

SIEMON ALLEN

Siemon Allen has been living and working in the United States for more than a decade, but the geographical dislocation has not broken his ties to his homeland. Conversely, the artist's insights into its political hegemonies have allowed him to reflect from an "insider/outsider" position on hidden ideologies embedded in the flow of media information. An obsessive collector, Allen assembles his compilations of eclectic found objects into large-scale installations that are extraordinarily revealing of a shifting national history.

Stamp Collection (2001) comprises more than eight thousand South African postage stamps issued from 1910 to the present. The installation explores how a country perceives and projects its own self-image and how this image alters with time. Allen's visual critique has a particular resonance in South Africa, where a fractious history has triggered a political desire to package the nation's identity into a rainbow composite.

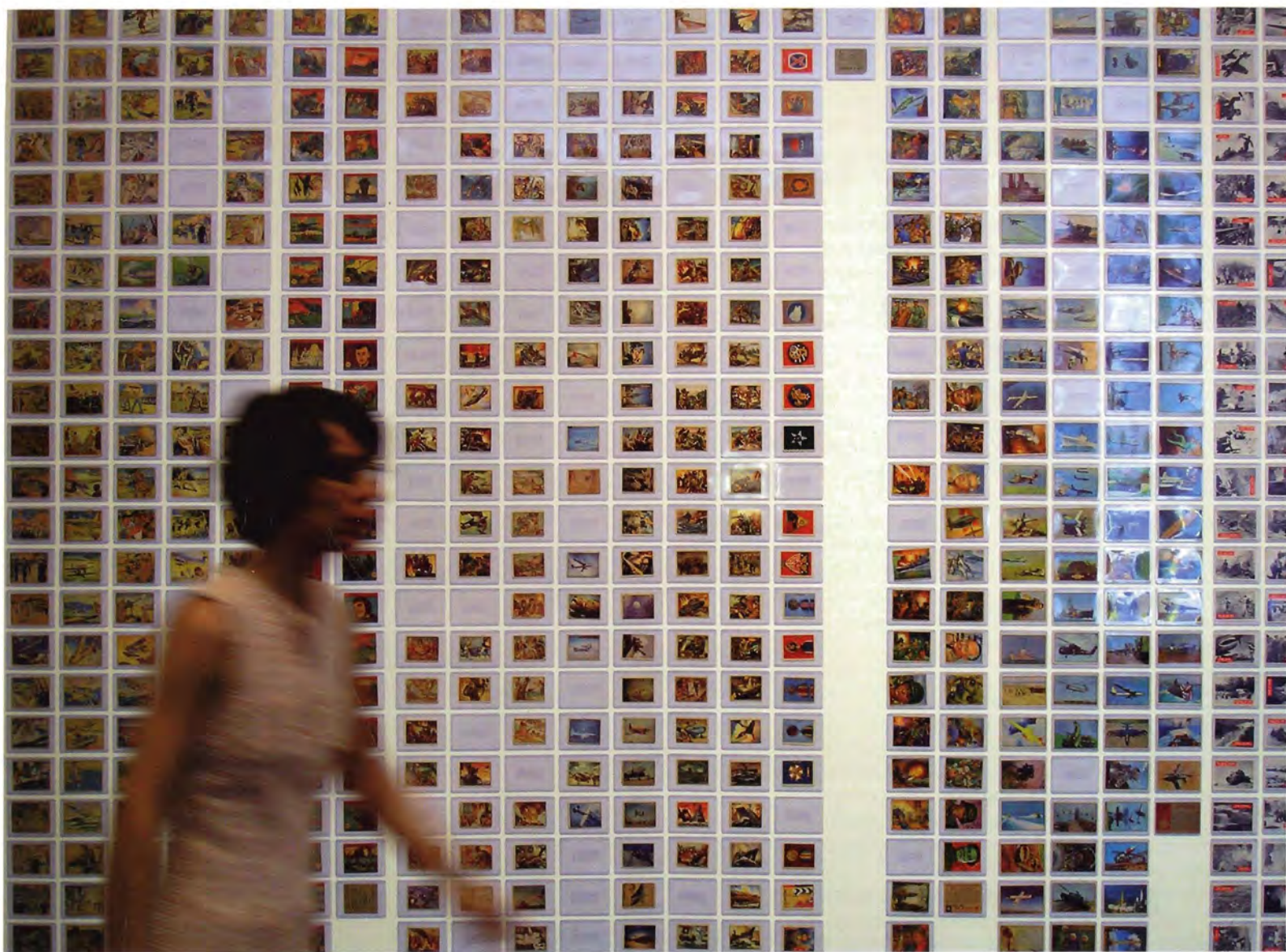
Currently Allen is focusing on a single person, the internationally known singer Miriam Makeba, in his work in progress, *Records (Makeba!)*. Makeba left South Africa for London as the star of one of the first black musicals, *King Kong* (1959), the story of the rise to fame of a Soweto boxer. Then she moved to the United States to pursue her career. After testifying against apartheid at the United Nations, Makeba's South African passport was withdrawn, and until apartheid ended she was not allowed to return, even for her mother's funeral.

Hunting down vinyl records and reel-to-reel recordings of Makeba's music on the Internet, Allen has acquired a collection of hundreds of her audio materials. Record labels from different nations and their respective record companies often used the same photograph of Makeba for a particular album, but varying biographical cover notes on the singer offered clear clues to each country's attitude toward South Africa and apartheid.

Allen also turns this analysis of national identity through cultural artifact to his adopted country. *Cards* (2005) comprises more than 2,500 military trading cards distributed in the United States between 1938 and 2003, featuring U.S. military battle scenes from 1887 to the recent Afghanistan campaign. The artist, by assembling and republishing such imagery, makes apparent the artifice of its construction. Thus images and text comment on the act of mediation itself.

To make *Screen* (2000), Allen wove reams of videotape into gridlike screens that form a life-size room within a room. The work is a savvy combination of apparent opposites: a contemporary medium associated with personal documentary narrative is morphed via a traditional, handcrafted construction method—while a student in Durban, Allen was taught to weave by Zulu artist Sam Ntshangase—into a cryptic physical enclosure. The former sequential reading of the videotape is made redundant. Only the reflective sheen offers the viewer an access point, but this turns out to be a dead end, reverting the audience's reflection to themselves.





I Records (Makeba!) 2007
 Records, 8-tracks, 4-tracks, cassettes,
 compact discs, iPod, plastic, pins
 Work in process, artist's studio, Richmond, Virginia
 Photographer: Siemion Allen
 © Siemion Allen

II Records (Makeba!) (detail) 2007
 Records, 8-tracks, 4-tracks, cassettes,
 compact discs, iPod, plastic, pins
 Work in process, artist's studio, Richmond, Virginia
 Photographer: Siemion Allen
 © Siemion Allen

III Cards 2005
 Trading cards, PVC sleeves
 Dimensions: variable
 Installation view in the
 Contemporary Museum, Baltimore
 Photographer: Siemion Allen
 Image courtesy of the artist
 © Siemion Allen

IV Cards (detail) 2005
 Trading cards, PVC sleeves
 Dimensions: variable
 Installation view in the
 Contemporary Museum, Baltimore
 Photographer: Siemion Allen
 Image courtesy of the artist
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