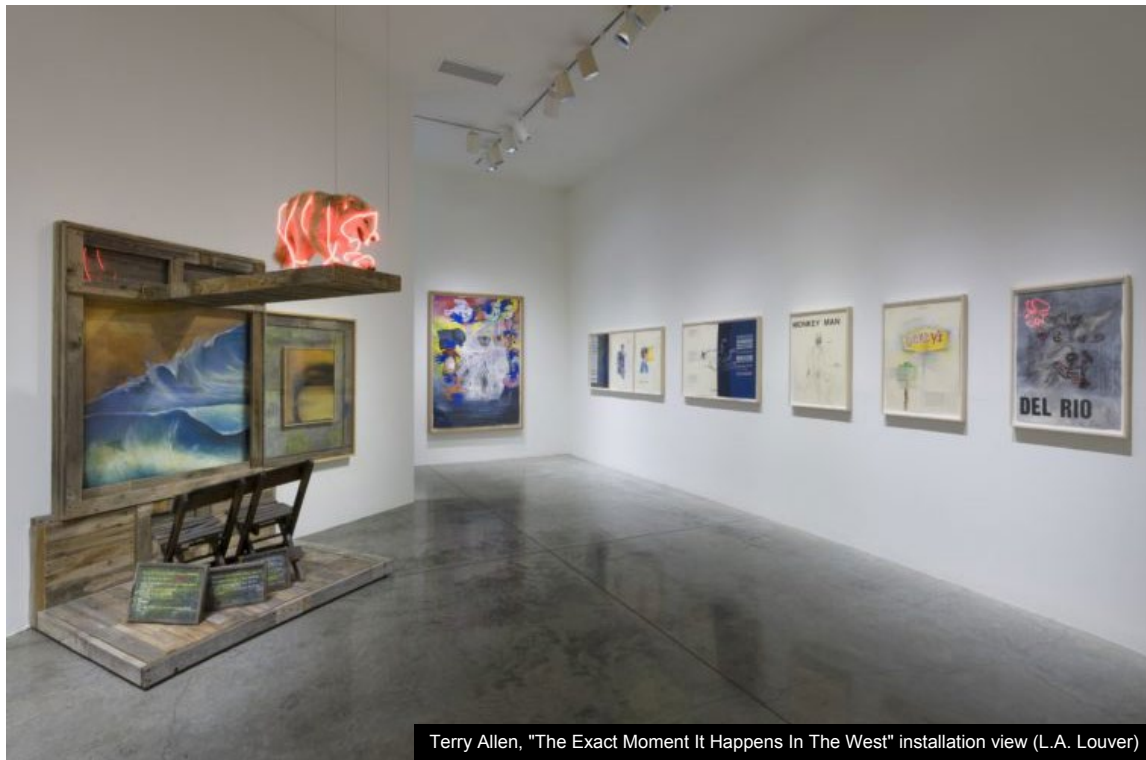


LA WEEKLY



TERRY ALLEN: LAUGHING THROUGH THE SAD SONGS

SHANA NYS DAMBROT JULY 25, 2019

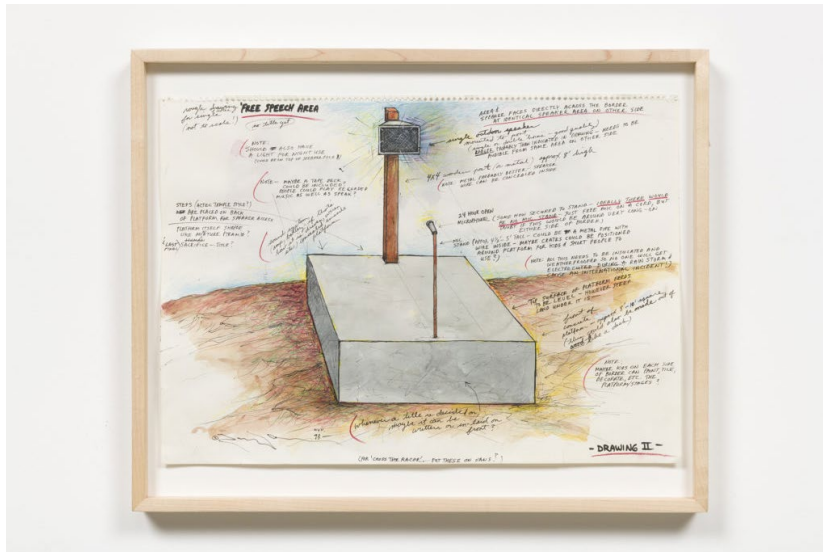
On a recent night at Frogtown bar and indie band emporium Zebulon, visual, theater, and country music artist Terry Allen, a conceptual cowboy folk hero to many, performed a set of new songs and an array of beloved classics. The sold-out crowd included A-list art word figures toe-tapping along with die-hard fans of the melodious pun-laden twang and macabre cheekiness unfolding on stage. That's because Allen's fan base among gallery and museum audiences is at least as fervent in their devotion as those of the keyboard, fiddle and lilting ballads of misbehavior performed.

