

Begun in the New Zealand landscape painting tradition and begun with McCahon

However great an artist may be, he will normally begin by absorbing the tradition prevailing at the time of his youth, and by taking a definite attitude towards it.
(Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Durer*)

In 1966, Killeen's final year at the Elam School of Fine Art, the New Zealand landscape painting tradition was the most comfortably established tenant of New Zealand art institutions. So Killeen's art was begun in a priorness largely of that tradition; and — inseparably — in the stock beliefs about it, the notions informing it, and the reactions to it — in the words too, which lay everywhere before, behind and over it.

One such informing notion was that of a 'national identity' in art. In New Zealand, from the 1930s through to the 1960s, this notion was inextricably intertwined with the depiction of land. Two qualities, above all, were claimed as constituting a New Zealand national identity in art: first, the ubiquity of the New Zealand landscape as subject, and, as a corollary, through a few favoured painters, a transparency to its truths; and second, a harsh clarity of New Zealand light, and a consequent harsh clarity in New Zealand style.

To quote for example from Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith's *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, 1969:

*Two main patterns emerge: a general orientation towards landscape., not only as a readily accessible subject but also as a source of imagery capable of profound implications, and a positive response by a number of New Zealand painters to the distinctive qualities of New Zealand light.*¹

The claims of a 'general orientation towards landscape' had by the 1960s assumed not only a descriptive power, but also something of the the force of a self-fulfilling prophecy, since landscape painting was as much encouraged by critical prescription as by painted example, while painters like Milan Mrkusich

¹ Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, Collins, London, Auckland, 1969, p. 9.

and Gordon Walters, painters working outside the landscape tradition, or in active opposition to it, were rendered more or less invisible by Nationalist critics.

So, in the 1960s, when Killeen was first constituted as a painter, the regionalist landscape tradition was the reigning power. Modernist abstraction was personified in but two major figures, Mrkusich and Walters, neither of whom were then admitted as major. The story Walters tells of his not exhibiting his several hundred abstract gouaches of the 1950s until 1974, knowing that there was an absolute hostility to such an art as his, and the fact that he did not exhibit at all between 1949 and 1966, may well assume all the pathos and power of an exemplary fiction.² In the 1950s and 60s, and through even to the 70s, the rhetoric of the regional real was still in New Zealand the most vociferous and the most institutionally acceptable art language.

Since the 1930s, New Zealand regionalist discourse had been governed by a series of hierarchical oppositions.³ For our present purposes, it is sufficient to diagram only the following, those which most clearly constitute the early Killeen. In these oppositions, the first term of each antithetical pair is the privileged, and the second is the despised:

<i>good figures</i>	<i>the divide</i>	<i>bad figures</i>
<i>country</i>		<i>city</i>
<i>realism</i>		<i>abstraction</i>
<i>New Zealand</i>		<i>foreign</i>
<i>local (rootedness)</i>		<i>cosmopolitan (rootlessness)</i>
<i>nature</i>		<i>culture</i>
<i>regionalist</i>		<i>internationalist</i>

Such oppositions had been rehearsed, with monotonous invariance, from the 1930s through to the 1960s. Regionalist critical proclamation — or, as it increasingly tends to be called today, *Nationalist* proclamation — is an endless dance between such figures. Three simple rules govern this dance. One. Any figure may join any figure on its own side of the divide. Two. Any figure on the

² Gordon Walters, cited by Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p. 13.

³ For a fuller account of these oppositions, see my 'Nationalist Antitheses: a Compendium', *Antic* 1, June 1986, pp. 72-84, and my forthcoming *The Invention of New Zealand: a Nationalist Mythology of Landscape*.

one side may be set in opposition to any figure on the other side of the divide. Three. The divide may not be crossed.

