

Style

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When History Throws Us an Endless Curve

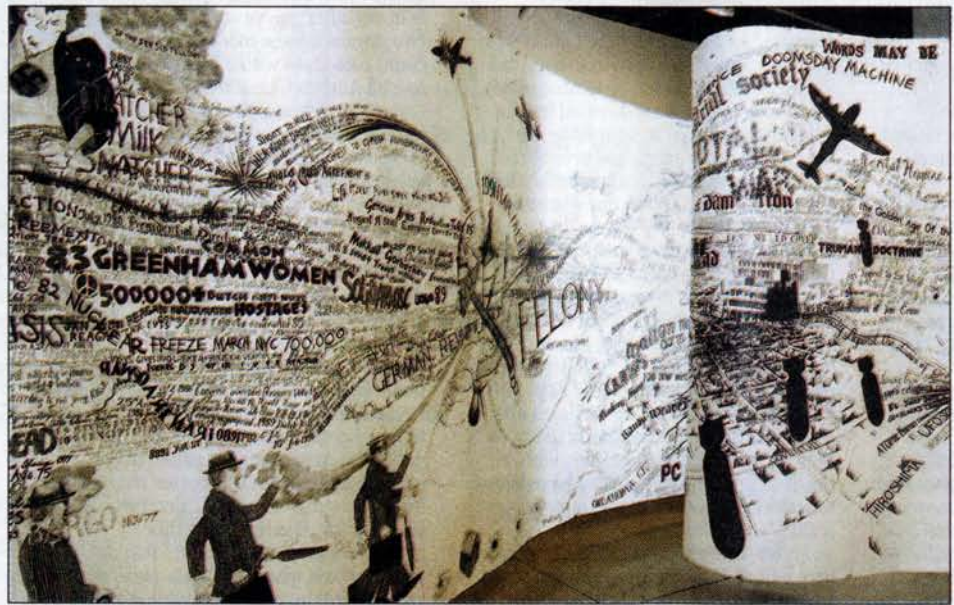
By GLENN DIXON
Special to The Washington Post

History painting once was a fairly straightforward affair. Whether it was Emanuel Leutze's "George Washington Crossing the Delaware" or Jacques-Louis David's "The Death of Socrates," the formula was clear: You need great men, dramatic moments, and flattering lighting.

By the late 20th century, unabashed hero worship was done for. And even when events unfolded in the daily newspaper or played out in real time on TV, you could no longer believe your eyes, no longer trust that the whole story was being told. Being an eyewitness to history didn't necessarily mean you understood what you saw.