This devotion is richly rewarded at L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice, whose galleries on both floors and the outdoor project space are currently devoted to a survey of Allen's works on paper across 50 years of his interdisciplinary practice. Occasioned by the reissuing of gems from Allen's albums catalog, as well as the landmark acquisition of his and his wife and partner Jo Harvey Allen's entire studio archives by Texas Tech University, the installation is organized chronologically and grouped according to the music and spoken word projects that correspond along the timeline. In fact, several listening stations throughout the galleries play the music itself and other augmented sound works in direct contemplation of the drawings.



Terry Allen, "The Exact Moment It Happens In The West" installation view (L.A. Louver)

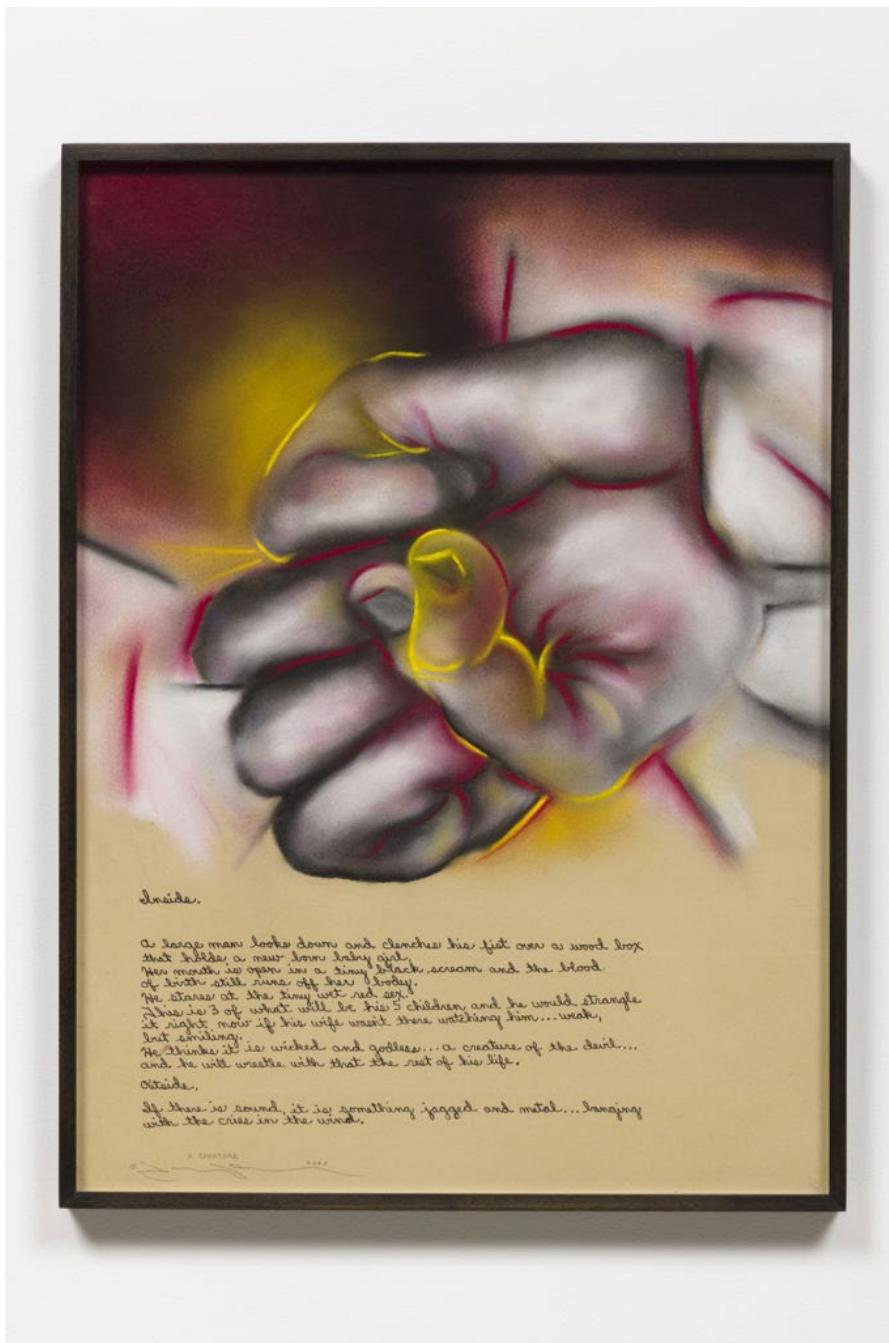
Like any proper greatest hits collection, *The Exact Moment It Happens in the West* not only highlights a thoughtful selection of exceptional works from all the years, but also both new and never-before exhibited pieces — both of which constitute some of the best work in an already majestic exhibition. In the upstairs gallery, a portfolio of drawings from 2019 is based on the motif of Greek poet Homer versus modern-day sage Homer Simpson. Nearby, studies for "Free Speech Areas" along with "Cross the Razor" and "Reflections/Mirror/Espejo" from 1993-94 illustrate a theatrical platform complete with translators and amplifiers. "Folks would communicate, read, or even play duets from across the border. They [the government] didn't like it being stationary, they were afraid it would become permanent I guess! So I put it all on wheels."



