

# THE COLLECTOR

PETER MACHEN speaks to U.S.-based former Durban artist Siemon Allen about his three large-scale exhibitions currently on show at the Bank Gallery and the Durban Art Gallery.

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SIEMON Allen is more than a little obsessive. The word might have negative connotations for some, but it's an essential element of being a collector and an archiver. Allen, who is principally an artist, has managed to turn a fetish for collecting into vast artistic projects.

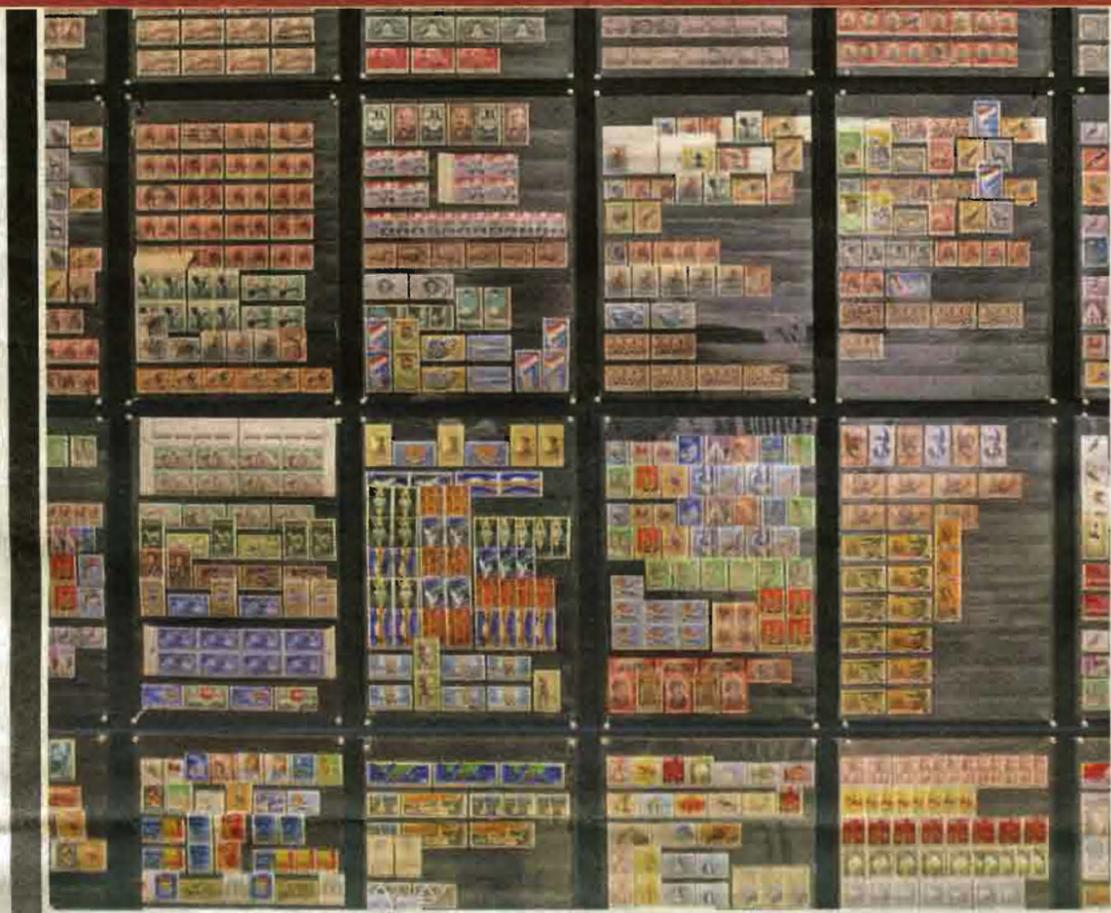
A graduate of Durban's DUT, he has been living in the United States for the last 13 years and has, for the last eight years, been exploring the image of South Africa through collections of stamps, newspapers and records.

Operating from his external vantage point, Allen has been systematically accumulating these mass-produced objects, which he meticulously catalogues and displays in large installations that take up entire gallery spaces but that could also be compressed into a few cardboard boxes.

Allen is in Durban to show three of his collection projects — “Stamps”, “Newspapers” and “Records” — and his gently insistent integrity is reflected in these large bodies of work, which have already been exhibited widely in the U.S. in such prestigious spaces as the Whitney Museum. This is the first time that the three projects, which form part of a larger project called “Imaging South Africa”, have been brought together and shown in South Africa.

And although Allen has been back to the country in recent years, this return, together with the three exhibitions, feels like a homecoming. The fact that “Records” is currently installed in Florida Road's Bank Gallery has a particular resonance as Allen lived in the building next door when he was a child and worked in the gallery building when it was still a bank that his mother managed. (The other two elements of “Imaging South Africa” are on show at the Durban Art Gallery.)

The three exhibitions, both individually and collectively, verge on the monolithic. They also, should



you be so inclined, pose heavily layered questions about what art is and isn't. This ever present albatross weighs heavily on our conversation, and while there's a level at which Allen really doesn't care whether it's art or not — because he's doing what he wants to do and he's exhibiting the results in a gallery — it is at the same time a concern that preoccupies him during the course of conversation. But the preoccupation is pedantic rather

than central, and far more important is the political nature of the work.

“Newspapers” is obviously so, cataloguing mentions of South Africa in five American newspapers over the course of eight years.

“Stamps” — which includes stamps from a century ago to the present — catalogues the way in which a country presents itself to the world in a thumbnail formalism.

“Records” includes the covers of

all the vinyl records and CDs that Miriam Makeba produced in her lifetime; Makeba is herself a potent political figure.

Allen's collections function on many different layers, but there are two discreet levels to the work. The first is the act of collecting or archiving.

The other is in the presentation of the work, in which the collections are shaped into large-scale objects that abstract through aggregation

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into a high modernism, calling to mind specifically the work of Mondrian, but also all of the arguments around modernism and its impact on the 20th century. The rows of stamps might reduce to blocks of modernist colour when you step back from them, but they also echo the infinite repetition of the office cubicle and the structure of skyscraper cities built out of glass and metal.

But are these modernist structures that house the works little more than a clever trick to elevate collections or archives to the status of art? I ask Allen the question as a devil's advocate, but he has his own devil sitting on his shoulder, and he never answers the question concretely, turning it into a discussion that meanders through the rest of our conversation. And again the question is perhaps more interesting than it is important.

There is something else, though, that is the passion behind obsession. It's something that oddly enough didn't come up in the course of our conversation — which lasted hours beyond my 30-minute dictaphone tape and included a quick dinner at Spiga D'oro — but that tinged every word spoken. And it's true that there is something that transcends materialism in the highly material world of the collector who doesn't collect for financial value (although many collectors lie to themselves by telling themselves that it's about value). Which is not to say that it's any kind of spiritual pursuit, but there is the sense with many collectors that they are engaging in a higher pursuit. And it's something that feels palpably true with Allen and his work, both of which are imbued with huge, quiet, humble passion, both rational and irrational.

•Siemon Allen's 'Stamps', 'Newspaper' and 'Records' runs until April 26 at the Durban Art Gallery and the Bank Gallery.