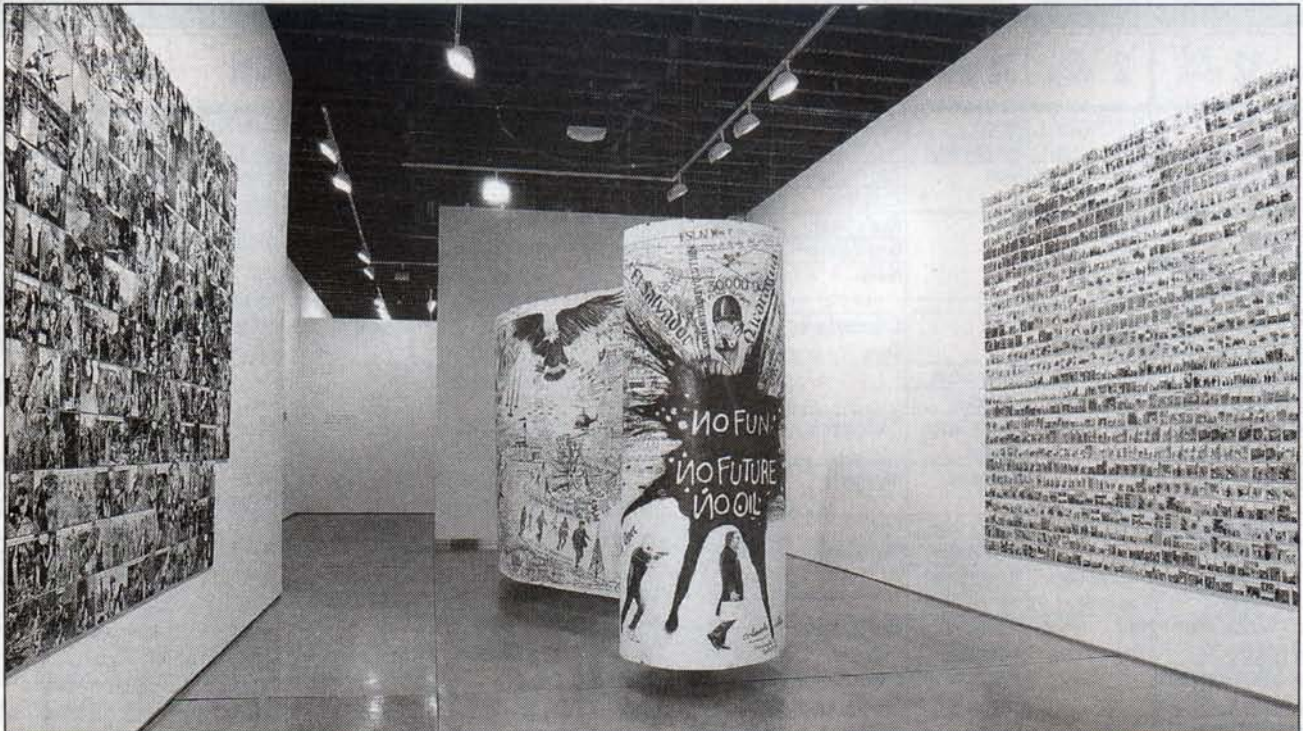
"Pop-Agenda," Fusebox's excellent show of provocative new work by Simon Allen and Dominic McGill, presents history in a way more in tune with our own cynical, chaotic age.

See ART, C5, Col. 1



BY CHRIS SMITH—FUSEBOX

Chaos theory: Dominic McGill's "Project for a New American Century" is part of a show of new work at Fusebox.



PHOTOS BY CHRIS SMITH—FUSEBOX

"Project for a New American Century" separates "Nagleioen," left and below, from "The Land of Black Gold" at Fusebox.

At Fusebox, A Dizzying Look at Our History

ART, From C1

This history is told not by victors, but by two observers in self-imposed exile. Allen is a South African based in Richmond. McGill is a Briton based in New York.

McGill's "Project for a New American Century" avails itself of the scale and scope of history painting, but the artist distrusts the sureness and permanence of the traditional painting. Coiled into loops and hung from the ceiling in the center of the gallery, his 60-foot timeline running from Hiroshima to the present day is executed in dark, smudgy graphite. Where history painting has traditionally been concerned with creating the perfectly planned permanent record, McGill's pencil drawing is another thing altogether. It's about immediacy and accident, rushing to get everything down before it changes into whatever happens next.

Stagy compositions are out, too. In place of images of the great moments of history's power players are simply the names that made the papers, hundreds and hundreds of people (Whittaker Chambers, Gary Powers, Martin Luther King Jr., Mikhail Gorbachev, Osama bin Laden), places (Dresden, Levittown, Chernobyl), events (Daniel Ellsberg leaks Pentagon Papers, Bloody Sunday, Nuclear Freeze March), policies (Truman Doctrine, Preemption), slogans (By Any Means Necessary), and sound bites (Axis of Evil). Each is inscribed in its own hand-wrought font, and all are roiling like so many worms in a bucket.

There are images interwoven into this tangled tapestry of text, from bomb-blasted city blocks to a crumbling hammer and sickle, but they serve mainly as visual punctuation of the writhing mass of words.

"Project for a New American Century" reverberates with the clash between the counterculture and the mainstream. Pop stars like Tupac Shakur and Sid Vicious jostle against apartheid and the Marshall Plan for a moment before the public eye. The effect is one of confusion, of too much information and too little time to decipher what it might mean.