Terry Allen, "Study for Free Speech Areas Drawing II" 1993, gouache, pen and ink, color pencil on paper (LA Louver)

Allen is of course all too aware of the enduring relevance of a project like that, one that attempts to inject creativity and humanity into a fraught situation at our southern border. As a Texan, it's part of the fabric of his daily life. As an American, it's central to our shared civic discourse. As a place to make art and a set of topics to make art about, well, it's "bittersweet" for Allen to think about how the work remains relevant in this new, unlooked-for context of the present day. This is true of other series in which Allen has previously addressed the impact of wartime or governmental overreach, from Vietnam to Desert Storm. Asked if he thinks of his work as political he simply says, "Well, isn't everything political?"

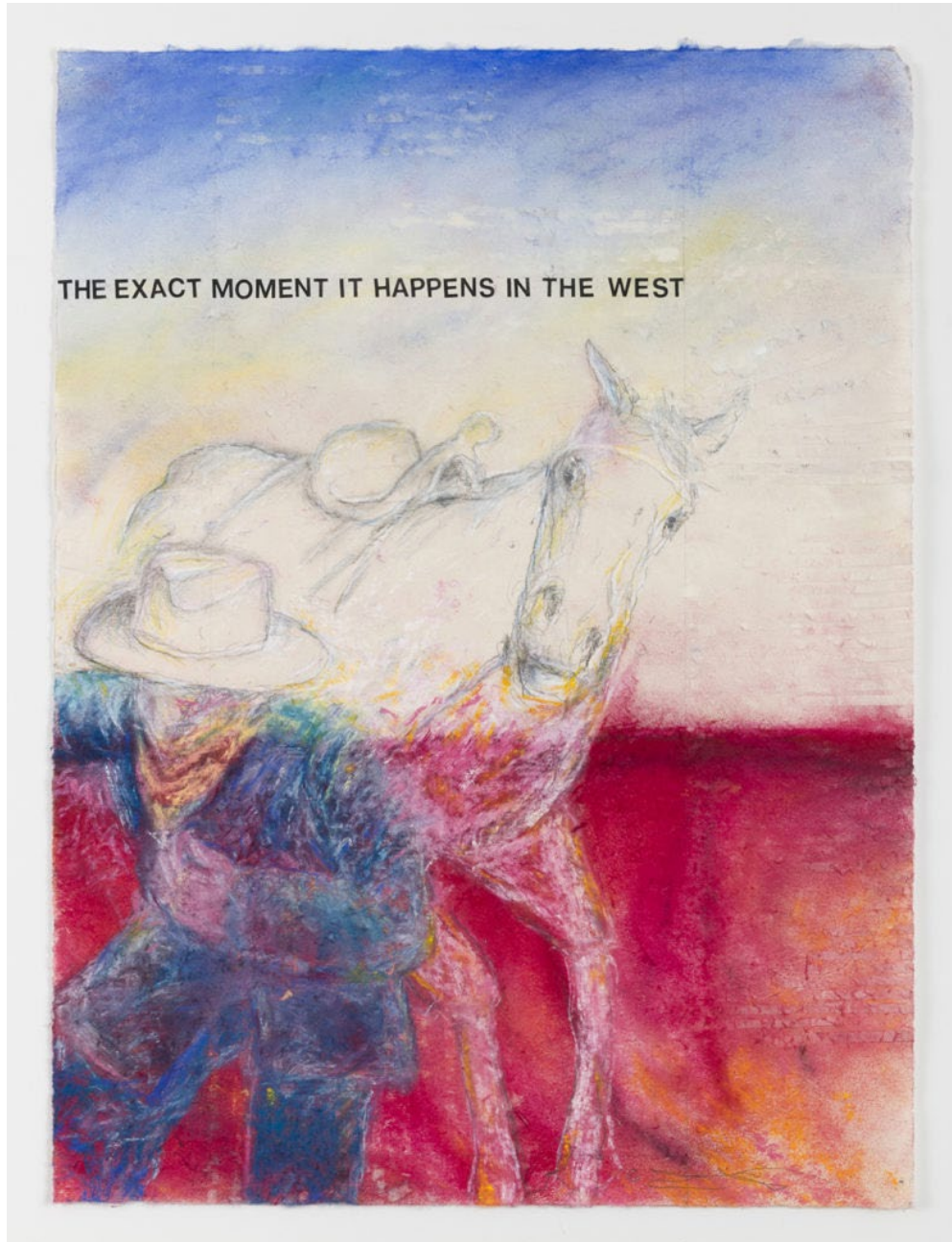
The drawings in "The Sonny Boy Chronicles" in particular tell a personal story, but one that touches on broader social and cultural issues. "Sonny, he lived in a trailer outside of Amarillo," Allen tells me. He had been a sailor. "When he was in the trailer, he had an epic yearning to get back to the sea, and then when he was at sea, he would have his epic yearning to get back to his trailer." The series was originally put together to be part of the "Ghost Ship" body of work, but Allen says that ultimately it just did not work. But every anthology needs an unreleased track, and that's what this, a powerful and intimate series of 14 mixed media works on paper with written texts, made in 1998 and shown for the first time this month.



