



FUSEBOX

Siemon Allen & Dominic McGill

Pop-Agenda March 27 – May 8, 2004

Siemon Allen and Dominic McGill are both artists who have chosen America as their home, and whose work looks at popular culture and political agendas both here and in their home countries. Much of South African-born Allen's recent work has involved some form of appropriation: a massive South African stamp collection, US newspapers and collector's cards have been used to examine ideas including nationhood and propaganda. Language, history and politics also fuel the work of Dominic McGill. In his last solo show, British-born McGill built a rusting atomic bomb that contained a lifelike model of the Bikini Atoll. His large scale drawings have also looked at recent American history.

In his latest work, Allen has used two of Hergé's classic Tintin adventures, "Land of Black Gold" and "The Red Sea Sharks," and a South African photo-comic from the 1970s called "Naglegioen" – Night Legion in Afrikaans. Allen uses the Tintin adventures to take a timely look at Western attitudes toward the Middle East and Arab culture. Tintin's Middle Eastern adventures have a complex history. In the original version, Tintin was arrested by the British authorities in Haifa, and subsequently kidnapped by Jews and then by Arabs. By its final

English language revision, Hergé has depoliticised the book, excising all references to the British and Jews and setting the story instead in his imaginary emirate of the Khemed. Allen has spliced the versions, highlighting Hergé's self-censorship and our own changing attitudes.

"Naglegioen" is a more overtly political work, set in Angola in the 1970s. Allen unearthed the Naglegioen in a Durban comic store. South Africa's answer to the A-Team, the Naglegioen are mercenaries who conduct covert operations for "millionaires, statesmen and leaders" – in this case rescuing the daughter of the local governor. Like the British presence in Haifa, the Portuguese had troops stationed in Angola to protect their colonial interests and to fight rebels who were seeking independence. In the familiar Tintin images, Allen has blanked out the speech bubbles, leaving space for the viewer to create his own narrative. In Naglegioen, the speech remains but is unintelligible for most American viewers.

Like a modern-day Bayeux tapestry, McGill's latest drawing, "Project For a New American Century," is an historical panorama. This looped drawing stretches across 60 feet, taking in Hiroshima, the Cold War and more recent history. With no clear beginning or end, the drawing's narrative leads the viewer on ever more complicated paths. This is a partisan

piece; historic "coincidences" occur throughout the work. Bob Dylan finds Jesus close to the Jonestown Massacre. Gary Gilmore's quote, "We are sentenced to die the day that we are born," crops up next to the Hyde Amendment banning Medicaid abortions. The piece also pokes fun at "revolutionary" counterculture. The Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious, who died of an overdose in 1979, snarls next to a slogan reading "If you see Sid, tell him," from the UK government's advertising campaign for the privatisation of British Gas. The ads ran in 1986, the year the biopic "Sid and Nancy" was released. The counterculture, McGill implies, is also cashing in on fossil fuels. Thick lines of gothic text twine out of the picture as its meanings become ever more complex and we emerge like lost children in a fairy tale, or Dante in a dark wood, "the right way lost."

Both artists' pieces seem to warn us that our agendas and the forces that shape them are difficult to read and ever changing, and that the search for the truth is a perilous journey: Allen's piece ends with Tintin lost at sea, McGill's history leads to a burning forest.

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