

Siemon Allen

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Seen And Not Heard: Perusing Works By Siemon Allen

By Ingrid Schaffner

Picture yourself a record collector: standing in front of boxes, bins and crates, sorting through them one album, cover, disk at a time. (Don't sneeze). It's a studious quest, driven as much by knowing what you are looking for (and, conversely, what you are not) as it is by curiosity about what you might find.

It's like all collecting really, save for a certain spin that flipping through records, like files, puts on it. This spin is pushed into full play by the artist Siemon Allen, whose installation for *Desire*, the three artist exhibition in the South African Pavilion of the 54th Venice Biennale, turns the imagery of record collecting into a lyrical form of archive building. His works take count of tracks and titles, performers and producers, labels and liner notes, scratches and grooves, design and color. And while there is a lot of information on display, we are also entreated to appreciate the structuring of the whole, as well as the readymade beauty of individual objects.

Strangely, the only thing of no account is the music itself. We may see that this is a collection of the music of South Africa, that it spans more than a century, sweeping from early format gramophone records to modern compact discs. We may also notice that it represents a vast range of styles, from white Afrikaans marching band to black Township Kwela, with myriad sounds in between, including sports commentary, dramatic readings, punk and jazz. Perhaps because of the acute silence, Allen's work conveys loud and clear a vision of archive yet to be heard.

Allen's installation presents two works. *Records* (2009-2010) is an edition of 12 digital prints, each depicting a vintage 78rpm record on a black background. They are very large as images, as prints; they make a big impression. Five are on view, and like all of the works in this series, what is immediately striking, given the scale and exquisite detail, is how scratchy they are. Like unforgivingly close-up portraits, these prints show every crack, every groove, every sign of wear, tear, aging, handling, use and even weather. One record looks like it has been left out in the rain, another in a sandstorm. All have been played to ruin. Worn down by countless drops of the needle, there appears to be almost nothing left to listen to. In a text about the series, Allen writes, "In direct contradiction to what a record collector might prefer to collect, I chose items that were particularly scratched or distressed." He also notes of his criteria the desire to choose only one example of any label, to represent a diversity of styles of music, and to pick the greatest-looking objects. One "electrical recording" bears a slinking jaguar on the label, printed in red on an ivory ground.

So here, titled by label, is the *Records* line-up: *Better*, Zonophone, *His Master's Voice*, *Tempo*, *Rave*. And here are some liner notes, based on the artist's descriptions. The oldest, historically (as well as in Allen's collection), is the Zonophone record *Marching on Pretoria* from circa 1901. As signaled by the word "on," it is a British version of the popular Afrikaans tune, also sung during the Boer War, but which had soldiers marching "to" Pretoria.

A more recent record launched the whole print series. Allen, a serious record collector, says his attempt to decipher a label that was terribly abraded and torn gave him the idea of scanning and enlarging it. Like a digital-age David Hemming character in *Blow-up*, Allen solved the mystery: at 750%, he could make out that the tune was *Vula No. 1*, by Wilson Silgee and his Forces, on a Tempo recording. He subsequently dated it to the mid-1960s.

The revelation was two-fold, says Allen. In the process of showing its obscured identity, the badly beat up record also disclosed itself to him in a new light: "The damage seemed visually engaging, recalling expressionistic drawings or prints, while the single central, iconic image reminded me of Jasper Johns' target paintings or Jeremy Wafer's singular forms." The big picture wasn't only talismanic, it was also Talmudic: the fine print transmitted what struck Allen as powerful knowledge and inspired him to gather more. "Each record remains a portal into South African musical history, and I am drawn to the encoded information that is uncovered in the scans."

Allen's process of collecting, scanning and displaying South Africa's recorded past continues with his other work on view in *Desire*. It is a new installation created especially for the site of the Pavilion, an old tower building on the canal behind the Arsenale. When he visited in January and saw for the first time the soaring interior space and massive open staircase, Allen knew the challenge as an artist would be to mute the architecture "in order to be heard." Hence, this monumental curtain: a cascade of 2500 labels, printed at 5 by 5 inches each and slipped into transparent sleeves on one, seamless clear backing. They appear to be raining down, or pouring off an assembly line, in this regimented grid that floats 50 feet high before us. Visitors to the last Biennale may recall the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui's gorgeous trash tapestry, made of scraps of printed metal tins and bottle caps, draped over the façade of the Villa Fortuny.