From among this doctrinal dance of opposites, Killeen found himself taking realism against abstraction, country as against city, nature as against culture, regionalism as against 'internationalism', New Zealand subjects, not foreign (native ferns, forests, skies). [fig. 12] 'I am beginning to believe more and more', he wrote in 1966, 'that a painter should begin in his own surroundings.'⁴ So he was begun as a painter.



fig. 12 'Landscape diptych', 1966

In Saussure's convenient terms, one might say regional realism was a language (*langue*) by which Killeen was first constituted as a painter, and in which his paintings were begun as individual acts of speech (*parole*). And this, it seems, is how he was regarded at the time: as one of the latest speakers of the

⁴ Killeen, note on loose paper headed White's Metal Industries Ltd and D.S.C., 1966.

language of the regional real. Consider, for instance, the following passage from a Gordon Brown essay of 1968, 'Directions in Recent New Zealand Art'.⁵

Perhaps the most significant development has been the growing interest in a new kind of realism that owes no allegiance to any recent ['foreign'] art movement but if anything is closer to the regionalists of the nineteen-thirties, without necessarily being so naturalistic or regional in outlook. Don Binney acts as a link... At the moment the most promising exponents are Michael Smither and Richard Killeen.

One might plausibly trace, following Brown, a genealogy in this form, going from Rita Angus (the key 1930s regional realist) to Don Binney in the 1960s, from him to Michael Smither, and from him to Richard Killeen, Robin White, Ian Scott, and others. Yet already the picture is somewhat more complex, since Killeen knew more than one language. He was not able to utter all of the required tenets of a regionalist orthodoxy, nor to subscribe to all its canonical antitheses. Already (through books, through magazines, through local artist's reports, through Colin McCahon as teacher) he knew too much of 'international' modernist language to regard it — as did the revered and still endlessly quoted Nationalist critic, A.R.D. Fairburn — as a kind of Jewish or homosexual plot, an aestheticism detached from normal life concerns.⁶ Killeen had himself spoken in the language of abstraction — he had painted some abstracts at art school. [fig. 13]

Given this complication of allegiance, this inward crossing of the regionalist divide, where might Killeen turn? He turns to the most multitudinous voice in the New Zealand regionalist tradition, to the work of Colin McCahon, his painting teacher at the Elam School of Fine Art, University of Auckland. He turns to McCahon as the convenient confluence of those two different, even contradictory languages — the regionalist landscape language, and that of 'international' abstraction. For Killeen, just as for his teacher McCahon, the

⁵ Gordon Brown, 'Directions in Recent New Zealand Art', *Ten years of New Zealand painting in Auckland*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1968, p.3

⁶ For A.R.D. Fairburn's connecting Semitism to cosmopolitan modernism, see his letter to R.A.K. Mason, *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, ed. Lauris Edmond, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1981, p. 80. 'The Jews are a non-territorial race, so their genius is turned to dust and ashes... Cosmopolitanism -- Semitism - are false... Internationalism is their child - and an abortion... Jewish standards have infected most Western art.' For Fairburn's connecting homosexuality to abstraction -- called by him 'aestheticism' - see his essay, 'The Woman Problem', *A.R.D. Fairburn: The Woman Problem and Other Prose*, selected by Denis Glover and Geoffrey Fairburn, Blackwood and Janet Paul Ltd, Auckland, 1967.

'international' language of modernist abstraction will be brought to bear upon items of the regional real.⁷



fig. 13 'Art school abstract', 1965

Since McCahon's enterprise included the language of international modernism, it afforded a far wider repertoire than that allowed by the regional realist proper. If it imposed greater stringencies and difficulties than did the regional real, it also opened greater opportunities. Had Killeen started instead with a more purely regionalist art, it might fatally have limited his possibilities.⁸ As it was, McCahon provided for him at once a barrier and a beginning.

⁷ It is perhaps significant, in the matter of the early Killeen's relation to McCahon, that the two surviving Killeen abstractions of 1966 should be based on a chimney and roof in the one example, and should look somewhat like a road sign in the other. McCahon was such an admirer of the road sign that 'as visually splendid as road signs' was for him the highest expression of praise. (Colin McCahon, 'All the paintings, Drawings and Prints by Colin McCahon in the Gallery's Collection', *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, no. 44, 1969, p. 11.) Furthermore, a number of McCahon's abstract series of *Gates* were based, according to his own account, on rooftops as seen through his studio window. (Colin McCahon, in *Colin McCahon / A Survey Exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972, p. 29.)

