



FULL CIRCLE

Introduction and Acknowledgments

Ashley Kistler

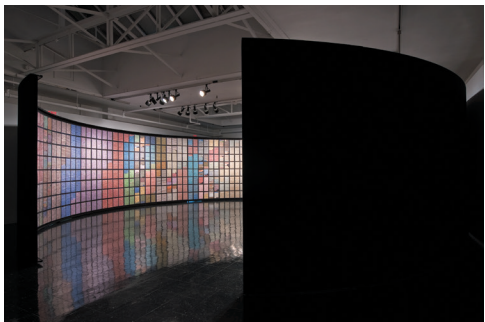
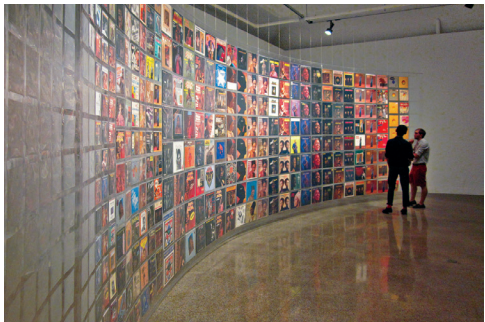
Filling all three floors of the Anderson Gallery, this survey offers the most comprehensive presentation to date of Siemon Allen's collection projects, collectively titled *Imaging South Africa*. Although painstakingly crafted and constructed on site last month, Allen's new room-sized, woven-videotape sculpture, *Screen II*, harkens back to a series of works from the late 1990s that were in many ways precursors to his current projects. The exhibition also features six selections from his newest body of work, *Records*, a magnificent suite of monumental prints created from scans of individual vinyl records that the artist culled from his collection of over 2,000 South African audio artifacts. These pieces are joined by Allen's recently reconfigured and most expansive rendition of *Stamps*, a massive inventory of South African postal stamps now covering an entire century, and his latest installment of *Newspapers*, a multipart project charting coverage of his home country in various American newspapers. *Makeba!*, a pair of installations assembled from the collected recordings of the exiled South African singer and political activist, completes the exhibition.

The opportunity to experience this many of Allen's installations at once reveals ever more clearly numerous aspects of his artistic practice. Moving from one gallery space to the next imparts a growing sense of awareness of the countless small, and not so small, aesthetic and conceptual decisions that each piece required for its creation and presentation. These decisions accumulate incrementally, in much the same way that his collected fragments of material culture do, to produce inspired works of art. Allen speaks of this process in terms of "rival" content: literal content on the one hand, here focused on the shifting political and social face of South Africa, and aesthetic content on the other, replete in this exhibition with references to Modernist and Minimalist archetypes. His efforts to effectively intertwine these two separate but equal components evoke the ongoing struggle to merge classic content with classic form that has preoccupied artists for centuries.

Allen's overall conception of his exhibition as a single cohesive installation becomes apparent when considering how he has sequenced the viewer's encounter with each successive work. And while he has often treated installation

- left: *Better*, 2010, actual size detail.
digital print, 78" x 78", edition: 2 + 1 artist proof.
Epson HDR ink on Hahnemühle Museum Etching
Fine Art Paper on Sintra.
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA.
- below: *Better*, 2009.
digital print, 80" x 80", prototype, grid of 20 sheets joined.
Epson HDR ink on Epson Velvet Fine Art paper.
BANK Gallery, Durban, SA.





• top: *Makeba!*, 2009.
record sleeves, clear acetate, aluminum, silver thread.
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA.

• above: *Stamps V*, 2010.
100 years of South African stamps (1910 - 2010).
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA.

• right: *Mirian Make Ba*, 2010
digital print, 78" x 78", edition: 2 + 1 artist proof.
Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA.

