

Artillery Magazine
Gallery Rounds
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Terry Allen
The Exact Moment it Happens in the West
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L.A. Louver

By Jody Zellen



Terry Allen rocks. In two sold out concerts at the Frogtown club Zebulon, presented in conjunction with his exhibition, “The Exact Moment it Happens in the West,” Allen and his Panhandle Mystery Band had audiences cheering and dancing as they sang along to his raspy-voiced country western ballads. In his music, as well as in his paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations, Terry Allen is first and foremost a storyteller.

Installed chronologically and filling both floors of the gallery, “The Exact Moment it Happens in the West” is a visual trajectory through Allen’s life and work from 1960 to the present. Divided into sixteen sections, many of which are accompanied by a musical complement that can be heard via provided headphones, the exhibition leads viewers on an intimate journey that reveals the artist’s interests and particular way of looking at the world: his materials and styles of working, as well as his continued commitment to social and political causes including border issues and the Vietnam War. Each series in the exhibition is well represented with numerous pieces as well as music and/or explanatory text.

Allen has a facile hand and is an accomplished draftsman. His layered works—whether two or three dimensional—intermingle text and image to create a narrative. The earlier pieces are quirky assemblages that often combine illustration, texts, diagrams and drawing. In *Sneaker* (1991), for example, from Allen’s “Youth in Asia” series, he uses a news story that describes a man’s hatred of the sound of sneakers on the floor because it reminds him of the sound the guard’s shoes when he was a POW during the war in Vietnam; this framework becomes his point of departure. In this assemblage, the text is yellow and stamped into lead. It is presented alongside collaged elements, a framed drawing of an airplane and two actual dress shoes. Allen explains that “Youth in Asia” is about the “consequences of betrayal—about a culture that betrays its children.”

Within the exhibition are songs, remembrances, fragments of dialogue, sculptures and documentation of public art projects, as well as a fascinating three channel video installation, *MemWars* (2016) and related recent drawings (2018-2019) in which Allen and his wife Jo Harvey Allen discuss the origins and meaning of many of his songs. Allen draws from popular culture, the news media as well as his own experience to create thoughtful and complex works that touch on the aftermath of war, personal struggles and demons and the changes to urban and natural landscape. Through the presentation of over 100 works, viewers are taken on a conceptual as well as visual journey through the cutting, engaging and inventive world of Terry Allen.

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