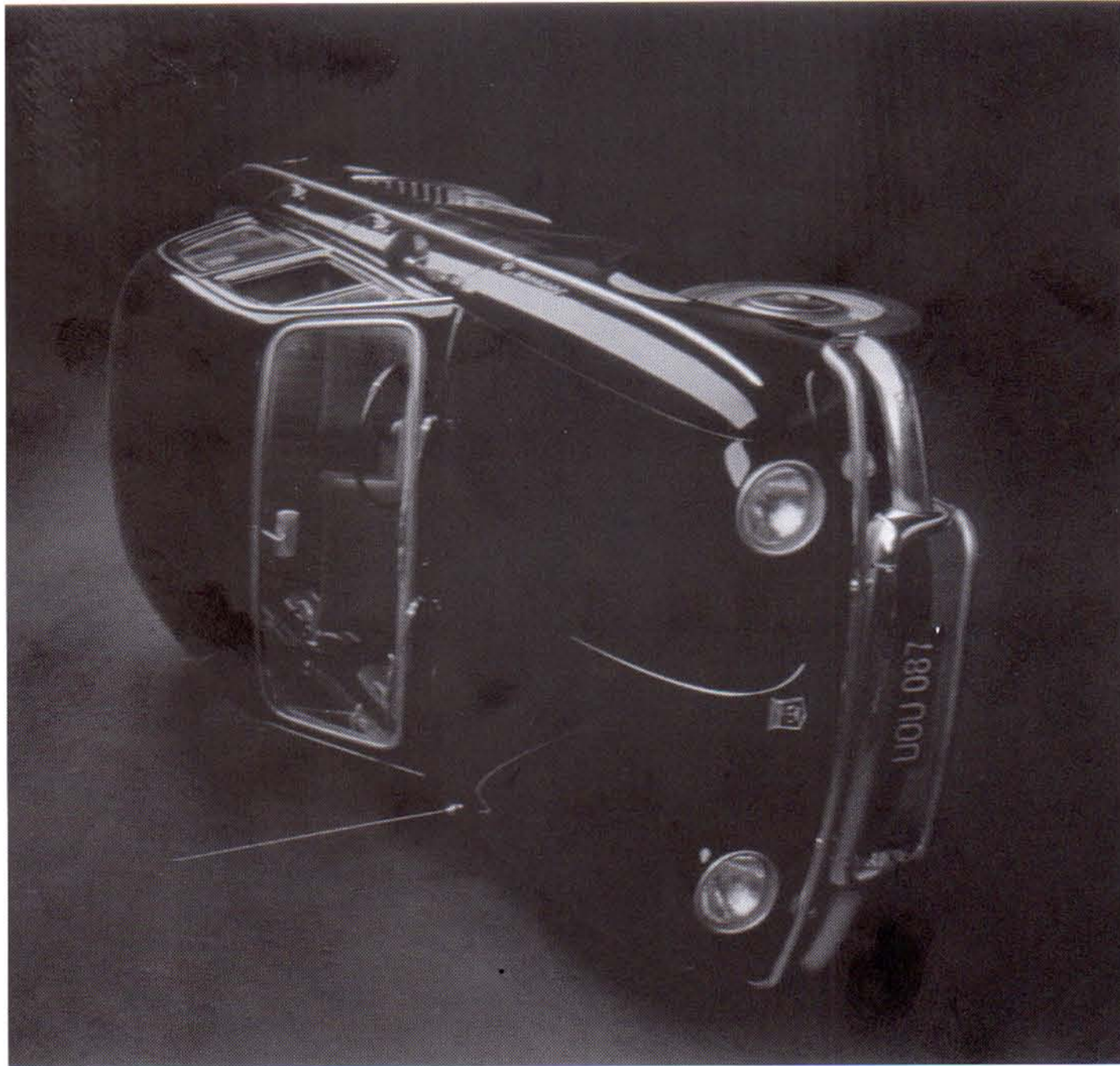


The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

Detourism

November 11–December 23, 2001



Newsletter
2000–2001

Below:
Installation View
The Renaissance Society
Foreground:
Siemon Allen
Stamp Collection
1992–2001
stamps, display cases

Detail
Siemon Allen
Stamp Collection
1992–2001
stamps, display cases



(from an essay by Hamza Walker)

qualifying tests of their weaving skills. The results vary widely, and many carpet experts look down on these rugs because of the crude design and the cheaper materials (note: wool was in short supply). By the time we arrived, the carpet-making enterprise was winding down. The Pakistani rug dealer scoured the refugee camps to come up with war rugs for us to buy. What attracted me to these rugs was that they came from the children's direct experience with war. Along with the vibrant depiction's of kalashnikov rifles, tanks, helicopters, land mines and bombs is an occasional flower pot and tea service thrown in for added decoration.

The war rugs are part decorative artform and part historical artifact. As documents they belong to the realm of material cultural. Material culture refers to collectible artifacts that fall outside the realm of fine art. It also encompasses the mundane memorabilia (postcards, coffee mugs, T-shirts, key chains) a place chooses to represent or celebrate itself. This includes the postage stamp. Siemon Allen's stamp collection is a veritable history of South Africa from the country's colonial origins to the post-apartheid era. In Allen's words, "the stamp is a kind of public relations gesture – a highly self-conscious attempt to express through a single image some aspect of national identity." Flora, fauna, framers of the constitution. Athletes, armed forces, architects of apartheid. Given South Africa's history, there is as much being repressed as there is revealed, proof that the production of a national consciousness is only complete when joined by its unconsciousness no matter how historically latent its manifestations. This is true not only of South Africa's founding myths or the rise of Afrikaaner political consciousness, but also its most recent efforts aimed at a "positive branding" of "the new" (and improved) South Africa. Designed by the bureau tourism to counter South Africa's image as it is tainted by Johannesburg's crime rate and the country's AIDs epidemic, these recent stamps feature young wrestlers starring in that country's version of the hit television show *Gladiator*. Their various ethnic and racial backgrounds represent the ideals of any pluralistic society. In and of itself, this reads as symptomatic insofar as the fetishization of multiculturalism is in direct proportion to an inability to articulate, never mind address, pressing social disparities. But between their physiques and their silly nicknames—Jackal, Wildebeest, Force etc.—it is perhaps more frightening to consider these steroid inflated action-figures come-to-life as a parody or projection of either sexual attraction or strong statehood.