⁸ The regionalist had to cope with a special - and self-imposed - handicap. Since the 'foreign' was inadmissible, as was the (almost synonymous) new, regionalism's forms, once established, could feed only on themselves or perish of inanition. (How, in any case, having caught the timeless essence of New Zealand, could any change be desired or allowed?) Repetition, or diminution, not development, was necessarily the result. In accord with these self-imposed limitations, even the best of the regionalists show remarkably little development. Rita Angus, for instance, apart from some mildly surrealist episodes (non-naturalistic juxtaposition of naturalistic elements - a sort of provincial, *English* surrealism) stayed much the same in style for thirty or so years of her work. Those younger painters who traced over her footsteps had by c. 1970 come to the end of the road - after a certain point, it seemed, there was simply not enough left to do, there were no possibilities in regional realism left. Binney retreated, in disarray, to England (seven lean years, he said, followed seven fat). Smithers' painterly voice became, and has remained, uncertain. Killeen and Scott abandoned regional realism entirely, Killeen submitting it to a telling critique as he left, and slamming the door behind. White, perhaps because printmaking is intrinsically a task of repetition, was able for some longer time to hang on.

This McCahonian beginning is first clearly visible in those early landscapes where Killeen adds to McCahon's characteristic composition of dark hill and light sky a naturalistic inflection of foliage and cloud; [fig. 14] in tall, scroll-format landscapes akin to McCahon's scrolls; [fig 14] and in those works where separate landscapes are made to abut in separate panels [fig. 15] — as in McCahon's *Northland Panels* [fig. 16] While McCahon as a barrier, a heap of obstacles rather than possibilities, was soon to constitute for Killeen the site of a larger struggle, a defining of himself, at least in part, in an opposing attempt to get through.



fig. 14 'Landscape', 1966



fig. 15 *Landscape diptych no. 2*, 1966



fig. 16 Colin McCahon, *Northland panels*, 1958 (detail)

Nor is this a matter necessarily of negativity. For Killeen, as for his friend and fellow student Ian Scott, McCahon provided a first 'passage to modernity' — in Marcelin Pleynet's phrase.⁹ Killeen seems to have seen

⁹ Marcelin Pleynet, 'Mondrian 25 Years Later', *Painting and System*, transl. Sima N. Godley, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 83

McCahon — just as later, he was to see Walters — as a way into modernity for the New Zealand painter, and as a way out of the reactionary impasse of New Zealand regional realism. McCahon, that is to say, was for Killeen and for Scott a *Gate*, in its triple and indeterminable sense — that which bars a way, that which opens a way, and that which shapes a way.

If the test of an artist be their fecundity, then, paradoxically, Killeen testifies to McCahon's fecundity, precisely *because* his art will become, in the end, the most radical critique there is of McCahon. And this is quite apart from the fact that Killeen might truthfully be able to say of McCahon's painting, as Mangold has said of Abstract Expressionism, to which *his* art responds as critique: 'I learned from it that art had content, that it signified something, that it was important'.¹⁰

Not only had Killeen had been McCahon's student for two years. Of all the students available to McCahon, it was Killeen whom he chose in 1966 to be his sole assistant in painting the windows and a series of landscape Stations of the Cross for the Chapel of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, Remuera, Auckland. McCahonian Christianity, that is to say, and the McCahonian Christianised landscape, had pressed with a particular intimacy against Killeen. It was, in some part, perhaps, his very closeness to McCahon which was later to provoke in Killeen an explicit and public rejection of McCahonian Christianity — a rejection sharing something of the very seriousness of that art it would refuse.

With his usual novelistic skill, and with a characteristic self-dramatisation, McCahon tells the story of his working with Killeen.

*The side walls were painted in the long, hot summer from a platform erected 25 feet above a horrifying concrete floor. The whole thing swayed; carpenters used its underpinning to saw timber on; I lived in terror of falling.... The west wall was made during the May university vacation by Rick Killeen and myself. This was good — Rick protected me on the narrow planks, always passing on the outside — we could sit and discuss the work in progress.*¹¹

¹⁰ Robert Mangold, cited Richard Marshall, *50 New York Artists*, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 1986, p. 72.

