the space. Here, however — perhaps because Allen’s attention is turned toward his own memories, rather than the more easily dramatized memories of others — a sense of vacancy remains. In the first, one feels oneself stepping into a world; this is more like flipping through a quirky, if memorable scrapbook.

These stories, perhaps, are still in development.