

# SIEMON ALLEN

Born Durban, 1971. Lives and works in Washington, DC.

**Selected solo exhibitions:** 2004, *Newspapers (Register)*, Anderson Gallery, Drake University, Des Moines, USA; 2002, *Newspapers (Post/Times)*, Fusebox, Washington, DC; 2001, *Stamp Collection – Imaging South Africa*, Hemicycle/Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; 1999, *House*, Gallery 400, Chicago; 1994, *Songs for Nella*, Flat Gallery, Durban.

**Selected group exhibitions:** 2004, *Notes on Renewed Appropriationisms*, The Project, Los Angeles; 2003, ARCO, Madrid, Spain; 2003, *The American Effect*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; 2003, *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad*, Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, St Louis; 2001, *Detourism*, The Renaissance Society, Chicago.

**Selected publications:** 2004, Howard Risatti, 'Siemon Allen/Dominic McGill' in *Artforum*, Summer; 2003, Lauri Firstenberg, 'Notes on Renewed Appropriationisms' in *Parkett*, No 67; 2003, Shannon Fitzgerald and Tumelo Mosaka (eds), *A Fiction of Authenticity – Contemporary Africa Abroad* (Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, St Louis); 2002, Roberta Smith, 'Context and Conceptualism' in *The New York Times*, February 22; 2002, Andres Zervigon, 'The Weave of Memory: Siemon Allen's Screen in Post-apartheid South Africa' in *Art Journal*, Spring.

Facing page, top *Screen*, 2000, woven VHS videotape, steel, installation view, *Translation/Seduction/Displacement*, White Box, New York; bottom *The Land of Black Gold* (version i), 2003, cut-up comics, foam-core, detail, shown on *Art Positions*, Miami/Basel, Miami, dimensions variable. Courtesy: Fusebox

In his powerful analytical works on media and mediated information, the clean forensic approach of Siemon Allen has made him one of the most prominent figures of the South African visual arts diaspora, particularly in the art-world heartland of the northeastern United States. This year, New York's Guggenheim Museum acquired one of his installation pieces.

Although Allen has been resident in the United States since 1997, he is yet another manifestation of a comment made by American intellectual Susan Sontag following her recent visit to South Africa that, unlike the Eastern Bloc which rapidly became depoliticised after the collapse of the iron curtain, 10 years after this country won its freedom South Africa remains profoundly political. Living in another part of the world, it seems, does not make any difference.

Allen's 2003 installation *Newspapers* is a case in point. Asking himself to what extent public opinion about world affairs is formed by the local press and how balanced that information is, Allen began a daily routine of saving newspapers. He was interested to discover how South Africa looked when observed through this lens. "The notion of the importance of imaging became even more significant when I came across a speech on a government website making a call for a positive branding of South Africa internationally, including the recruiting of 'non-government South Africans living overseas to act as ambassadors for the country'." Allen had the idea that his documentation might play a critical role in this initiative, though typically for his practice, he would be highlighting what was already in existence rather than presenting his own opinions.

*Newspapers* took the form of screens to which the newspapers were pinned. Semi-translucent paper covered most of the information, with cut-out rectangles revealing anything emanating from or referring to South Africa – news items ranging from stories of police violence to a South African reaction to the American television series, *Survivor*. An earlier piece, *Stamp Collection: Imaging South Africa* (2001) gave a rather different view of the country: this one through the eyes of those government officials responsible over the years for commissioning South Africa's postage stamps.

Says Allen, "My work reflects a number of distinct, but interconnected activities. I collect, organise, and display artifacts. I sample sounds from various media sources and remix these to produce audio works, with some integrated into sculptural works, and others covertly presented in specific sites. I construct large hand woven panels with cast-off movie film or videotape that operate between painting and architectural enclosure. I design and produce limited edition artist's books. The thread that runs through all of these seemingly varied practices is my need to reconcile my interests in the world of the political with the language of the aesthetic."

In *La Jetée* (1997) and *Screen* (2000), Allen used recorded videotapes to encrypt rather than reveal information. Combining a minimalist aesthetic with traditional weaving techniques, the artist constructed false rooms or enclosures of woven tapes on steel frames, rendering the tapes forever unplayable. The only information now emanating from the screens was the image of their immediate surroundings, reflected in the high sheen of the tightly woven surface. The structures themselves seemed to hark back to the laagers that are such a definitive image in South African historical mythology.

The piece acquired by the Guggenheim is *The Land of Black Gold* (version ii) (2004), set in the Middle East and featuring the boy/journalist Tintin, a childhood icon of the artist. This early Tintin story prefigured current disputes over oil in that contentious region. Over the years, sections of the comic were redrawn and written by the Belgian artist, Herge, according to the directives of publishers and shifting ideas of political correctness. In Allen's piece, a grid integrates the third (1950) and fourth (1971) versions, setting one above the other in rows. Identical beginnings diverge and go out of synch as the story progresses and erasures and alterations occur. The installation story ends ambiguously with truncated scenes from *The Red Sea Sharks* showing Tintin lost at sea on a burning ship.

Aesthetically satisfying, conceptually powerful, as in so many Allen works, freely available images and text have been mediated by the artist into an art piece that reveals a complex new reading.

/ SUE WILLIAMSON



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This page, top *Newspapers (Post-Dispatch)*, 2003, newspapers, pins, tracing-paper, cloth, wood, installation view, *A Fiction of Authenticity: Contemporary Africa Abroad*, Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, St Louis, dimensions variable. Courtesy: Contemporary Art Museum St Louis; bottom *Newspapers (Post-Times)*, 2003, newspapers, pins, tracing-paper, cloth, wood (newspaper detail, *The Washington Post*), installation detail, *The American Effect*, Whitney Museum, New York, dimensions variable. Courtesy: Fusebox  
Facing page, top *Stamp Collection*, 2001, stamps, cloth, wood, plexiglas, installation view, *Imaging South Africa*, Hemicycle/Corcoran Museum, Washington, DC, dimensions variable. Courtesy: Hemicycle/Corcoran; bottom left *Stamp Collection*, 2001, stamps, cloth, wood, plexiglas (stamp detail: stamps issued between December 14, 1938 and January 1, 1942) bottom right *Stamp Collection*, 2001, stamps, cloth, wood, plexiglas (stamp detail: Inauguration of President Thabo Mbeki, issued June 16, 1999)