

Rear View Mirror

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Elizabeth Fisher, 2004

Much of Siemon Allen's work deals with the political and social history of South Africa and the way this country represents itself through images and the news media. *The Land of Black Gold* assembles two versions of Hergé's classic Tintin comic, in which connections between oil, the Middle East and its importance to the West are explored. Setting them alongside one another in a grid structure, Allen is able to compare, frame by frame, the original French cartoon which first appeared in 1939 in the newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle* with a second, British version that was published in 1971. At the beginning the stories are virtually identical, and so the parallel rows appear to be in sync. This is evident in the top two rows. As the story progresses the pattern begins to go out of sync, and the repetitive pattern begins to stagger and becomes more complex. The changes reflect the shifts in the political climate in the Middle East. In 1971, at the request of the British publishers, the British Palestinian Mandate forces in the comic are replaced by Arab military police. In almost identically drawn scenes, we see in the place of the kilted British soldiers of the 1950 version, two Arab military policemen. Other scenes, including various anti-Semitic images, are eliminated and the events truncated after the third version. Tintin no longer arrives in British-occupied Palestine, is no longer arrested by British soldiers and is no longer kidnapped by the Irgun (the Jewish militia, who in the third version let off a gas grenade and bundle Tintin in their car having mistaken him for their own.) Instead the new version takes place in a non-specific, fictional Arab country: Khemed. From a distance, the colour shifts that appear as the stories go out of sync create visual rhythms across the grid that give the work the semblance of an abstract painting – a formal device used by Allen that has the overall effect of softening the sharp, national discrepancies in historical memory.

