

WASHINGTON, DC

SIEMON ALLEN/
DOMINIC MCGILL

FUSEBOX GALLERY

Clearly inspired by events in the Middle East, the works by Dominic McGill and Siemon Allen that make up the recent show "Pop Agenda" use a pop-cultural idiom to offer a glimpse of how political, economic, and social issues get transformed as they percolate through mass media and culture. McGill, who is British born but lives in New York, titles his work *Project for a New American Century* as a way to frame American military involvements in 2004 against those of the last hundred years. The immense drawing is suspended like a sculpture from the ceiling and looped in such a way that it forms a curved interior space in the center of the gallery. Beginning with the phrase NO FUN, NO FUTURE, NO OIL, a time line unfolds that references events and issues from Hiroshima to O.J. to the homeless to Cheney's "Energy Task Force"; all of this is conveyed via sweeping panoramas suggesting patriotic Hollywood war movies whose illusionistic spaces have been punctured by scrawled and printed news headlines, slogans, and leftist political graffiti. Following this loose narrative, the viewer eventually ends up in the work's interior, surrounded by forest scenes in which a nun can be seen praying. But even this space offers no respite: Images of an explosion and a hangman's noose break the stillness.

Allen, on the other hand, takes his political imagery straight and uneditorialized. On the walls flanking McGill's drawing, the South African artist, who now lives in Richmond, Virginia, installed what at first appeared to be two large, gridded abstractions but which are actually the photocopied pages of comic books he read as a youth, laid out in a grid. *Naglegioen* ("Night Legion" in Afrikaans), 2004, measures approximately seven by fourteen feet and reproduces a black-and-white photo-comic from the '70s that tells the tale of South African mercenaries in Portuguese-controlled Angola trying to rescue a local governor's daughter from mutinous colonial forces. Because all the participants look alike and the Afrikaans-language text is untranslated, it's impossible for an American viewer to tell heroes from villains, and one is left to ponder the nature of aggression and violence itself. On the opposite wall is *The Land of Black Gold*, 2004, another

giant at seven by sixteen and a half feet, which takes apart a still painfully current 1950 *Tintin* comic about colonialism and Middle East oil. The original French-language edition of the comic book and its 1971 British translation are aligned in parallel rows with all text removed from the panels to show how its British translators and publishers transformed the later version; not only entirely expunging anti-Jewish images and all depictions of the British Navy and British Mandate forces in Palestine, but actually changing the setting to a fictional Middle Eastern emirate called Khemed. Gradually, with scenes redrawn, truncated, or eliminated so as to project a more politically expedient story, the two editions get further and further out of sync. Like McGill's technique of puncturing wide-screen panoramic effects with graffiti and text, Allen's shifting frames make the changes in Western political attitudes toward the Middle East palpable and visible; they also raise our awareness of the way seemingly innocuous sources can quietly manipulate our understanding of history.

—Howard Risatti