

**"DUGOUT I"**

LA Louver Gallery, Los Angeles CA  
March 4 · April 10, 2004

**"DUGOUT II (HOLD ON to the house)"**

Santa Monica Museum of Art, CA  
February 28 · May 15, 2004

**"DUGOUT III: Warboy (and the backboard blues)"**

Skirball Cultural Center and Museum, Los Angeles CA  
March 3 · 7, 2004

The most consistent element of Terry Allen's multi-part, multimedia invasion of Los Angeles is the quirky and thoroughly charming voice of his wife, performer Jo Harvey Allen, whose Texas twang spits forth the capsulated stories of this "DUGOUT" series like dirt clods in a slingshot. Allen the latter took the lead in the radio play performed live at the Skirball Center, and this spoken soundscape fills the two Westside gallery spaces where Allen the former's paintings, drawings, installations, music and own recorded storytelling create an overfull sensory display of a personal, melancholic Americana.

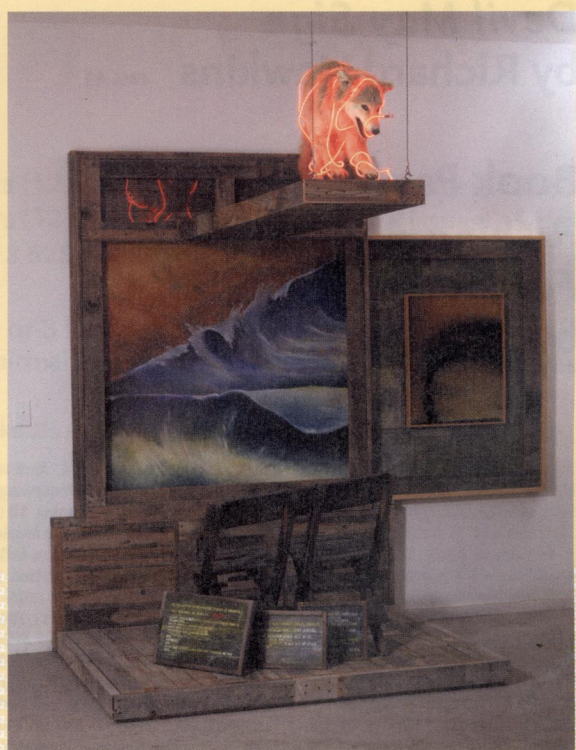
The second most consistent element is the central motif and variously applied title, "DUGOUT," which refers all at once to the architecture of America's great pastime and a number of historical sub-referents, like Civil War trenches and A-bomb hideouts. Piles of fine, fresh dirt rest among the installations, driving this notion of digging into a basic material form and supporting what is the most important aspect of Allen's motif, the psychological excavations of reconstructing memory through storytelling.

Overall, the "DUGOUT" series concerns itself with Terry Allen's own parents, a baseball-playing father born in the nineteenth century and his wife, Allen's pianist mother, who together made house in Texas and begat a figure known here as "the boy." Like a boy, Allen uses equal parts invention and solipsism to trace the moody architecture of their lives. Like a good

memoir, the specificity of the narrative moments adds up to an authentic generality, presenting both a little piece of 1950s Texas and a broad swath of a generation's reluctant role in American history. Born in 1943, Allen, though having preceded D-Day, exemplifies a baby-boomer-ishness of spirit; his rebellions against the past are undercut and thus reified by his deep reverence for what's been lost. As an artist, this trajectory appears in Allen's brave and playful range of material choices, his kooky regionalist aesthetic, and the facts of his career (decades of formal revolt revving him up to land on an institutional plateau).

"DUGOUT I" is the more refined of the two gallery installations. LA Louver's high-end space is filled with rows of framed drawings done in gouache, pastel, and ink, interspersed with large assemblages of paintings, old wood, front-porch furniture, and taxidermy, collaged in a style that could be described as cowboy-Kienholz. Both the drawings and assemblages illustrate bits of text that are figured within, small stories that gently describe the discovery of a baseball mitt or black jazz, the time when tonsils were removed with a hot poker, or the morbid fate of a first husband. This narrative web holds decades of mini-events together, their shared context being the filter of Allen's adult psyche and the material translations thereof. These works are clever and succinct and are sometimes very good-looking, especially the drawings (which reminded me of twentieth-century expressionist propaganda posters). All of the works here have a finished quality, one that is forgivably at odds with the frayed threads of time and space they unwind.

While more impressively daring, the installations at



(LEFT) TERRY ALLEN, INFINITE ("DUGOUT" STAGE VI), 2002, MIXED MEDIA ASSEMBLAGE, 13 X 15 X 10 FT. (RIGHT) ANCIENT ("DUGOUT I" STAGE 1), 2000-01, MIXED MEDIA ASSEMBLAGE, 13 X 15 X 10 FT. COURTESY LA LOUVER, VENICE CA.



the Santa Monica Museum of Art's "DUGOUT II" appear slightly haphazard. More of these drawings and paintings are dispersed among a huge, skeletal house frame, a pretend kitchen table hanging at an awkward angle, an off-scale bed set, and other implications of a lost suburban past. Video projections conjure a bygone time, as in old images of 1950s children running around a hillside. These interact with the model structures (the aforementioned video was playing against a white basketball backboard suspended from the museum's ceiling). Here, the range of depictions, from a projection of Marilyn Monroe to a painting of Stalin, is broad, and the introduction of more contemporary materials and modes leaves Allen's carefully contrived content unhinged.

Floating around both exhibitions is the sound recording made at the Skirball Center performance, through which the stories told by the visual works are told again by real telling, this time in the personality-plus delivery of Jo Harvey Allen, along with Terry Allen's own effective utterances. Terry Allen and a couple of able musicians also provide interstitial songs, little folksy show tunes that fill out the narratives and help cue us into the intended tone: serious, but not too serious. When moving through the gallery installations, one hears a story that one just read a moment ago, preceded perhaps by a story that is depicted in a visual image one is about to encounter. This layering makes the narrative more slippery and more fun, breathing a wry kind of life into what could be a rather macabre autopsy of Allen's past. At the Skirball performance itself, the Allens displayed the character and aplomb of the professional monologist and musician couple that they are, dispersing Allen's oeuvre across so many media as to make this

interdisciplinarity the central triumph of the entire "DUGOUT" experience.

Also worth noting is that the performance began with the Director of LA Theater Works (who produced the radio play series of which Allen's show was a part) offering a rueful prepared statement about it being dropped from the regular schedule of a local NPR affiliate for obscene language contained in a previously aired piece. What this said about the current climate of fear and reprisal in broadcasting is one thing, but more pertinent here is that this statement highlighted the Allens' inappropriate candidacy for censorship. They've both been funded by today's NEA and their material (in this case, a hetero-fantasy of baseball-admiring remembrances tinged with a don't-mess-with-Texas wit), is by no means the outlaw art of Karen Finley or Tim Miller that once landed those NEA grant recipients in the Supreme Court. I imagine that were it more linear, even some Republicans could enjoy Allen's "DUGOUT" series.

This is not so much a criticism as an observation. In the end, Allen's multiple shows accomplish what they should: a warm encounter with an interesting guy's personal history, strange enough to intrigue yet so grounded in tiny particulars of time and space as to feel very real.