

SIEMON ALLEN
STAMP COLLECTION (detail),
2001, Postal stamps



STAMP COLLECTION
Imaging South Africa
An Exhibition by Siemon Allen
June 30 — August 13, 2001

STAMP COLLECTION – Imaging South Africa is an exhibition by South African artist Siemon Allen, a participant in the Corcoran College of Art and Design's Visiting Artists Program.

Mr. Allen's work explores the political and social history of South Africa and offers a subtle social critique of white South African culture. Many of his projects reflect an uneasy nostalgia for his middle-class upbringing. His installations incorporate structures within structures, employing a variety of architectural forms to reconfigure and reframe gallery spaces. He often places common objects within these constructions to offer a critical view of his native culture, exposing the hidden ideology encoded in ordinary things.

For this exhibition, Mr. Allen catalogs a complete collection of more than 1000 postal stamps produced in South Africa from the colonial era to the present. The stamps are individually framed and displayed like precious artifacts or miniature "paintings" in a large-scale architectural structure. Designed and built by the artist, this accessible "simulated gallery" within the exhibition space mimics a display of artifacts in a historical museum. In this context, these official government images become detached from their market value and begin to function as art objects. Seen as a

collection, the stamps create a kind of timeline, with each one offering a unique view into South African history.

Images on individual stamps range from early colonial editions made and imported from Great Britain and examples that chronicle the continued colonial presence through the progression of royal family visits, to images of the Apartheid authors. Recent releases commemorate the historic elections, Robben Island, the Mandela Presidency and address such current issues as AIDS awareness.

"Allen is also interested in the significance of presenting his South African stamp collection in Washington, DC," says curator Paul Brewer, Director of College Exhibitions. "Surrounded by monuments, memorials and museums, the Corcoran Gallery of Art's location provides an appropriate context for *STAMP COLLECTION*. Washington is a city where monumental architectural structures shape a sense of national identity and history. Presented here, the South African stamps speak to similar issues, but in a manner that is more subtle and intimate."

"The postal stamp operates as both official currency...and as a miniature work of art with distinct aesthetic qualities," explains Mr. Allen. "But the stamp is also a highly mobile record of visual propaganda, reflecting how a country at any given period sees itself and seeks to present itself. It disseminates a narrative, on both local and global levels, that speaks as much about what is shown as what is not."