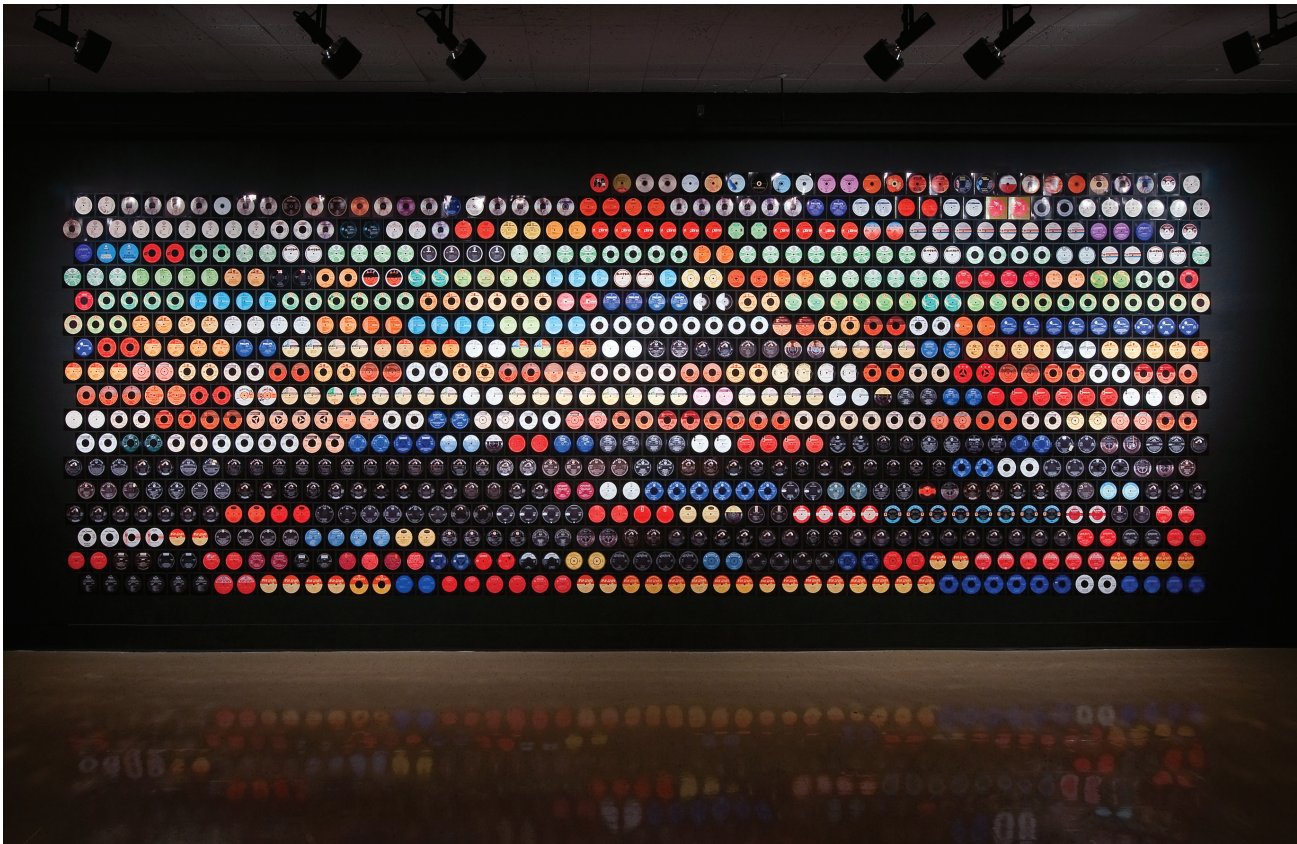
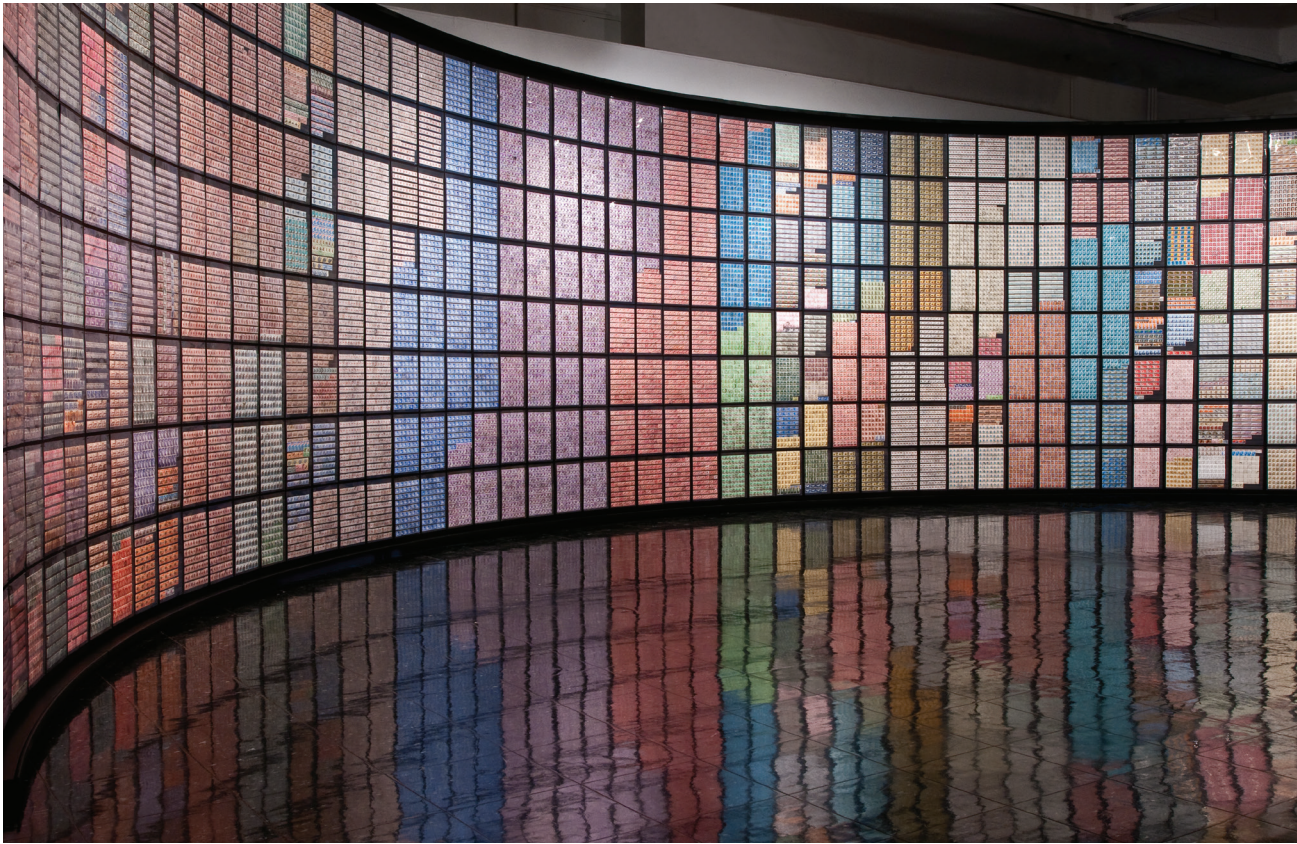
as a form of architectural intervention, in this instance he has applied a similar approach to the whole building. The circle, for example, emerges as one of several dominant motifs. Among other, distinctly different associations, Allen relates this format to the Afrikaans term *laager*, which referred in the 19th century to a Boer military encampment protected by a circle of wagons, reminiscent of the response of American pioneers to danger. It has since come to signify a defensive state of mind, closed to new ideas.

