



Darrow Montgomery

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paint flowers, you're negating the political—which is itself political."

In "Stamp Collection: Imaging South Africa," on view at the Corcoran Gallery of Art's Hemicycle to Aug. 13, Allen has organized a nearly complete run of South African stamps issued since 1910. The exhibition aims to reveal the iconography of that country as it transitioned from colonialism to war to apartheid to international pariahdom and, finally, to fledgling democracy.

Allen arranges the stamps chronologically and contextualizes them with a short list of contemporary historical events, informing viewers, for instance, that even as black townships were erupting in riots, South African stamps featured such bland images as animals and scenic vistas—when they weren't celebrating pioneers of racial separation.

Allen's message—that stamp design is a form of national propaganda—might sound confrontational. But he suggests that South African audiences would actually find his approach rather mild, given the prominence of aggressively political artworks in their homeland since the '70s. The politics embedded in Allen's previous works were even more subtle, critiquing his suburban (and largely apolitical) upbringing in the port city of Durban through the display of such childhood items as his Hardy Boys books and an old pair of Doc Martens.

"There's this thing in South Africa that you cannot make a work of art that is not political," says Siemon Allen, 30, a visiting artist at the Corcoran College of Art and Design. "Even if you

Even since the country has been under the democratic leadership of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, South African stamp production has retained some of its old propensities. Although one new stamp depicted Robben Island, where Mandela was imprisoned, more frivolous topics have been featured as well, including a commercially sponsored set of television gladiators. Only one stamp has highlighted the nation's severe AIDS epidemic. "I don't know if it's the responsibility of the government to highlight all those [problems]," the Adams Morgan resident says, "but I wanted to present the images as they were issued."

Allen's philatelic project began in 1993, with a smaller work he constructed using his actual childhood stamp collection. He eventually sold that piece—as a work of art—to a collector. Last year, Allen and his wife, Corcoran Professor Kendall Buster, decided to undertake a more comprehensive stamp project. That meant having to rebuild and expand the collection—purchase by purchase. Allen estimates that the value of the stamps in the exhibition is between \$3,000 and \$5,000.

Allen and Buster are now putting together a detailed guide to the collection that explains for viewers the history of the people and the episodes portrayed on each stamp. Allen wants to exhibit his work in New York and, eventually, South Africa. "To be honest, I'm now quite attached to the collection," he says. "I don't want to sell it, but if someone made an offer to buy it and exhibit it, I would definitely sell."

—Louis Jacobson