

Southern California

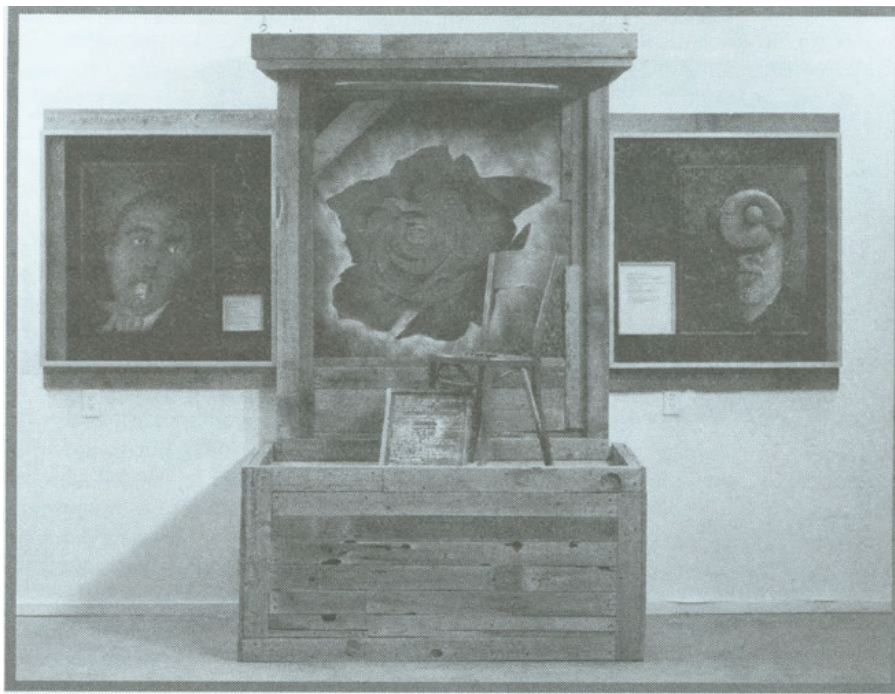
Terry Allen at LA Louver

Terry Allen is a superstore of cultural identity. Over the past few decades, his output has included music, performance, theater, painting and drawings, sculpture, installation and more purely conceptual undertakings. The *Dugout* project, of which phase one was installed at LA Louver Gallery, represents a sort of culmination of these strains of inquiry, incorporating not only two- and three-dimensional works, but also a soundtrack recorded live expressly for the purpose. Built as a series of numbered vignettes called "stages," each area of *Dugout I* is a discrete proscenium flanked by large, semi-attached paintings and adorned with found and sculptural objects. A network of connective tissue runs between all these stage areas, in the form of dozens of framed drawings along the gallery perimeter. The alternation of dense passages of text with more sparse or purely symbolic imagery in these

form of dozens of framed drawings along the gallery perimeter. The alternation of dense passages of text with more sparse or purely symbolic imagery in these works on paper is supportive of the overall narrative experience of the exhibition. Together with the soundtrack, whose libretto reflects the written components of the installations as well as their physical content, the work's presence is overwhelmingly one of story.

The subject of this story is not particularly the artist himself, despite its autobiographical quality. Rather, it is memory; more specifically, the processes on which one relies when constructing one's own sense of self. The past is inconsistent when recalled, more so the pasts of others, being further filtered through time and shifting and evolving through generations of retelling. For Allen, this unavoidable process is to be embraced and scrutinized every bit as thoroughly as the content of history itself. Put another way, what happened is, in the context of art especially, not ultimately as important as the happening's meaning. And sometimes there are truths that are more true than the truth.

Stage 4: House On Fire is the most powerful example of the tenuous relationship between being and memory. Allen's father was a professional baseball player and his mother a piano player.



Terry Allen, *Blue Rose*, 2000-2001, mixed-media assemblage, 89" x 126" x 34-1/4", at LA Louver Gallery, Venice.

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Elsewhere in the kaleidoscopic narrative we have learned that they both strongly identified themselves with these professions; and we have also learned that the mother kept a collection of painted porcelain plates with birds on them. Out of the raw planks of such mundane details of American life, Allen has built literal and figurative platforms to contain their larger meaning. The piece is charred, its precious artifacts sooty and forlorn. A small-scale piano balances against a porch swing, a single baseball suspended in space alongside homey wooden furniture depopulated but for taxidermy birds roosting there. The stage is set for the tale of how the family house burned down exactly on the first anniversary of his father's funeral, and for the story of what did and did not survive that cataclysm, itself a symbol of great pathos and change. But all of this biographical detail is not concerned with itself. In fact, it revels in its own ambiguity, instigating not a strong desire to know more about Allen, but rather an unsettling inward-looking curiosity.

Standing before a work of great visual and emotional power such as *Stage 2: Blue Rose*, one is simultaneously moved by the formal beauty and technical achievement of the gouaches. They are more figurative and traditionally composed than the ink on paper text pieces, which have after all a different function in the story, and in the context of so much splintered wood, charred treasures, dusty chalkboards and neon highlights, the unapologetic beauty of these drawings is not only moving, but also unexpected. However, it is useful to appreci-



Terry Allen, *House on Fire*, 2002, mixed-media assemblage, 121" x 121" x 184", at LA Louver Gallery, Venice.

ate Allen's facility with several styles of visual representation as an outgrowth of his larger inter-media practice. Different surface qualities, materials, visual cues, cultural references, an archetypal human interactions such as sitting with a dying man or playing basketball in the driveway, access different parts of the human psyche. Thus, he will switch between text and image, between sculpture and theater, between music and installation, in whatever measure is called for by the idea at hand. All the more so if

the idea is as expansive and nuanced as this one is—what makes us who we are, and how do we know?

—Shana Nys Dambrot

Terry Allen: Dugout I closed April 10 at LA Louver, Venice.

Shana Nys Dambrot is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.