

The outside insider



A scene from Siemon Allen's **Makeba!**

Although Durban artist Siemon Allen has been living and working in the United States for the past 12 years, his subject matter resolutely remains the country of his birth. In fact, Allen's life's work is slowly evolving into an epic meditation on the concept of "identity formation through dislocation". One of his primary ongoing projects is **Imaging South Africa**, the three elements of which — *Records*, *Stamps* and *Newspapers* — go on show at two major galleries in Durban in the months of March and April. *Records* opens at the Bank Gallery on March 3 for a run until April 16, and *Stamps* and *Newspapers* run at the Durban Art Gallery from March 8 to April 26.

In these sprawling "collection projects" Allen examines the image of South Africa from his external vantage point by systematically accumulating mass-produced printed material, which he catalogues and displays. As a South African living overseas Allen has been particularly interested in the dynamics of how a country is imaged and how it in turn participates in a kind of imaging of itself.

Records, the third and most recent work in the series, is prefaced by a comprehensive compilation of recordings by Miriam Makeba. Comprising more than 400 individually acquired recordings in multiple formats by the late great South African singer, the roots of the collection began three years

ago when Allen purchased a used Makeba LP dating from 1965 in the US and was struck by the overtly political nature of the liner notes.

He proceeded to expand the Makeba collection to explore how these artefacts, through covers and liner notes, presented to an international audience an image of South Africa that differed dramatically from that promoted by the government of the time. Makeba's widely disseminated iconic visage and message were significant in that she was an icon in the age of mass media, carrying an oppositional "image of South Africa" to the world that was diametrically opposed to that which South Africans themselves had of their country.

The same thesis is what forms the backbone of the equally entrancing *Stamps* and *Newspapers* collections.

The Bank Gallery is open Tuesday to Friday from 10am to 5pm and on Saturday from 10am to 2pm. Tel: 031 312 6911, email info@bankgallery.co.za or visit www.bank-gallery.co.za. The Durban Art Gallery is open seven days a week, Monday to Saturday from 8.30am to 4pm, and on Sunday from 11am to 4pm. Tel: 031 311 2264 or email strettonj@durban.gov.za. — Alex Sudheim

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