¹¹ Colin McCahon, Colin McCahon, in *Colin McCahon / A Survey Exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972, p. 32.

Always passing on the outside. This, in a sense, what was Killeen's art was always to do in relation to McCahon's. He was never a follower. Never on the inside of McCahon's art, nor trying to be. The painting of the Upland Road Chapel offers, then, an instructive occasion, an allegory of Killeen's and McCahon's relation.

Though he respected McCahon, and was allowed an intimacy sufficient to sit with him to discuss McCahon's work in progress, Killeen was concerned, even as a student, to separate himself off, to mark out his own space. McCahon may speak warmly of Killeen's protective relation to him on the scaffold. Yet what we have here, perhaps, is a variant of a classic Renaissance story: the tale in which the most favoured, the most talented apprentice, is not the minor and faithful follower, but he who will in the end most leave his master behind, whose work will most seem a critique of the master's, and a refusal of its power.

'The New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition'. These words which head the present chapter echo the title inscribed on a Killeen painting of May 1971: *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?* [fig. 17] Note the query mark: landscape painting will then be posed as a question. By 1971, Killeen will have added a query mark to the whole New Zealand landscape painting tradition in which he was begun. Significantly, Killeen will have the word *Painting* brightest (as McCahon commonly has some of *his* painted words brighter), as if to say — and to McCahon, and to the whole regionalist tradition of which he was the acknowledged master — it is *painting*, not landscape, which ought to be the painter's proper concern. And to say it in a manner which is at once a respectful bow to and a refusal of the McCahon style of landscape in New Zealand — a style to which so many about him had succumbed.

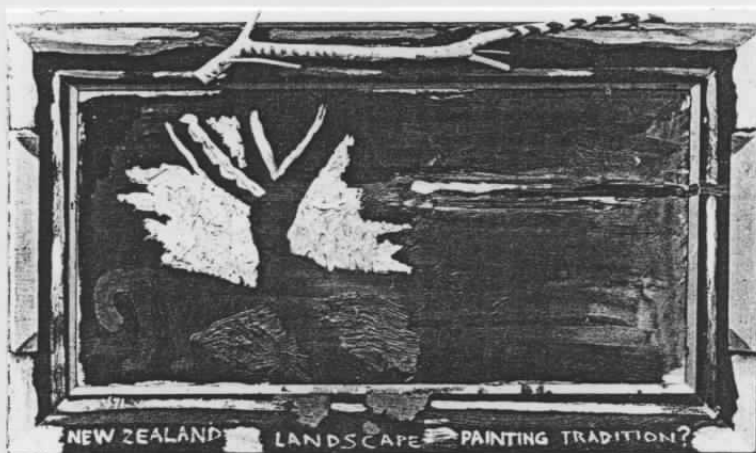


fig 17 *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?*, May 1971

Still later, Killeen will feel secure enough in his established difference from it, to return in a sense to the landscape tradition — see the silhouetted profiles of landscape, from the early cut-outs like *Dreamtime*, June 1980, [plate 48] through to *Floating islands with strange birds and people*, May 1986 [plate 148] — profiles detached as if from a McCahon or a Binney. [fig. 18] In so recalling McCahon, Killeen will revisit and revise his own artistic origins. Having worked through his indebtedness, in earlier scenes of homage, hostility and struggle, and having invented for himself in this struggle his own 'strong, originating voice', as Harold Bloom might say,¹² he will be able with impunity to recall again the McCahon who had been held up before him as the only model, as the greatest New Zealand painter, and the one most responsible for making international modernist art a truly *New Zealand* performance. So Killeen 'continues to draw his strength from the scene of instruction', and proffers his 'own artistic voice as one nourished by the greatest painters in the tradition'.¹³



fig. 18 *Floating islands with strange birds and people*, May 1986 (detail)

Already my account of Killeen/McCahon may have seemed somewhat Bloomy, to those who know the works of Harold Bloom, so we might as well come directly to him, to his generalised psychology of poetic origins. In Bloom's dramatic account of how the 'strong poet' strenuously detaches himself from a prior master, the young artist is first seized by an older artist's power (*election*), so that their visions come to agree (*covenant*). But then a counter-muse is chosen (*rivalry*), much as Killeen was later to adopt Walters as a model, after first adopting McCahon. Then, says Bloom, the seemingly liberated artist will proffer himself as the true incarnation of the originary voice (*incarnation*), and will

¹² Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1976, esp. pp. 1-11.