Terry Allen *A Creature* ("Dugout" Set I, #5), 2000, pastel & ink on paper (LA Louver)

From these and other early drawings such as those accompanying the 1971 album *Juarez* that kicks off the show, through the "Dugout" suite from 2000 which touched on his childhood and his relationship with his father, and much more besides, we clearly see not only Allen's taste for eccentric, saturated colors, clean strong contour lines, and seductive, psychedelic, witty and occasionally ghastly figures. We also trace the evolution of the role of both penned and typewritten words in his drawings — always his and Jo Harvey's own original lyrics, poems, dialogues and short stories.

And over the intervening years, that personal allegorical dynamic proliferated and deepened. The "MemWars" suite from 2018-19, for example, were made at the same time as his new recordings. The resonance between these spheres of activity, and why Allen consistently describes all his work as part of a single, multi-faceted whole, becomes more apparent comparing the works in the gallery to the performances, not least because of its gift for evocative storytelling and delight in throwing torch of humor into the darkest of corners.



Terry Allen, The Exact Moment (MemWars), 2018-2019, mixed media on paper (LA Louver)

In works for “MemWars” Allen recounts with vivid, fantastical yet deadpan prose a few episodes from his life, from the time a local woman was rumored to glow after being hit by lightning, to the time he ran into the same waitress at a local Denny’s and later at a circus, and the outlaw cowboy scenario in the show’s eponymous work. Our two-hour stroll through the show occasioned a treasure trove of such sparkling insights as these, anecdotes, surprises, memories, jokes and low-key epiphanies. It’s easy to imagine the Allens in their studio, deep-diving into 50 years of life and art, discovering and recalling and it taking absolutely forever. “It’s like I’ve been kind of crawling down Memory Lane,” Allen says, pausing in front of one particularly bizarre and charming drawing, “Vision Behind Glass (Billingsgate)” from 1993.



Terry Allen, *Vision Behind Glass (Billingsgate)*, 1983, mixed media on paper (LA Louver)

"I was driving around in Billingsgate," says Allen. He's already laughing. "I saw a dead snake in the middle of the road and I pulled over. I was kind of looking at it and I went over to the side, and there was a woman watering her yard. And I'm not kidding she had this kind of huge big fuzzy pink robe and garden shears. She saw me look at her and she ran in the house like she was terrified. When I checked again she was at the window looking through, surrounded [by] hundreds of little ceramic dogs."

Turning back to the drawing, what had seemed like a random surrealist's sketch pad revealed itself as a literal experience of real-life camp. "I thought, oh my god. That woman deserves a song," says Allen. And so it goes, a song inspired by a truck with a blood-bank logo, a visual poem for a woman struck by lightning, or a duet performed across razor wire. Does he think strange things happen to him more so than to other people? "I think it does happen with everybody," he says. "But not everybody notices."

"The Exact Moment" is on view through Sept. 28 at [L.A. Louver](#), 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice.

Terry and Jo Harvey Allen appear in song and conversation with curator Aram Moshayedi at the [Hammer Museum](#) on August 7.

A [screening of the documentary](#) "Terry Allen: Everything For All Reasons" takes place at the gallery on July 31.



Terry Allen, Snap Voidville, 2004, mixed media installation, detail (Courtesy L.A. Louver)