While *Records* highlights one aspect of Allen's collection — scratchy 78s — *Labels* surfs the entire archive. The arrangement is chronological — although at the time of this writing, Allen was just working out the exact sequence structure. Moving left to right has the conceptual appeal of putting the past at a distance, like a vanishing point: viewers on the ground would stand in front of the work, faced by the very present. On the other hand, arranging the labels in rows from top to bottom, the past and present would become woven together. Each approach would seem to determine its own pictorial outcome. Will the curtain fall in gradually shifting gradations or take on an overall fish-scale pattern? This remains to be seen.

It's interesting to consider this notion of history seen at a distance, in view of the fact that Siemon Allen's archival project began to take shape only after he moved away from South Africa. Since 1997, he has lived in the United States, where he teaches in the Department of Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond. He studied sculpture at Technikon Natal (now DUT), in Durban, South Africa (where Allen was born in 1971). When as a student Allen started to weave and construct objects from VHS videotape, his instructor Jeremy Wafer pointed out to him the artist Christian Marclay. Allen says the affinity he felt for Marclay's use of sound and music's material culture — he once crocheted magnetic audiotape into a sculpture in the form of a pillow titled *The Beatles* (1989) — was immediate and enduring. Though it would be another decade, at least, until Allen had the opportunity to see actual works by Marclay.

Aside from magazines, there was little access to international contemporary art in South Africa in the early 1990s (when the internet was still fledgling). Perhaps this in part explains the formative role of music in Allen's art. Despite regulated and limited distribution, music was still a relatively accessible form of cultural

currency. Allen's predilection for avant-garde, experimental and noise music has played parallel with his interest in visual art. Over the years, he has so keenly listened to the work of Steve Reich, with its shimmering repetition of small units of sound building into larger patterns of Minimalist music, that it may be heard as a prelude to (or in concert with) Allen's *Labels* curtain of South African sounds.

Music and art are also the crucible elements of the FLAT gallery, which Allen co-founded with Ledelle Moe and Thomas Barry after finishing art school. Of its short but storied existence, the Durban-based critic Alexander Sudheim wrote: "From 1993 to 1995, an unknowable energy catalyzed a group of young art students in Durban to crystallize into a mysteriously coherent entity. They pooled their meager reserves, rented a flat, moved into it and embarked upon a journey of exhibitions, performances, installations, happenings and all other manner of spontaneity that characterized the turbulent two years of the FLAT gallery's brief but incendiary lifespan." [*The Activist Archivist*, Art South Africa, 2009 p. 76] Indeed, the gallery opened eight months prior to the general election that marked the end of apartheid and closed eight months later, when a candle someone left burning one night set fire to the space. And though the program was not explicitly political, FLAT Gallery was part of a seismic national push against a parochial culture and its racial boundaries. One day, Sudheim recounts, Allen and his cohorts Barry, Jay Horsburgh, Aliza Levy, and Samkelo Matori drove into the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands just to record the coordinates 33 longitude/33 latitude with their collective presence. Although no longer a physical space, FLAT continues as a conceptual enterprise.

When asked about his own musical aptitudes, Allen confides an aversion to performance. But his talents lie elsewhere: he is an avid listener, collector, reader of liner notes, trawler of record shops and, more recently, addicted to e-Bay.

It was in a Richmond thrift store, eight years ago, that he found the record that launched what would turn into the massive archival project that all of Allen's subsequent work, including the pieces in this exhibition, are a part of. The record was an LP recording titled *An evening with Belafonte/Makeba*, from 1965, and more than the music, it was the jacket that struck Allen with the force of an epiphany. Growing up, he had always taken Miriam Makeba as something of a given: she was Mama Africa, the 1960s folk singer and civil rights activist, a powerful though (to a young man in the 1990s) dated cultural icon. But here she was in Richmond, appearing on the album cover, as the completely radical international operative for human rights, whose every song was a call for the end of apartheid in South Africa. And there was Allen, who, through the mere circumstances of living abroad, was finding himself increasingly self-conscious of something else he had long taken for granted: his identity as a South African. Did living in the American South, where race is also implicitly an everyday tension, amplify this awareness? And to what degree does anyone who lives abroad find himself speaking and acting as a foreign-delegate, however unwitting or unwantingly? Or maybe it was the simple recognition of home that Makeba triggered. In any case, and for whatever reasons, Allen bought the record.