The curved wall constructed for *Newspapers*, which ushers viewers into the exhibition, is echoed on the second floor by the curving expanse of the transparent curtain containing the Makeba record jackets. Upon reaching the third floor, it has metamorphosed into the giant cylinder housing *Stamps* that, once entered, physically and psychologically encircles the viewer, whose initial view becomes a continuous field of pattern and color. The fact that this chronologically arranged collection begins with the first South African stamp ever issued—a depiction of the colonial monarch King George V—and ends exactly 100 years later with a reissue of the same stamp reinforces its circular character. The relocation of *Stamps* next year to a permanent home in South Africa will complete yet another circle.

This shape, of course, figures prominently in Allen's *Records*, a new series of prints that perhaps signals a different direction for his work. Having meticulously selected a dozen records from hundreds of options, he enlarged each scan by 750% so that the final print—nearly seven feet square—conveys extraordinary detail. The lush surfaces and vigorous presence of these prints recall physical aspects of Allen's *Screen II*; and like the videotape he used to weave this sculpture, the records are also silenced. Yet the union of form and content that Allen has achieved in his latest project yields artworks that are much more forthcoming in the information they contain. Bearing a singular network of marks, scratches, scuffs, and grooves, which distinguishes its exploded topographic surface from all others, each image represents a unique world of lived history. After all, as Allen notes, these damaged records have been literally played to death. Amplified visually if not aurally, his renditions transform the most humble and distressed objects into mesmerizing eulogies.

