

## No view and the collocation of things

I have said that the artist's problem is not necessarily ours. That, as we work with the painting, our interest is not in the artist's consciousness. That, however interesting the story may be of the artist's doubts, fears and desires, it is the painting we work with. And this even if we do ascribe such meanings as we invent/ discover there to the artist — as if meaning were (merely) a recoverable intentionality. Yet Killeen's notes, we will see, assert this very thing as theme and as problem: that the painting 'should not be explainable ... as one artist's view'.

The strategy in relation to a spectator is planned — in secret — in the notebooks. In making public this secret and slow coming to terms with the painting, it is perhaps possible to do something more than to make of the notes the artist's recovered intention. It may be possible to see them as a critical reading of such paintings as have already been made — to see Killeen as critic.

There is a crucial difference, of course. If our problem is to read the paintings, his is to make of his reading *new* paintings.

Killeen's problem now, as always, is what to put in the painting (what 'objects', what 'subjects', what 'things', as he calls them — what signs), and how to put them in, how to relate them. Just as our problem is what to make of them once they are in, and related as they are. Once, his paintings had related things in terms of realism, in terms of the classical 'view'. Now that they have abandoned what Killeen calls the view's old 'real situation', they offer instead what he calls 'an assemblage of objects not easily situated with each other'<sup>1</sup> — not easily situated in terms of classic realism, that is.

Yet it is noteworthy that even during and after the chance works, in which already he was making 'an assemblage of objects not easily situated with each other', in which already the view was undone, Killeen was still considering making 'subject' or 'situation' pictures — pictures with traditionally narrative titles like *Riot* or *Sinking of the Wahine*.<sup>2</sup> — pictures which might allow the

---

<sup>1</sup> Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 12. The blue notebook is a blue, hardback, unlined notebook, which Killeen wrote and drew in from 30/4/71 to February 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Killeen, the notebook, p. 108 and p. 120 respectively.

reader the comfort of making a traditional narrative reading. Though in one voice he said sternly to himself, 'There must be no attempt to do the old realist feeling of a situation', and 'other pieces of subject matter not realistically present in a riot situation must be brought in', in the very thought of such classical titles, he was in danger of backsliding towards the classical picture, in which there is a coherent collocation of things, all subsumable under such headings as person, place and event.

That these pictures were never completed is, perhaps, in its very negativity, significant evidence. Killeen came to realise, it seems, that, given the present state of his painting, he *could not* make such works.

Shortly after January 1971 he was certain:

*The enlargement of a subject situation  
is not the point...*

*Objects grouped together should not  
be explainable especially as one artist's  
view of a whole situation.*

*The situations I do are not situations at all...*

*The objects need therefore not be grouped as  
a physical situation but as a conceptual one.*

*(Killeen the green notebook, p. 142)*

And so, in April 1971 he instructs himself: 'Move away from *event* — the people in the paintings ... they have become objects like everything else.'<sup>3</sup>

*The whole thing must be moved up  
to the next painting level leaving all  
illustration behind.*

*All illustration must go...*

*(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 149)*

*Do not want real situation or  
to try to give more information about  
particular event.*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 14)*

---

<sup>3</sup> Killeen, the green notebook, p. 148.

So the view must go. So the event. So the reader must go to a new situation. Accordingly, in 19 April 1971 Killeen can criticise a show by Colin McCahon at Barry Lett Galleries, saying: 'He has been moved by a beautiful landscape and he has represented it in paint — it comes down to a picture of.'<sup>4</sup>

No view, then. No illustration. No picture *of*. What then? The struggle is to find some other, some new way of relating the signs.

*My problem seems to be that of  
replacing the real situation which I  
no longer have any affinity with  
with something I cannot quite realise  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 4)*

Certainly, the artist should not seem to explain the grouping of objects; the artist's eye and 'I' should no longer be a point from which a view is seen to project. Furthermore, since the title too may constitute a view, a projective point from which all in the picture depends, the title too as a view must — somehow — be undone.

*This seeing as a view is possible even if a number of  
objects and subjects are represented in some  
way with the title naming only one of  
them. This means all the other subjects  
other than the one named become related  
to the one subject. They become a  
background and who needs that?  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 27)*

The title, should it select one from a number of depicted objects for remark, constitutes a projective point from which that object becomes the foreground in the viewer's reading, and the rest background: devices, both, of the old and unwanted view. One way, then, to stop the title reconstituting a view might be to include, as well as the object(s) to which the title points, other, apparently irrelevant, 'distracting' objects — a device to which the cut-outs will return.