¹³ James Cuno, 'Voices and Mirrors? Echoes and Allusions: Johns *Untitled*, 1972', in *Fairades and Fizzles: Echo and Allusion in the Art of Jasper Johns*, the Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987, p. 228.

revise the precursor, (*interpretation*), and finally will recreate him in new form (*revision*).¹⁴

The precursor, in Killeen's case, literally 'presides over a scene of authority and priority, as well as over a scene of love and competition';¹⁵ and Bloom's 'Scene of Instruction' is literal with Killeen, and not situated only in the psyche, since McCahon was Killeen's material and actual teacher, in a material and actual school, the Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland. 'The ephebe's consequent assimilations and accommodations, his self-withdrawals and self-representations, his devotions and aggressions reveal to us further the workings of a primal repression, which accompanies the initial fixation on the precursor. What is repressed is the new strong poet's ravenous demand for autonomy and for immortality.'¹⁶

So, if we are to believe Bloom, when Killeen will later come to maintain that what he rejects in McCahon is his deplorable Christianity, and his negativism, his love of the tragic, and of death, such a claim, while true on a conscious level, represses his own need to separate himself off from McCahon, in order properly to invent or create or distinguish himself in the face of McCahon's prior power.

Even if we have a distaste for Bloomy heroics, for the sheer malicism of its struggle between big men, we may well see something of Bloom's typology in Killeen's behaviour with McCahon. We may see *clinamen*, a 'swerving from the precursor', a turning away from McCahon's religiosity, a turning from the monotheistic to the plural. We may see *tessera*, a revisionary completion of the precursor, as when with the cut-out Killeen takes McCahon's framelessness to a more radical conclusion; and *daemonisaion*, which counters the alien precursor; and *askesis*, a self-purgation which seeks a self-contained solitude against the precursor; we may even sometimes see *apophrades*, the 'return' of the precursor in which the latecomer seems, paradoxically, the true author of the precursor's work.¹⁷

¹⁴ Harold Bloom, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983, p. 131.

¹⁶ Vincent B. Leitch, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹⁷ Vincent B. Leitch, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

Perhaps the cut-outs themselves might be regarded — so we will see — as the ultimate fulfilment of certain McCahonian desire to escape from the frame. Perhaps Killeen becomes, even in the very assertion of his difference from McCahon, a fitting heir to him — more fitting, by far, than those weak and more obvious imitators who are promoted as his heirs, those painters like Nigel Brown, who traduce McCahon, turning his pathos to bathos, and those 'McCahon junior'¹⁸ painters who, like Brown and Tony Fomison, understand McCahon only in his least modernist and most conservative aspect, that of the early figurative works. (Curiously enough Killeen's cut-outs, as collections of separate signs, are not so dissimilar to the collection of separate symbols in those McCahon windows he had once helped to paint.) [fig 19]



fig. 19. Colin McCahon, East Windows, Chapel of sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, Auckland (detail)

But still all that is to come... For the moment, in his landscapes of 1966 and 67, Killeen is just begun with the New Zealand landscape tradition, and with its chief master, McCahon, working there with what he can, and rejecting what in McCahon is intolerable to him (profundity, religiosity, expressivity), so that his paintings are like one aspect of McCahon, drained into a cautious literalism — hence perhaps the curiously pallid expression they wear, product not so much of a presence as of a making absent.

