

The act of archiving is never objective, never neutral. Every collection is the result of selection and framing. In examining a collection of artifacts we consider not only the nature of what is being collected, but also who is doing the collecting and with what organizing systems. Every object in an archive is but a fragment of an incomplete history, and in examining the imagery in a given body of collected material we look at what is explicitly shown, but we also acknowledge what is not. Plucked from one context to be placed into another, the collected artifact is a carrier of information scarred by use.

South African born, US based, artist Siemon Allen for the past eight years has been engaged in a massive collection project called *Imaging South Africa*. In his studio practice Allen systematically accumulates mass-produced printed material, including postal stamps, newspapers, and most recently audio recordings, which he ultimately catalogues, displays or uses as source material. His process is not unlike that of an archivist, each collected item bringing with it a narrative particular to the nature of that artifact's production, dissemination, and use. And yet, arranged for exhibition, items in Allen's collection projects are typically configured in such a way as to also operate as pattern fields.

The seeds of these collection projects were simple displays of personal possessions from Allen's youth. Presented like specimens, they included a set of Hardy Boys books, a pair of Doc Martens shoes, and his boyhood stamp collection. Allen regarded the items as a kind of archive from a narrowly inscribed South African cultural experience.

With *Elegy* and *Stamp Collection* the scope of the works expanded and the focus moved from 'self' to 'nation.' *Elegy*, the first major woven videotape installation was titled to reference Paul Stopforth's painting of Steve Biko of the same name. To Allen it was significant that the source image for Stopforth's painting was a censored photograph and that the imagery and sound on his woven videotape was inaccessible.

Stamp Collection, an ongoing collection of South African stamps from 1910 to the most current releases, when first shown in 2001 in the United States featured approximately 8000 stamps. By the time Allen presented the work in South Africa in 2009 the collection had expanded to over 45,000 individual stamps. For Allen, these artifacts reflect the way in which a government defines or images itself. This most conventional of collected items operates not just as a philatelic project, but a record of South Africa's "internally constructed image" over time.

In *Newspapers*, another ongoing archive project, Allen examined how South Africa was represented in the US media by investigating what he regarded as the country's "externally constructed image." Over a given period of time Allen purchased daily newspapers from several US cities including the New York Times, Washington Post, Washington Times, St. Louis Post Dispatch, and Des Moines Register. The newspapers were pinned onto large panels, each covered by a thin sheet of tracing paper that resulted in a semi-transparent overlay. Windows were cut to reveal paragraphs mentioning South Africa. From across the room, the work appeared as a large grid with subtle shifts of grey and small patches of color. Up close the content of the articles were easily accessed. Here as in *Stamp Collection* artifact display conversed with geometric abstraction.

Records, the most current of the collection works, is Allen's immense and growing accumulation of South African audio material. This ongoing project currently consists of over 2000 items including 500 rare 78 rpm shellac discs and has evolved into a searchable web-based resource.

The record collection grew out of a project called *Makeba!*, an almost comprehensive inventory of international recordings by South African singer and political activist, Miriam Makeba. It all began with a

single Makeba LP dating back to 1965. Upon finding the LP in a thrift store in Richmond and reading the liner notes, Allen had been struck by the political nature of the text and asked himself how these commodities, mass-produced for entertainment in the Americas and Europe had operated in creating a global awareness of apartheid in South Africa. As the collection grew the project evolved into an investigation of the particular global reach of the exiled singers music and image; and a recognition of the subtle differences in how each country imaged Miriam Makeba, Apartheid, and South Africa.

The project soon expanded to include early South African music as well as other audio artifacts from South Africa and Allen's increasing focus on relatively rare and unusual material led him to used, often severely worn, 78 rpm records. These artifacts became the source material for his most recent body of work, a series of iconic large-scale digital prints that are direct scans of records from the collection.

Printed in rich matte tones on velvet archival paper the scans offer remarkable detail capturing not only the grooves that are the (here mute) carriers of the sound, but also the accumulated grime, scratches, damage, and repair work done by the records' owners. These original grooves and subsequent random cuts and scuffs both operate as markings. What is a destroyed or distressed surface, the result of multiple playings and damage, becomes like an expressionistic drawing; the visible markings on the record's surface a function of its use and a trace of its history.

Unlike the collector who values the mint-condition artifact, Allen regards the damage on the record as a kind of participation by subsequent anonymous authors, collaborators who have unwittingly altered the original recorded sound and in doing so contributed their own history to the object. The obvious wear on such audio artifacts speaks to a degradation of the original sound, and yet the damage on most of the records in the collection are the result of use and re-use. For Allen, such damage is evidence of the recorded musician and the listener's mutual relationship. In *Rave*, for example the white painterly marks around the hole of the label is a Plaster-of-Paris fill probably made by one of the record's owners, a center hole recreated after that center had deteriorated so dramatically from use. The repair job shows—as messy as it looks—a persistence to keep the record grooving.

In a sense, the scans of records from Allen's collection are both part of his audio archive and something quite apart. Allen says "I think about how I have now taken an original artifact, a 78 rpm record, which is itself a document of an original performed audio moment, and transformed it into an image. That image becomes a new object where the audio trace is now twice removed from its original breath."

Indeed it is significant that though these prints are considered by Allen to be part of his audio collection and speak to the primacy of music in South African cultural history, they are silent. Wear and repair, like the plastered hole on *Rave*, identify the record as an object independent of its sound carrying capacity. Allen's videotape works denied the viewer the sights and sounds of the video recording, but offered a sleek reflection. Perhaps the luscious, velvety surface of the *Records* prints operates in a similar way, bringing one in, making one want to touch, or connect to this new object, transforming the auditory to the visual and tactile.

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MARCHING ON PRETORIA

(Patriotic Song)

Mr. Ian Colquhoun

Orchestra Accompaniment

London

X-348.

RECORDS, 2009 - 2010

*better, city special, sunshine, zon-o-phone,
cape to cairo star, church, his master's voice,
tempo, envee, columbia, quality, rave*

set of 12 digital prints, 200 x 200 cm each

edition of 2 + artist proof

epson ultrachrome HDR ink on hahnemühle
museum etching fine art paper mounted on sintra

south african edition collection of the
gordonschachatcollection

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