

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Review: The L.A. art exhibition that will have you laughing, gasping and crying



By DAVID PAGEL JULY 16, 2019

If you see only one exhibition this year, my vote is for Terry Allen’s “The Exact Moment It Happens in the West: Stories, Pictures and Songs from the ’60s ’til Now.” The 50-year survey of drawings and songs by the artist at L.A. Louver gallery in Venice is so jampacked with love, suffering and resilience that there’s a good chance you’ll be moved to tears.

You may also laugh, gasp and marvel at the humanity of Allen’s artistry, which is flat-out inspiring.

At a time when narcissistic self-regard seems to be a lot of people’s default setting, it’s refreshing to see Allen’s exhibition. Filling two galleries downstairs and two upstairs, the sharply focused show consists of more than 100 works on paper (in ink, graphite and gouache, along with pastel, press type and found objects), a smattering of sculptures (in bronze, neon and taxidermy) and more than 18 hours of songs, performances and radio plays (some in collaboration with Jo Harvey Allen — playwright, film director and Allen’s wife of 57 years).

“The Exact Moment It Happens in the West” is a self-portrait. It’s all about Allen’s insights and experiences, his dreams and regrets, his memories and frustrations. But, like anyone mature enough to know that no man is an island, Allen paints a picture of himself by way of the relationships that have shaped him.

His parents figure prominently, as do his friends and classmates, co-conspirators and the authorities with whom he clashed. The same goes for place and time: Lubbock, Texas, where he grew up in the ’50s, and L.A. in the ’60s, where he moved with Jo Harvey to make his way in the world. Whether in the studio or on the road, Allen reveals his keen interest in — and affection for — the nitty-gritty details of everyday life, those quotidian instants that might seem meaningless but might also blow your mind with the depth and resonance of their beauty.

Allen’s works have been installed chronologically, in 16 sections. All but a few include headphones so you can listen to the music he was making at the time he was working on his drawings, assemblages and commissioned installations.



It's a great way to look at his art. A soundtrack, and not just a wall label or didactic panel, makes more room for poetry, for freewheeling leaps of the imagination and for stream-of-consciousness associations, not to mention enjoyment and revelation. Accompanied by the audio components, Allen's visuals become open-ended storyboards for movies that unfold in the mind's eye.

On their own, his drawings are knockouts: intimate and accessible, as user-friendly as cartoons and as sophisticated as the most refined Conceptual art.

Words and images collide and cross-pollinate. Figures and scribbles commingle. Decisive gestures express a great range of emotions, and abstract expanses hum with ambiguity. Current events enter many pictures, as do touchstones of various strands of American identity, including baseball, honky tonks, rodeos, Vietnam, the southern border and the Western landscape. Superman, Mickey Mouse and Homer Simpson make cameos, along with Homer (of "Iliad" and "Odyssey" fame) and Antonin Artaud.

Throughout it all, you see — and feel — that Allen has approached his life as an unscripted adventure, a journey of self-discovery whose epiphanies are as mysterious as life in the big city. His exhibition shares that generously with every visitor.

*L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., (310) 822-4955, through Sept. 28. [www.lalouver.com](http://www.lalouver.com)*

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