It is not just that Killeen's painting is, like all painting, irreducibly permeated with previous paintings. At this point, Killeen's paintings are — at least in part — the acts of his reading (necessarily, mis-reading) the landscape paintings of Colin McCahon. It is not so much the primal scene, as it might be enacted in Freudian mythology, of the son turning forever away from the father, as it is Killeen's taking of McCahon to himself, and an undoing or displacement of that McCahon there, within. Nor can one speak of Killeen as a painterly self preceding that learning of a McCahonian language: rather, the persona of the

¹⁸ I take this hilarious phrase from my supervisor, Professor Tony Green, who is not, of course, to be held responsible for my applications of it.

painter Killeen is constructed by it. And then — and simultaneously — he defends as an yet insufficiently constructed self against the power of that McCahonian Other, and in so doing, invents his own self. ('Invent' may perhaps here retain, for those who need it, some comforting trace of its archaic meaning of 'discover'.)

One might recall here what Foucault has taught, that the positing of an *Other* is a necessary stage in the incorporation and consolidation of any cultural body.¹⁹ In this instance, the body is one which might seem to be singular — the cultural body of the painter Killeen; and the necessary Other is McCahon, and, arrayed behind him, the whole regionalist landscape tradition in New Zealand, that tradition of which McCahon is the chief master. For the time will come, we will see, when Killeen can speak of 'not pushing a theory of the world on you like McCahon does', when McCahon will seem to Killeen all but *totally* Other.

So it is that Killeen can today speak with some scorn of those first of his works shown here ('my Peter McIntyres', he calls them, in reference to a popularist landscape painter): they are like the effigies of the gods of an obsolete religion (that of regional realism), which Gods he can now with impunity insult, since he has ceased to believe in their existence.

In 1970, in one sudden series, Killeen will come literally to paint over and out that regional realism within him and within which he is. But from 1966 until that decisive moment, while his style sharpens and his colour brightens, so that each depicted object becomes sharply discrete from the rest, and his subject changes from the regionalist's requisite rural to a kind of regionalism of suburbia, Killeen's work will be a once an assertion of regionalist concerns, and, increasingly, a submitting of those concerns to question. It will be, increasingly, a regionalism and a realism which can properly only be written like this: ~~regionalism, — realism.~~

¹⁹ See, for instance, Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, transl. Richard Howard, Tavistock, London, 1973.

First fissures — and sharpening, fragmenting & cropping

On (the) edge. Alert to the border itself. Attentive to the edge...
(Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*)

One would not, doubtless, make as much as I will of the first fissures in Killeen's work were they not the first sign of what was in the cut-outs to come: the complete fragmentation of painting's traditional ground. For the vertical fissures Killeen makes in some of his landscapes of 1966 and 1967, the splits caused by separating a painting into two or three panels, are the first signs in Killeen's otherwise immobile and unbroken views of the instability a century of modernist art had already induced in the classic order of space.



fig. 20 'Landscape with road', 1967

Here, though, the ground is barely beginning to stir under our feet. In a number of Killeen's early *plein air* landscapes, such as 'Landscape with Road',¹ 1967, [fig. 20] only the faintest disturbance is registered in the view's surface: the horizon and the whole are continuous, their road, bush, clay and cloud disturbed only by two fine, vertical cracks, the joins of the three panels. Such views have but a partial fracture, their parts still cohere. The view is still conceived of as an unbroken base; and the pictorial structure of panels is merely an addition to the

¹ The titles given here in quotemarks are titles I have added, for convenience of reference, to paintings left untitled by the artist.

view, a structural intersection which does not interrupt its still classic composure.²

'*Bush diptych*', 1966, [fig. 15] with its *painted* rather than actual divisions of the single ground, marks the first clearly intended break in the continuity of the view — a separation of parts, and a slip along the fault line where the two 'panels' join. The single viewpoint, from which the space of the classic picture was constituted by the viewer, and by which the picture posited at once the viewer's presence and position, has had here to endure something of a binary fission.

