

ART / Joanna Shaw-Eagle

Siemon Allen, who made the huge installation "Stamp Collection — Imaging South Africa" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art's Hemicycle Gallery, believes Americans stereotype his native land. "They think South Africa is just apartheid, the AIDS epidemic and diamonds," says Mr. Allen, 30. "I wanted to tackle the idea of imaging my homeland and presenting it in all its complexity."

To do this, the artist looked to the South African stamps he collected as a youngster. He already had exhibited, and sold, most of his collection in 1993 at an exhibit in Johannesburg.

Mr. Allen felt strongly that stamps could convey a complete, though veiled, image of South Africa — the government used stamps as subtle propaganda for years — and gathered about 5,000 dating from the colonial period to the present. The artist emphasizes the stamps' function on two levels, as art designs that give visual pleasure and as remembrances of the country's politics and history.

The challenge was melding this duality into the passion Mr. Allen clearly feels for South Africa. He has lived in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States for the past six years.

Another South African artist, William Kentridge, showed his animated films, charcoals, prints, film installations and videos of theater works this spring at the Smithsonian Institution's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Mr. Kentridge's presentation was fervid. He showed hungry workers marching across destroyed landscapes to claim more wages. He showed the greed and self-satisfaction of a businessman and his curling ticker tape. The inhumanity of whites against blacks was unambiguous.

Mr. Allen calls his work "cooler" and "ambiguous." The artist notes that he came a generation behind the "hotter" Mr. Kentridge, 46, and the "resistance" period of the 1970s and 1980s. "I and my peers feel we're showing more individual reactions," he says.

Mr. Allen mounted the stamps of "Imaging South Africa" on 40 connected panels that follow the curve of the Hemicycle's wall for 132 feet. The 10-foot-high semitransparent black panels support the frames that hold the stamps.

The artist includes tiny descriptive labels at the base of the frames. He plans to make a computer-generated catalog in larger type to make reading easier.

Two stamps — to the left and the right of the entrance — open and close the show. The exhibit begins with an image of King George V, who declared the new Union of South Africa on Nov. 4, 1910, in which four British dependencies became a self-governing country within the British Empire. The king issued the stamp on that

same date. It's a traditional design etched in deep indigo and printed in London. Great Britain printed and issued all South African stamps in Europe and London from 1918 to 1928.

The image adheres to the conservative design conventions of the time rather than the art Pablo Picasso and the cubists were creating in Paris. The stamp shows the 45-year-old king full face and framed by four shields, one in each corner, representing the provinces of the union: the Cape Colony, the Orange Free State, Natal and the Transvaal.

Ending the exhibition are the stamp and commemorative cover-envelope that mark the "25th Anniversary of the Soweto Uprising." Students set large parts of Soweto on fire on June 16, 1976, to protest government educational policies that required some classes in schools for blacks be taught in Afrikaans. The rioting set off disturbances in other parts of the country, and clashes with the police left 600 persons dead. Most of those who died were black.

Stamp designer Ntsie Lohloholo Moagi used the film footage of a terrified Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying a young boy in his arms, with a screaming girl running beside him. The news media distributed the film worldwide, and the image became the symbol of black students' struggle against the apartheid system.

Mr. Moagi decided to turn it into a symbol of peace and freedom by adding a dove and an olive branch. The commemorative cover, unheard of in King George's day, shows Tsietisi Mashinini, a prominent student activist at the time of the Soweto uprising.

Stamps of the colonial period continued the traditions of the King George V stamp. They show portraits of other British sovereigns and landscapes that confirm English territorial presence. Only three of the 174 stamps issued during the union period (1910 to 1961) show the native presence.

Designs and political messages change during the republic period (1961 to 1994). Images of H.F. Verwoerd, often referred to as the architect of apartheid, begin to appear.

Subjects are more varied and depict mining, sports, farming and religion. One stamp celebrates the heart transplants done by Dr. Christiaan Barnard.

South Africa also issued a stamp showing the Cullinan diamond, one of the two largest diamonds in the world, in 1980.

The country's stamps became more colorful and varied with more releases per year. Stamp design also changed with worldwide changes.

One stamp noting the "Anniversary of the



Exhibit stamps country's image

South African postage reveals past, culture of the nation



This stamp, issued June 16, 1999, commemorates the inauguration of Thabo Mbeki, the second president of the "new" South Africa. The 1938 stamp at top represents the colonial period when the British ruled the country.



Bert V. Goulet / The Washington Times

South African artist Siemon Allen says his installation "Stamp Collection Imaging South Africa" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art is intended to show his country in "all its complexity."

STAMPS

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Voortrekker Movement," commemorating the Afrikaans youth movement, appeared in 1981. Many of the young people in the movement became leaders of apartheid, meaning "apartness." The similarity to images of the Nazi youth movement is unmistakable.

Mr. Allen added a section on South African "homelands" stamps from Transkei, Ciskei, Venda and Bophuthatswana. They seem to depict idealized African states with images of native stick fighting, the making of traditional beer and the playing of musical instruments.

Stamps of "The New South Africa," dating from 1994 to the present, depict subjects such as the new African flag, former President Nelson Mandela and Indian nationalist leader Mohandas Gandhi, who spent time in South Africa. "Africa went wild" and issued lots of stamps, Mr. Allen says.

Images of Robben Island, where apartheid leaders imprisoned Mr. Mandela for 27 years, and Thabo Mbeki, the current president, became popular.

Content for stamps opened up, but the subjects of wildlife, railroads, ships and vintage cars dominated. The "big five" image — white rhino, African elephant, lion, leopard and buffalo — was a favorite.

"It's as if the country is saying animals, not AIDS," Mr. Allen says. South Africa was beginning to attract tourists.

The "new" South Africa also printed stamps dealing with for-

merly taboo subjects. A stamp designer turned the red AIDS ribbon on its side to fit the stamp's horizontal form. He framed it with Zulu beads. It is one of the simplest, yet most effective, designs in the show.

The new country also issued stamps with humorous pop images, such as "Gladiators," taken from the American TV program and franchised in South Africa.

Followers of art and political movements in South Africa can learn from both the impassioned images of Mr. Kentridge and the more impartial art of Mr. Allen. Mr. Kentridge's visual idiom comes from European expressionism, Mr. Allen's from the Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell tradition of found objects in boxes.

The visitor will decide which artist conveys the stronger message.