Allen's work is more orderly, but it too speaks to the difficulties of coming to terms with history. In "The Land of Black Gold," he takes as his starting point the comic book of the same title featuring the youthful reporter-adventurer Tintin, the most famous creation of legendary Belgian cartoonist Herge.

Since 1929, Tintin has entertained children around the world. His serialized ex-



ploits, which first appeared in newspapers and magazines, are today available on six continents, collected into two dozen colorful volumes that have been translated into more than 30 languages, from Afrikaans to Chinese to Greek to Welsh. In Herge's stories, Tintin himself trotted around the globe, exposing treachery from Chicago to Sydney, unraveling schemes from South America to Tibet.

More than simply history's student, Herge was also its pawn. "The Land of Black Gold," which featured a German villain, was begun in late September 1939, during the Nazi invasion of Poland. The story was aborted when Belgium fell to the Germans, who shut down the newspaper that employed Herge. In 1948, he took up the narrative anew, giving the plot an overhaul. Playing off current events, he explicitly set the new version amid the intrigues of postwar Palestine. In 1950, it appeared in book form.

Two decades later, the cartoonist updated the old title by cleaning up the drawing and modernizing the settings, but this time, with an unmistakably political ring. Palestine became the mythical Middle Eastern emirate of Khemed, Haifa became the fictional Khemikhal, and British soldiers and Jewish militias were supplanted by various Arab factions.

What Allen does with Herge's comic is line up wall-mounted color copies of the 1950 and 1971 compilations of the strips, spooling the panels out into long rows and interleaving them. Everything happens twice—almost. In the earlier version we see Tintin being escorted by kilted, helmeted British soldiers. Look to the line below and you see him in the company of Arab military policemen. It's as though Tintin has slid into a parallel universe governed by a different set of political tensions. It's pretty much the same story, but now it means something entirely different.

It's not exactly the same story, though. Herge simply dropped sequences along the way. Consequently, matching panels in adjacent rows of Allen's piece soon fail to align. You know something's missing but it takes serious detective work to unearth the missing blocks from the wall of images.

Allen further dismantles the narrative by

blocking out all the speech balloons, rendering the characters mute. Even if you are familiar with Herge's stories, you'll have trouble discerning what the cartoonist intended. Any number of plots could be imagined to suit the pictures.

For viewers who don't read Afrikaans, a similar difficulty attends "Nagleioen," in which Allen takes as his primary text "Night Legion," a black-and-white photonoel from the 1970s about the exploits of mercenaries in Angola. This time, there's only one version of the story and the speech balloons remain intact, but the goings-on remain largely inscrutable to an American audience. Although Allen's sources are works of fiction, his art suggests that accounts of actual events are similarly vulnerable to alteration. The past is ever at the mercy of the prejudices, ignorance, and programs of the present day.

And McGill's work counsels that all the good intentions we can muster won't be enough to straighten out the mess history has become. In the middle of a violent black splat that faces the gallery door, interrupting the timeline and greeting viewers as they enter, white lettering reads, "NO FUN/NO FUTURE/NO OIL." The first line is taken from Iggy and the Stooges, the second from the Sex Pistols. The third is simply an inevitability for a world grown heedlessly dependent on fossil fuels.

McGill suggests that the moment we have the least perspective on is the one we're living in right now. His wraparound timeline culminates in a forest of dead trees that melts back into the flash of the A-bomb, like a serpent eating its tail.

"Pop-Agenda" is a heady and ominous show that calls into question even art's ability to save us from ourselves. Savvy and pessimistic, it uncovers a logical hitch in George Santayana's famous dictum: The machinery of history being what it is, those who can remember the past may be condemned to repeat it as well.

Pop-Agenda: Siemon Allen and Dominic McGill is at Fusebox, 1412 14th St. NW, through May 8. For information call 202-299-9220. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday noon to 8 p.m. or by appointment.