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ART REVIEW : Vietnam Comes Home : Terry Allen's 'Youth in Asia' Confronts Veterans' Battle

July 17, 1993 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | TIMES ART CRITIC

NEWPORT BEACH — Throughout the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, "Terry Allen: Youth in Asia," a scattering of quotations from philosophers, poets and others creates a fleeting frame of reference for understanding a substantial body of work on which the Santa Fe-based artist labored from 1983 to 1991. The very last quote, penned by Allen himself, provides an essential key:

"The number of suicides by Vietnam veterans is now double the number of names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall," Allen writes. "Where's the memorial to that?"

"Youth in Asia" turns out to be it. A decade after the last American troops left Vietnam, Allen began to commemorate the tortuous experience of some of those who came back. The mercy-killing pun of the title is a bittersweet remembrance.

Allen's is a flawed and sometimes impenetrable monument, despite occasional flashes of brilliance and moving passages of considerable power. Nonetheless, this work deserves regard as one of the few significant attempts by an artist to come to terms with the aftermath of an indescribably complex trauma, whose impact on the national psyche remains, 20 years later, clouded by denial and marred by recrimination.

The show, organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, has been slightly abridged for its current presentation at the Newport Harbor Art Museum. About a dozen works were trimmed in order to accommodate Newport's smaller space. With one exception, the rather crowded feel of the galleries paradoxically enhances the sense of confinement and claustrophobia that is crucial to Allen's art.

The exception is the juxtaposition in adjacent galleries of two of the show's three installations. Allen, who is an accomplished musician, employs audio components in these works. But the delicate words and music that float up from 1988's "Big Witness"—a figure reclining inside a huge sofa placed inside a schematic house—can be inaudible when the raucous period music of Creedence Clearwater, the Doors and Townes Van Zandt intermittently animates the bleak, roadside bar called "China Night" (1985), in the next gallery.

"China Night," which is in the collection of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art, is the show's masterwork. Like the structure of "Big Witness," things nest inside other things: A grim, run-down bar in New Mexico, sporting a broken neon sign and a tattered American flag as a window curtain, stands isolated and unable to be entered inside a fenced patch of litter-strewn desert.

The surrounding gallery, painted midnight black and sporting two neon aphorisms, puts the spectator inside a peripheral zone of the installation, but outside the fenced-off bit of landscape that is its heart. Perusing the scattered beer bottles, cigarette butts and trash, and lured by the music, your mind begins to imagine a desperate mix of playfulness and horror inside the bar.

Around back, a confirming clue will be found. A small diorama of a domestic living room is literally turned upside down, chairs and tables hanging like stalactites from the ceiling; below, a tableau of Snow White confronting the Seven Dwarfs presents an all-American face-off between the eternally virginal and the emotionally stunted.

Actual knowledge of the hidden barroom is, however, unavailable. The walled-off interior becomes a metaphoric image for the finally impenetrable mystery of another human mind or heart.

Allen's environments can make lonely isolation shockingly palpable. The show's other high point is a radically stripped-down, but not dissimilar, installation called "Tables and Angels" (1987). Along one side of a scruffy corridor, dimly lit by red and blue bulbs, a sequence of chambers is part roadside diner, part prison block. Periodically, the loud, incessant, slow-motion sound of helicopter blades chopping the air is punctuated by woozy strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Socially trenchant and morally passionate, Allen's installations are informed by the precedent of Edward Kienholz's assemblage tableaux from the 1960s. Like Kienholz, Allen relies on a literary form, but his theatricality is smartly translated into a kind of soundtrack for the spectator's experience. The result is a compelling form of installation with a pronounced cinematic quality.

"Torso Hell" (1986), the strongest wall-piece in the show, also claims that quality. A kind of storyboard for a post-Vietnam horror movie, the triptych's central panel features the outline of a script push-pinned to a bulletin-board, together with indistinct photographs of body parts. The panel is flanked by woozily painted portraits of Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse, cuddly icons of irascibility and sweetness, here revealed in all their frothy weirdness.

The literary quality of most of Allen's assemblages is problematic, though, because unlike "Torso Hell," they don't directly declare themselves as working studies for something else. I don't mean to suggest you'll be seeing a movie-version of "Torso Hell" at your local cineplex anytime soon, but, a vivid film does unspool in your imagination as you read the text. That layer of engagement doesn't happen elsewhere.

Allen seems to have had an inkling of the problem early on--the first works in the series are awash in printed text--and the bare bones of attempted formal solutions emerge right away. He began to stamp abbreviated texts right into the soft, dense, lead-covered surfaces of the works, in an apparent effort to make

the writing corporeal.

Formats also began to change. Rudimentary allusions to altars and altarpiece triptychs soon came to dominate the forms of both free-standing and wall-bound works. There's something medieval about them, as if the museum that houses them was meant to be identified as a modern shrine.

The triptychs also metamorphosed into an odd shape, in which a large, horizontal panel in the center is flanked on each side by small, vertical panels. The overall shape describes the head of a Hopi kachina, representation of a beneficent spirit or of an ancestor. Eccentrically evoked is an ancient link between Asia and the American Southwest, which is pointedly described in a 1984 work called "Bearing Strait at the Club Cafe," and elusively present in the broken neon sign of "China Night." There, the letters "ka" have dimmed, leaving only "china" behind.

Allen's effort to absorb the literary within his assemblages doesn't really work, though. It's best exploited in the installations, with their slippery evocations of haunted corners of the mind.

Newport is a perfect venue for this ambitious exhibition. There's something appropriate about a setting where John Wayne once moored a mothballed military vessel off-shore as a private yacht, and where freeway exit signs a few miles north now direct travelers to Little Saigon, home of the densest population of Vietnamese-Americans in the nation.

The museum, once the most adventurous and important small museum of its kind in the country, has also been sadly becalmed and bereft in its programming in recent years. "Terry Allen: Youth in Asia" happily recalls its glory days.

** Newport Harbor Art Museum, 850 San Clemente Dr., Newport Beach, (714-759-1122), through Sept. 12. Closed Mondays.*