Then he acquired more. For over three years, Allen dedicated himself to tracking down as complete a record as he could compose of Mama Africa's global presence. Completed in 2009, and exhibited at the BANK Gallery in Durban, *Makeba!* is an installation/portrait, an archive of music in all its forms, from 78s to MP3s. Along the way, it's easy to see how Allen's collecting for *Makeba!* expanded into the current body of work, as well as how it came to be encompassed by a much larger project. It too is a portrait in the form of an archive: *Imaging South Africa* is Allen's on-going accumulation of mass-produced, printed matter. Drawn from afar, and largely outside of the place of its depiction, this archive includes postage stamps, newspapers and, of course,

audio recordings, each systematically catalogued by Allen in a computer data base. And while it stands as a discrete archive and work, it is also the overarching framework (conceptual and material) for a whole series of subsidiary projects. In 1993, he showed a small collection of his own effects as a modest self-portrait of a South African boyhood. More recently, he has been working in tandem on two serial bodies of work: *Stamp Collection* and *Newspapers*, both of which have evolved over the years in scale and structure, from wall-bound "pictures" to architectural installations, immersive environments that the viewer may enter.

Made of information, Allen's archival art fits into a vast cultural enterprise. This includes the pioneering social research project *Mass Observation*, which put the daily lives of postwar Brits under constant surveillance, as well as the works of contemporary West African artist Georges Adéagbo, whose installations appear as streams of media and artifacts that might be seen to pinpoint, more or less obliquely, the artist's own coordinates within the global artworld at any given moment. Allen himself considers his project as something that falls in, between independent artwork and public resource. He speculates that he could imagine sending all the material in *Imaging South Africa* to South Africa, where it would be an open source for scholars, researchers or whoever is curious to see the country as it represented itself (through stamps), or was seen (through the press), or was identified (through music), in the years following Apartheid.

Allen's open-ended view of what he may be building nicely dovetails a space that already exists. The Prelinger Library & Archives describes itself as "an appropriation-friendly, browsable collection of approximately 40,000 books, periodicals, printed ephemera and government documents located in San Francisco, California, USA." Anyone may drop by and peruse the stacks, which are organized "iconoclastically" by themes that thread their way through the universe.

Simultaneously, along with making his art and building an archive of material culture (that may or may not be art), Siemon Allen has also been creating a digital archive. Housed at flatinternational.org is the South African Audio Archive, where you may find, for instance, the very disk that Allen scanned to make the Rave print in the *Records* series. That is the one with a blob of white plaster repair-work carefully applied around the center hole. Click on the image, and you go to the complete track listing with notes, links to the artist and additional information. From noodling around a bit, one quickly learns that this is a recording by Spokes Mashiyane, who is credited with having popularized pennywhistle jive or "kwela" (commonly translated as "step-up") style music, which is associated with apartheid-era police raids: those who were arrested were ordered to, "step-up" into the vehicle. As Mashiyane's first sax recording, this "Rave" recording also paradoxically marks the end of kwela and the start of a new craze for Sax-Jive later called "mbaqanga" that would dominate South African urban music for the next 20 years. The record was made in 1958; go to the Web site chronology for some further history on Mashiyane, who left Trutone (and Rave) and signed on with Gallo to become the first black musician to receive royalties from his recordings. Here's another tidbit: in 1958, the all-female group The Dark City Sisters was formed and recorded with EMI.

One could keep going of course, following the grooves of this particular history deeper and deeper into Allen's archive, which links to other sites and cites other sources. Or, in Venice, one could follow the pattern of the completed curtain, smart phone in hand, going cover by cover, through a thoroughly annotated look at South Africa's music. Are we now back at the beginning, standing in front of those bins that collect people who collect records? Yes and no. However tied it is to the archive he has created, Allen's art ultimately appears at a remove from it — his records signal that there is more to know, and plenty to hear, but this is, after all, just a look. ■