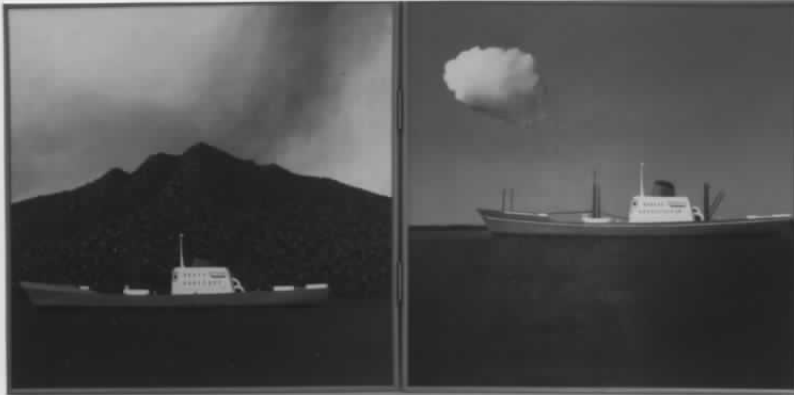


fig. 21 *Freighters diptych*, May 1967

Freighters diptych, May 1967, [fig. 21] suffers a more severe McCahonian disjunction of parts. On the left panel, the sea's horizon falls about three quarters of the way down; on the right, just under half — a brusque juxtaposition of disparate horizons Killeen would have known in McCahon's *Northland panels*. [fig. 16] So the single viewpoint, with its single eye level, from which classic space was established, is split.

But at least in '*Freighters diptych*' if we were all at sea, it was all sea we were at. *Wilson's cement*, 1967, on the other hand, frames four quite different views together. [fig. 22] Reading from the left, the horizon of the first and the third view is continuous, but their represented substance is not — the first is of sea, and the second a grassy plain. The second panel has a *Wilson's Cement*

² In fact, so the artist informs me, the panel of '*Landscape with Road*' was initially cut into three only for convenience of access to his attic studio space. In Killeen's recollection, the tall, thin, scroll-like landscape panels of 1966 were generally intended to be hung separately; and that they should appear in all his slides in juxtaposed pairs is merely the result of arranging them for the convenience of the camera. Nevertheless, it is at least suggestive that the only single panel which has been framed, is framed at the top and bottom only and not at the sides, as if perhaps it was intended to be affixed as the centre of two further panels. In any case, from an initially 'merely' technical consideration, considerations of 'meaning' may flow.

store (an urban spectacle, drawn from an actual edifice on the Auckland wharfs); while the fourth (back, perhaps, in the country) has a grassy hill. Country/city, urban/rural. Much the same might be said of the disparate views posed by the adjoined tondos of *'Four tondos'*, March/April 1967. Here, too, the division of parts is not a rent or rupture in some single subject or view: the subjects themselves suffer an approach to discontinuity.



fig. 22 Wilson's Cement, 1967

An as yet timid approach...

For, as yet, the superimposition of a structure of panels is still, in Barthes' words, 'a way of cutting, of perforating discourse, without rendering it meaningless',³ as if to a series of classic views there was appended the as yet unbeyed instruction, *tear along the dotted line*. And these landscapes still subscribe to the classic rhetoric of painting, for, again in Barthes' words, 'of course, rhetoric recognises discontinuities in construction (anacoluthons) and in subordination (asyndetons)'; but they are still 'set in the base matter of common utterance.'⁴

anacoluthon: a sentence or construction lacking in grammatical sequence. (From the Greek *anakolouthon* — following.)

Asyndeton: the omission of a conjunction. (From the Greek *sundetos* — bound together.)

Killeen's fissuring, at this stage, still starts from a sure site of sense, from landscape's base of common utterance. It is no more than an occasionally violent decoration of the picture surface. It is as if Killeen's landscapes are

³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. Richard Miller, Hill & Wang, New York, 1975, p. 8.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

patterned by a rhetorical form which permits a construction lacking in some items of a grammatical sequence, which form is called, in the case of classic painting, diptych, triptych, or polyptych — multi-panelled forms in which the view need not be continuous. Whereas later, in the cut-outs, as memorably, if less successfully, in some works on the way, 'a generalised asyndeton seizes the entire utterance': there are no conjunctions at all: not one of the parts conjoined: no view left: none possible.⁵

If, in these otherwise perfectly conventional little New Zealand landscapes, some of them even painted *plein air*, we may sense the first faint faults in the classical view, that base, foundation, motive and reason to which Killeen's painting yet subscribes, it will be, in the end, the whole ground of painting (canvas metal, board) — and not only that — it will be the whole ground of classical thought which is fissured...