---

<sup>4</sup> Killeen, the green notebook, p. 151.

*If the title names some object that is not collective in any way then the whole tends to be a view of this situation and thing. Everything relates to one point and this is wrong.*

*A painting should contain this subject but there should be something else to distract the mind and move it towards the larger and more important subject of the whole.  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 27)*

Killeen also considers the possibility of using 'meaningless' titles — titles unrelated to the depicted objects, titles which point for their viewer/reader only to an absence, titles:

*Utterly unintelligible  
Inconceivably understandable  
Understandably inconceivable*

*The title helping in the understanding by denying the painting. Instead of naming a subject which the painting could be about names what is lacking or perhaps that which concerns the painter but is not there as an object. This means the spectator cannot understand the painting in terms of the title. The painting does not illustrate the title (or appear to)  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 26)*

*Most important in calling a painting something that the painting is not seen as a view of that subject  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 27)*

How then to relate things together? (Often our problem too, in looking at Killeen's paintings.) Which question can be subsumed for the painter in

another: how to relate things to ground? This is the question posed and re-posed in the paintings of June, July and August 1971.



fig. 69 *Duck*, July 1971

One possibility is having 'objects toning into non-objects':<sup>5</sup> to fade objects out at one or more of their edges, so that they merge with the ground — as happens, say, to the duck of *Duck*, July 1971, [fig. 69] or to the cylinder of *On the ground*, July 1971 [fig. 70] and to the 'abstract' shapes in both paintings. (This fade-out device might be related to McCahon's use of it, learned from Malevich, in such paintings as his notorious co-winner of the Hays Prize, *Painting*, 1958) [fig. 71] — though more probably it derives from Malevich himself.

But, there is a problem with the device. As forms fade out at their edges, they seem to come in and out of the painted ground, which ground so misted will seem to the viewer more and more to signify 'sky'.

<sup>5</sup> Killeen, the green notebook, p. 118.



fig. 70 *On the ground*, July 1971

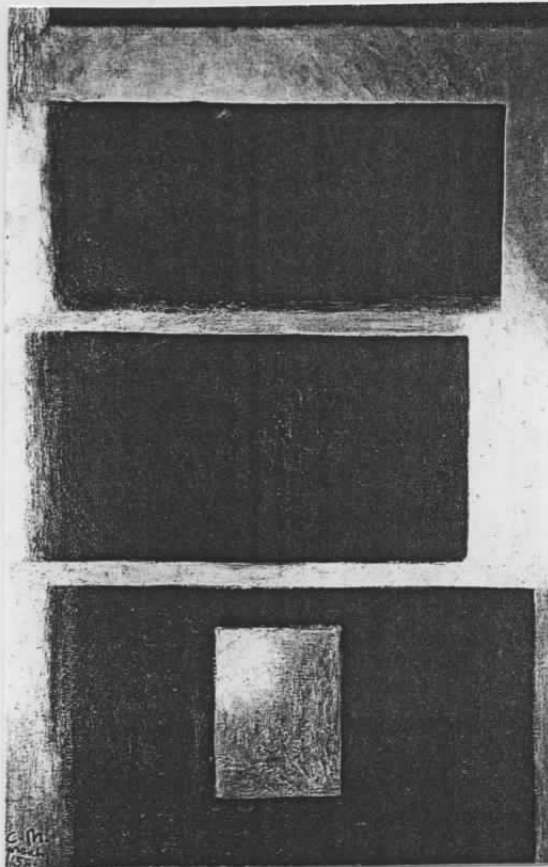


fig. 71 Colin McCahon, *Painting*, 1958.

*Am I to accept that the part left over from  
a something (an object, tangible) is a  
nothing. Therefore must things always  
float in what amounts to the sky.  
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 144)*

A problem not solved until the cut-outs, when the part left over from a 'something', that 'sky', that 'nothing', is cut entirely away.

*Do not make paintings of it — paint the idea  
and leave the rest of the board to constitute  
something else.  
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 144)*

But how, before the cut-outs, to do that? Not until the cut-outs can Killeen truly *leave* the rest of the board. The closest he has come is in *One foot twelve inches*, [fig. 62] and the related works, where, between the signs, the board is left as white and untouched ground. Concurrently with such paintings, Killeen had made others with misted backgrounds, and since then, the ground has come unsatisfactorily again to seem something like sky — unsatisfactorily, that is, to move towards the Surrealist, towards the unlikely conjunction of things in a still retrogressively realist space.