Mirian Make Ba, another stunning new print by Allen, is currently on view at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in conjunction with the museum's exhibition, *Darkroom: Photography and New Media in South Africa Since 1950*, with which *Imaging South Africa* was scheduled to coincide. We are grateful to Tosha Grantham, curator of *Darkroom*, and Robin Nicholson, Chief Officer of Art, Education and Exhibitions, for their enthusiastic interest in showing this work.





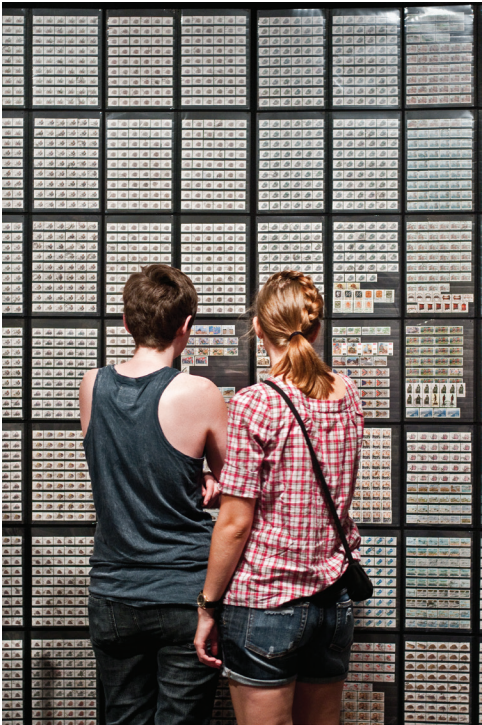
Joint opening receptions were held at the VMFA and the Anderson Gallery, as well as at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, where a portion of *Darkroom* is also displayed. Special thanks are extended to our colleagues at both the museum and the center for their kind consultation and collaboration.

This publication was made possible in part by generous funding from the Office of the Dean. For his support of Allen's exhibition, we thank Richard Toscan, Emeritus Dean of the VCU School of the Arts, who retired in June. Special thanks go also to South African curator Clive Kellner for his insightful essay, and to Andrés Zervigon, who so generously allowed us to reprint his article on Allen's early woven sculptures. At the Anderson, Gallery Coordinator Traci Garland and Exhibition Manager Michael Lease tackled with their usual finesse many tasks related to the exhibition's promotion and installation. The successful implementation of this project, like those preceding it over the last two years, has been dependent on their input, and I greatly appreciate the excellence that Traci and Michael apply to everything they do.

For their tireless labor on the gallery installation, the artist thanks Kyle Hosli, Miriam Ewers, Tim Devoe, John Henry Blatter, Miyuki Nishiuchi, Chris Mahonski, Molly Underwood, Terry Brown, Jesse Burrowes, Ledelle Moe, and his wife, Kendall Buster. Deep appreciation goes also to Henrietta Hamilton and Robert Frazier, Directors of BANK Gallery, and Jenny Strayer, Director of the Durban Art Gallery, for the opportunity last year to expand and exhibit in Durban, South Africa, the *Stamps*, *Newspapers*, and *Records* projects; to Sharon Burger and Grace Kotze, who provided heroic support for these installations; and to music critic Richard Haslop who kindly opened the *Records* show at BANK Gallery. The artist extends special gratitude to Gordon Schachat for his generous support and patronage, and to Clive Kellner and Jeannine Howse of the *gordonschachatcollection*. Finally, the artist sincerely thanks Denise Allen, Bob Allen, Maxine Poisson, and Phyllis Gray for helping to accumulate the massive archive of stamps and for making so many of these projects possible.

Most of all, huge thanks are due to Siemon for undertaking with such perfection what always promised to be an enormous project. It has been fascinating to witness firsthand the unfolding of his exceptional exhibition. Keenly reflecting its maker's intelligence, talent, compassion, tenacity, and precision, *Imaging South Africa* continues to illuminate so much in so many ways.

Ashley Kistler is Director of the Anderson Gallery at the School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond.



- left top: *Stamps V*, 2010.
100 years of South African stamps (1910 - 2010).
stamps, pins, acetate, cloth, wood.
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA.
- left bottom: *Labels*, 2009.
digital prints, map pins
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA.
- above: *Stamps V*, 2010.
100 years of South African stamps (1910 - 2010).
stamps, pins, cloth, wood.
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA.