

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

TERRY ALLEN

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View of "Terry Allen: The Exact Moment It Happens in the West," 2019, L.A. Louver, Los Angeles.

Although Terry Allen attended the Chouinard Art Institute during the heyday of left-coast Conceptualism, his fame arose from the 1975 song cycle Juarez, a landmark album of outlaw

country. Allen's latest record, *Just Like Moby Dick*, is due in December, and a cassette tape of rarities, *Cowboy and the Stranger*, has been released on the occasion of his retrospective at L.A. Louver, on view through September 28. The show skirts classification, combining fifty years of drawings, paintings, audio works, and sculptures, all with interlocking themes. In the three-channel *MemWars*, 2016, Allen and his wife, the actress Jo Harvey, share the stories behind his art and music: Allen bends into his keyboard, singing toward a green-screen landscape of arabesques and vortices, lightning-torn highways, and waves of grain . . .

I GREW UP IN WEST TEXAS. When you're raised with that kind of endless horizon, you have a tendency to look through what's right in front of you, to go straight to that edge. But I don't know how much bullshit that is, either. It was a very conservative atmosphere and I couldn't wait to get out.

Working in Los Angeles right after I'd gotten out of school, there was a lot of weird paranoia that was going on between the city and New York. LA was making its first strides with gallery shows and artists and whatever. They were getting a lot of attention. There was LA paranoia about New York and New York weirdness about LA. That's what the song "Truckload of Art" is about, on *Lubbock (on everything)*, 1979. And then there was, you know, always some wreck on the highway. I wrote a song on that same record called "The Great Joe Bob" about a football player, some kind of high-school sports hero, who robbed a liquor store. So many people ask me who that person was. I have a drawer full of different clippings. It's an iconic American story. And "Truckload of Art" is like that too. Driving on the highway and seeing stuff burning. Very artistic. What an artistic fire.

Have the politics of country music changed? I don't know. My tendency is to say, "Which country are you talking about?" I know a lot of people called "country musicians" that are mad-dog liberals, like my friend Steve Earle. Others of them are, you know, redneck deluxe. But there is something in that genre of music that is embedded in you from birth. Once you start dealing with real people, all the stereotype stuff falls apart. We're not that simple.

"Youth in Asia," 1982–92, dealt with the aftermath of the Vietnam War and stories of people who went through that very intense time. Everything gets filtered through Vietnam, and then twenty years or ten years later it's getting filtered through something else. That's what sparked the piece *Sneaker*, 1991. It's straight out of a newspaper. Some guy with PTSD made his family

not wear sneakers because their squeak reminded him of his guard's sneakers when he was a POW. Later, when he died, his wife tried to get him buried in a military cemetery and found out he'd never even been in the war. He had completely usurped it, and everybody believed him. That's why it's called *Sneaker*. There's your right shoe and there's your wrong one.

My folks told incredible stories. My mother was a professional piano player. My dad was a professional ball player. I did a series of drawings, sculptures, theater pieces, and a radio play based on their stories that I titled "Dugout," 1993–2004. Then I got interested in my own stories, from when I was a kid in the '50s, stuff like the first rock 'n' roll killers who terrorized the Midwest down into West Texas, Charlie Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate—and a kid with thalidomide eyes. Thalidomide was a birth control pill they gave women in the early '50s that didn't work, and in fact caused horrendous birth defects. There was a kid in grade school born with no eyes, not even eye sockets. He was a great kid. Really funny. We drew eyes on him. We all laughed, including him, who had no concept of eyes. He disappeared, then later in junior high, showed up again and they'd broken into his face and tried to build eyes in it, in some effort to make him "normal." And he looked like a monster. That always had an impact on me.

Lately, I've been interested in Italian Futurist plays called *sintesi*, really short little "stab dramas." I've been working on this body of stories and songs and little theater pieces called "MemWars," 2016–19. "MemWars" is not really a retrospective, just thinking about where songs come from. Not that you ever really know. I mean, I don't think of anything as a lockdown. You make a voice for whatever idea you have—a visual voice, audio voice, or whatever—and you try to hold true to that voice. *No, it's not mine. It's the voice of the work.*

— *As told to Travis Diehl*

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