



Covers, Allen's installation of record covers, was on show at Durban's Bank Gallery in 2009

The record collector

US-based Siemon Allen, well known for the way he draws unseen meanings out of his collections of ordinary objects, tells **Sean O'Toole** how it all started in a Durban flat

In 1975, Tom Wolfe caused a stir (picture a ripple in a martini glass) when he published his novella-length essay, *The Painted Word*. A funny, teasing, at times snarky outsider's view of the contemporary art world, it included the famous jibe that the "art village" constituted no more than 3 000 people, of whom about 300 lived outside the New York metropolitan area.

In certain respects, little has changed since 1975. Today's art world is merely a diffuse set of interconnected villages, with New York the capital. Consider the following sequence of events involving Siemon Allen, the Durban-born, US-based artist whose work will be shown at the Joburg Art Fair courtesy of the Gordon Schachat Collection.

In December last year, I visited Berlin's Deutsche Guggenheim to see a new suite of drawings by the Ethiopian-American artist Julie Mehretu. Flipping through a pile of books dedicated to this prolific New Yorker, I came across an essay Allen contributed to a 2007 exhibition of her work. Allen's explanation of how he came to write for Mehretu's Detroit Institute of Arts catalogue connects several strands in his impressive biography.

"We met when we were roommates during a six-week residency in Chicago in 1999," says Allen, who completed his master's

degree that same year at Durban University of Technology (DUT; it was then called Technikon Natal). Convened by the prestigious School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the residency brought together a number of future art stars, among them Mehretu and South African artist Moshekwa Langa, now based in Amsterdam. The residency included an exhibition component, in which Allen showed a fragmented, scaled cardboard model of his parents' home in South Africa.

The essay on Mehretu that followed eight years later had nothing to do with this early apprenticeship in the international art industry. In fact, the request arose totally independently of Mehretu herself, and was in large part prompted by a book project Allen completed in 1999. The subject of that book was an informal, alternative exhibition space he co-founded with three friends in a flat across the road from DUT in the early 1990s, which is remembered simply as the FLAT Gallery. Allen's obituary for this temporary autonomous zone, which flared for a brief two years until the flat was destroyed in January 1995, originally manifested itself as a handmade book. Set against the backdrop of South Africa's birth as a democracy, the book described a secret history of experimentation, collaboration and pranksterism in Durban.

The book's contents intrigued Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, two heavy-hitting international curators based in the US, who republished Allen's essay in the catalogue for *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, a landmark exhibition on African conceptualism presented as part of the 2001 Venice Biennale. It was this latter, eccentric catalogue, designed by Dutch book maker Irma Boom, that introduced Allen and his conceptually applied thinking to the Detroit curators.

New York, Detroit, Chicago, Venice, Durban. The arc of Allen's career straddles a diverse network of places and people. With the FLAT Gallery still the subject of much interest and scrutiny, I ask Allen what value he attaches to having studied in Durban when he did.

"My experiences at Technikon Natal were some of my best and most fruitful, and provided a solid foundation for my later work," he enthusiastically responds. "The faculty and student community, and the subsequent creative energy at the institution at that time were remarkable. Jeremy Wafer and Andries Botha taught in the sculpture department; Virginia MacKenny and Lola Frost taught theory and art history; and Clive van den Berg was my drawing instructor." The energy and momentum of these highly awarded artists (at the time) had a definite trickle-

OUT OF THE ORDINARY



Photography courtesy of Siemon Allen

down effect, he says, inspiring students. "That said, the most important part of my experience at Technikon was the exchange I enjoyed with my peer group, my fellow students, during and after my studies there," he says. "The first year after I graduated, a number of us, including Ledelle Moe, Thomas Barry and Niel Jonker, formed the FLAT Gallery."

Although it is frequently rather solemnly recalled in the debates about avant-garde practice in South Africa, this venue on Mansfield Road was, by all accounts, a space very often dedicated to silliness, fun and muckraking, what Ray Charles encapsulated as "the mess around".

One memorable intervention saw the FLAT play host to a "faux exhibition" of work by Kendell Geers. Many in the city, including the organisers of an official Geers exhibition, believed it to be, and endorsed it as, authentic. For his part, Allen exhibited his Hardy Boy books and an impressively large stamp collection.

Stamp, as the latter project has come to be known, offers a good entrée into Allen's practice, which is marked by his deep-seated

interest in a variety of vernacular archives and systematised forms of knowledge creation.

Described by Allen as "a kind of highly mobile visual propaganda", his stamp collection forms part of an evolving archive of objects (stamps, records, newspapers, trading cards, comic books) that he uses to rigorously analyse and relationally interpret latent attitudes to national identity and otherness. Along with his earlier *Newspapers* project from 2001-04, which collated and analysed a range of US news reports on South Africa, *Records* forms part of a larger collection project titled *Imaging South Africa*. The scope of this overarching project is best understood through a series of questions Allen posed in 2004: "How is the South African image projected, interpreted and received? What is represented or misrepresented? What exactly is the image of South Africa?"

To which I offer a rather oblique counter-question: "Are you a music fan?"

"I have been collecting records since high school, and think that I am drawn to both the music and what I would regard as the audio

carrier/object — the discs, the packaging," says Allen. "Some of my earliest memories of playing around with my records come from when I was about 15 or so. I would lay them all out in a series of grids across my bedroom floor, almost like an installation."

Still a committed record collector, Allen says it was while he was rummaging through second-hand stacks in thrift stores that he chanced on some records by Miriam Makeba.

"I was intrigued with how the liner notes often carried political, anti-apartheid messages," he explains. "I became interested in how her music and image operated in creating a broader awareness of apartheid for an international audience. The *Makeba!* project developed out of this interest, and I began a massive collection of her recordings in various formats specifically for that installation."

Allen showed his *Makeba!* collection at Durban's Bank Gallery last year, which in turn led to an invitation to exhibit 12 large-scale prints showing detailed enlargements of rare and damaged records from his massive collection of South African music (800 LP records, 500-odd seven-inch singles and at least 600 shellac 78 rpm discs).

"Ironically, most record collectors throw damaged records away, but to me they were the most appealing," Allen says of his current interest in old 78 rpm shellac discs. "I am building a searchable website of this record archive, which will include visual and historical material." Archives systematise experience after the fact. This prompts a curious question about music as raw experience and artistic epiphany. For someone like Geers, who played a minor role in the post-punk band Koos, music was the gateway to art. Was it the same for Allen?

"Absolutely, I have been interested in music and audio for much of my life. Some of my most important cultural experiences have been things like seeing Malombo at the Rainbow Restaurant in Pinetown in the early 1990s, or going to Jam & Sons and then Jam & Co jazz club in Durban to see artists such as Siphso Gumede."

Joburg Art Fair Stand: Booth P05. Allen's talk, titled Imaging South Africa — Records and other collection projects, will be held at the fair on March 27 as part of the Alfa Romeo Art Talks programme. www.siemonallen.org



Top, from left: Siemon Allen's work *Labels* (2009) on show at Durban's Bank Gallery; *Zon-o-phone* (2010); *Columbia* (2010). Far left: Allen's large prints at Bank Gallery, 2009. Left: Allen's exhibited collection of records featuring Miriam Makeba