31/5/71

*At the moment I cannot structure  
the situation which the objects  
are in. Naively one seems to attempt  
to fade into the other*

---

*Consider shapes with objects painted  
on them — the shapes carrying the  
object and providing the structure — shape  
to shape — leaving the object and subject  
freer  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p.7)*



fig. 72 *If you like it you can have it*, June 1971

And so, in such paintings as *If you like it you can have it*, June 1971, [fig. 72] the object (man or knife) is placed on a rectangular shape, which itself fades out, at one or more of its edges, into the ground. But, really, this is only to defer the problem: to paint, for each sign a little ground all of its own, which then still has — somehow — to be related to the larger ground of the whole.

Killeen also considers, and rejects with a firm *No*, the possibility of placing these rectangular planes into a grid.<sup>6</sup> It is a freedom of placing he is after, which the grid would entirely deny:

*Structure?*  
*square lines etc*  
*contain the whole*  
*thing — it doesn't open out*  
*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 8)*

The object's outline frames it; that outline is framed within the rectangular 'structure'; those structures are framed within the rectangular frame. Killeen reads this multiplication of frames as imprisoning his objects — in frames within frames within frames. 'It doesn't open out.'

<sup>6</sup> Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 7.



*Make the structure  
3 dimensional instead of  
Flat  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 8)*

Might *that* help his things to escape? So that one might

*Define the structure  
and then do what you like  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 8)*

There are, he realises

*2 things — the structure and the subject  
is it necessary to structure the subject  
thereby changing the subject.  
The subject is free — the painting  
is not. I do not like ordering  
a subject for the sake of the painting  
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 8)*

Not until the cut-outs will Killeen find a way again, as he did in the chance works, not to do that which he so dislikes — a way not to order the subject for the painting's sake, and at the painting's dictate; and to allow, instead, the subject to go free, uncomposed, over the unpainted ground. But for now, for Killeen the critic:

*still the same problem of 'background'  
What is it? — something real  
in relation to the objects?  
or painting space?*

*The trouble is that I have  
been thinking of the objects  
as real things and not  
painting things and therefore as  
needing a real situation  
as background. But they  
are not real — I made*

*them and they exist only  
in the painting to be  
used for the painting and  
the message...*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 8)*

That is, despite the fact that Killeen's present work has some advantage over his earlier 'realism', in that it is able now to combine 'abstract' things with 'figurative' things, he has mistakenly continued to think of all his painted things — whether 'figurative' or 'abstract' — as if they were real. As a consequence of this confusion, he has been forced to accept for his painted things a 'real situation' — a realistic space: hence that sky in which, deplorably, they are floating.

In that space, and in that fertile confusion of thought, even his abstract shapes have become 'things', and so subject to all the dictates of realist representation. In *Duck*, [fig. 69] for instance, a triangle — an 'abstraction' if ever there was, a 'mind thing' — has become so materially a thing it can even be carried away under an arm...

A confusion not without its amusements. Nor without its uses. For it is but a step from thinking of all his painted shapes, whether they are 'figurative' or 'abstract', as 'things', as but one kind of entity, to seeing them all as *signs* — which latter way of seeing is a prerequisite for the cut-outs to come. Since 'a consubstantiality had been established', as Panofsky would say, between 'figures' and 'abstractions', since *both* are treated as 'things', they are granted an 'existential homogeneity' — to use another Panofskian term: a homogeneity which not only precedes but is the precondition of their coming both to be regarded as sign.<sup>7</sup>

Some part of Killeen is now coming consciously to see that his painting is putting SIGNS together, not things, and that the sign is not the thing it represents, but only a *difference*. He says of his painted 'things': 'they are not real — they exist only in the painting to be used for the painting and the message': their only existence is in pictorial language. They constitute a difference from the world and an absence from it, in which the world is only deferred: — the sign duck does not fly.

---

<sup>7</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, Harper and Row, New York, 1971, vol. 1, p. 14.

*It looks like a duck but it can't fly*  
*Looks like a duck but isn't a duck*  
*Looks like a duck but didn't*  
*He looks like a duck be he didn't*  
*make a duck and it can't fly*  
*duck and fly.*  
*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p.8)*

The paintings in which all these problems are raised represent the moment and the site of an important and necessary realisation — a realisation which constitutes a major advance (not that Killeen knew it) in the direction of the cut-outs. This realisation: all of the objects of Killeen's representations, including both the 'figurative' and the 'abstract', are existentially homogeneous, in that they are all signs, and have their life only in pictorial 'language'. And such a realisation is a necessary precondition not only of the cut-outs, which will best preserve and exemplify it, but of all the works on the way.