

'Newspapers' looks at how people are informed

By AMANDA PIERRE
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

"Newspapers," the latest exhibit at Drake University's Anderson Gallery, is an illuminating exercise that allows a community to see how it is informed.



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Artist Siemon Allen calls his work an 'imaging' of South Africa.

Artist Siemon Allen, originally from South Africa, has described his conceptual installation as "the profound social implications of the simple act of reading a newspaper."

The project emerged from Allen's own experience as a South African living in America. He arrived about seven years ago and lived both in Washington, D.C., and New York. He now lives in Richmond, Va., and teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Allen said people often assume, because he is from South Africa, that he knows a lot about South African golfer Ernie Els. In reality, he had to learn about Els through the American media.

When a racism conference in Durban, South Africa, Allen's home city, began to receive international coverage, he was compelled to collect articles on the subject. Allen was interested to see how the American newspapers portrayed his hometown in pictures and in words.



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

In "Newspapers," the artist displays pages from The Des Moines Register and other newspapers to highlight and compare coverage of his homeland, South Africa.

In "Newspapers," he displays pages from The Des Moines Register in a minimalist configuration, in chronological order, guided by the grid-like pattern of the newspaper page and its columns.

He put translucent tracing paper over the newspapers, obscuring words and pictures, then cutting around the articles about South Africa to expose them to viewers.

On a second wall, articles about South Africa printed in The Des Moines Register in 2003 are lined up end to end, forming a horizontal strip.

The same treatment is given to articles about South Africa printed in the St. Louis Post Dispatch during the same year, and from six months of the Washington Post, allowing a viewer to deduce in a glance how the Register's coverage of South Africa compared.

Allen calls this an investigation into the "imaging" of South Africa.

By looking at this exhibit through a

macro lens, a viewer can determine the frequency and depth of coverage lent to South Africa in the newspapers.

Seen through a micro lens, viewers can study the subject matter published about South Africa in Des Moines and measure that against what newspapers in other cities published.

The piece stimulates thinking about the control newspaper editors have over information and the amount of attention paid to international issues in different regions of America.

Allen has also mounted versions of this exhibit at St. Louis' Contemporary Art Museum and Washington, D.C.'s, Corcoran Gallery of Art, using newspapers from those cities. It was also replicated at the Whitney in New York City, juxtaposing the two D.C. area papers (the Post and the Star) to illustrate their liberal or conservative leanings.

"I think it's important to show each city its newspaper, rather than showing each city the Washington Post," Allen

Details

WHAT: "Newspapers," a solo exhibition by South African artist Siemon Allen

WHEN: Now through Feb. 22

WHERE: The Anderson Gallery, Drake University

GALLERY HOURS: Noon-4 p.m.

Tuesday-Sunday

ADMISSION: Free

said. "It's about local coverage of another place."

Through this exhibit, one might discover that a reader who relied entirely upon his newspaper for information about South Africa in 2003 might get some erroneous ideas.

The reader might deduce that Nelson Mandela is the country's leader, that South Africans are big into golf, and

that AIDS is not a major problem.

In fact, according to Allen, Mandela is widely respected, but South Africa's actual president is Thabo Mbeki.

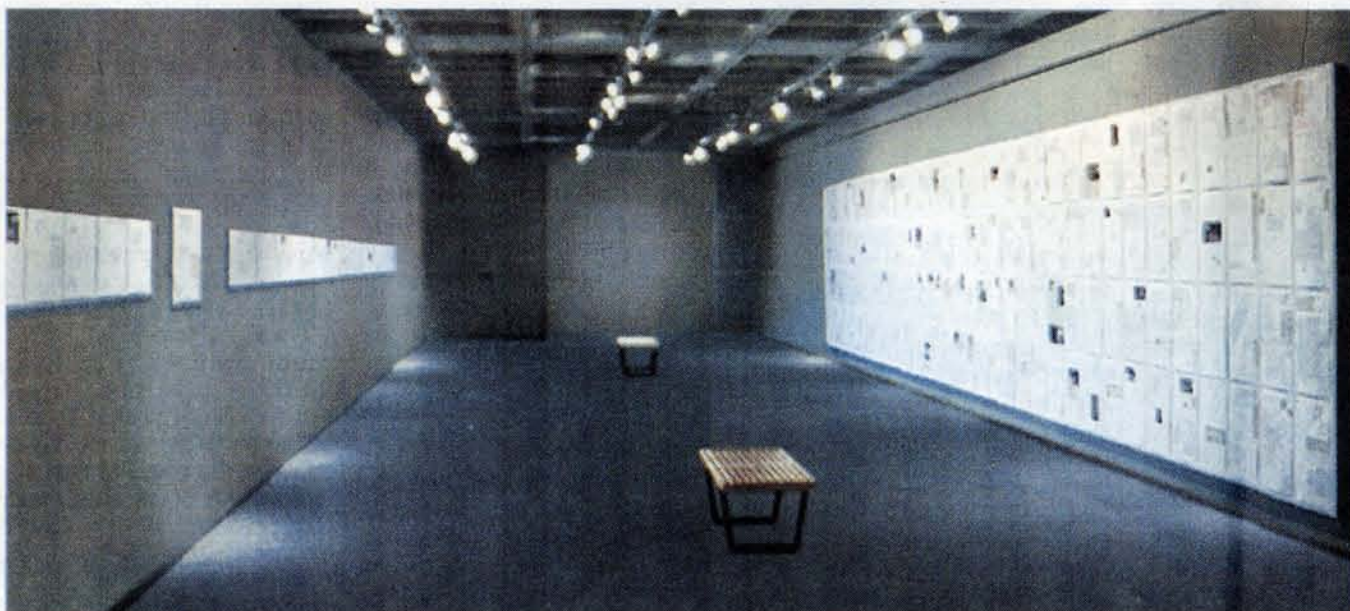
South Africans, for the most part, prefer sports like soccer, rugby and cricket, and AIDS is a huge problem. In fact, South Africa has more people afflicted with AIDS, in sheer numbers, than India.

Although covering subjects like AIDS can be seen as negative for the country, "these kinds of things need to be imaged so more people can know about them," Allen said.

He said the exhibit was also inspired by a film about intellectual linguist Noam Chomsky, who also studies media and their effects.

"We could extrapolate this (information) about any country at this point," Allen said.

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Articles about South Africa printed in the Register, Washington Post, and St. Louis Post Dispatch create a display.

Concept:
"the profound social implications of the simple act of reading a newspaper."