In Killeen's landscapes of 1966, despite the superimposition of a structure of panels which tended to fissure the view, *within* each panel, the view was made to cohere. It was held together, not only by a unity of viewpoint, but also by a unity of tone, of colour and of brushwork, all fusing each depicted thing to the next. And within each panel, the clearest subdivisions tended to be large: a McCahonian duality of light sky and dark hill.

In the landscapes of 1967, however, where brushwork begins to be tightly reined or altogether suppressed, the depicted things start to come all apart from each other, or rather, each thing to come into its own, regardless of the clamouring rest. Edges, in a labour that will extend through into 1969, are sharpened, to the point where they might seem almost to cut or to pierce the picture's unitary plane; and each object is so sharply defined, and so tightly painted and so individually coloured within, as to be impermeable to the rest.

Killeen doubtless learns from Rita Angus, Don Binney and Michael Smither in this hard edgedness and separability of parts, exacerbate it though he may, as well as responding to the distant retort of American Pop. And all this is in accord with a note Killeen addressed to himself:

individual

⁵ Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

separate
edge and line emphasis
each object person clear
 (Killeen, *the green notebook*, p. 39)

In these landscapes, and increasingly in Killeen's painting, there is no effect of what today is called 'atmospheric perspective', or what Leonardo used, more poetically (more precisely) to call 'the perspective of disappearances' and the 'perspective of colour' — that blueing, blurring and fading of things with distance, in inverse ratio to their distance from the observing eye. Nor does one colour affect the next, by reflection or refraction, in a softening mutuality. Each colour and form is stretched so tight within as to leave no slack for the rest.



fig. 23 'Landscape with two clouds', 1966

There had been, in the landscapes of 1966, some premonitory hints of this new pungency of parts. In 'Landscape with two clouds', 1966, [fig. 23] for example, two oddly discrete little clouds are added to the broad McCahonian structure of water/hill/sky. Already these clouds might seem as detachable as those *actually* detached clouds which will float through the cut-outs entitled *The*

politics of geometry in 1991. [fig. 24] There had been some premonitory note of such detachability, too, when McCahon, as Killeen's teacher at the Elam School of Fine arts, used to remark how *separate* each piece of his compositions tended to stay, so that they remained a collection of parts, rather than a subsuming of parts into unity.⁶



fig. 24

In the tondo *'Man, cloud, land, sea, sky'*, September 1967, [fig. 25] there are those things in the abrupt list of the title: red jerseyed man, green-blue sea, dark green bushed land, blue sky, white cumulus. Each is sharply cut off from the rest by a precision of edge, each differentiated from within by colour and texture. They are like cut-outs, stuck one over the other. Each seems a detachable sign.



fig. 25 *Man, cloud, land, sea, sky'*, September 1967

In *Freighters (diptych)*, May 1967, [fig. 21] there are freighters, sea, sky, a little puffball of cloud; in *'Chimney and cloud'*, June 1967, [fig. 26] there is chimney, sky, and that same cloud puff. In *'Car, hill, cloud'*, c. June 1967, [fig. 27] the car is *literally* cut out, a magazine photo over a painted hill, and above

⁶ The source for McCahon's remark is Killeen, as reported in my 'The Escape from the Frame: Richard Killeen's Cut-outs', *Art New Zealand* no. 20, Winter 1981, p. 36.

them sits that same little cloud. That cloud appears again, now in abrupt conjunction with tree and tank, in *'Petroleum tank'*, July 1967; and with a freighter, hill, and sea, and with funnel and cloud in *'Funnel and cloud'*, July 1967; [fig. 28] and with man, road, truck in *'Man and truck'*, Summer, 1967-68 (destroyed).



fig. 26 *'Chimney and cloud'*, June 1967



fig. 27 *Car, hill, cloud'*, c. June 1967



fig. 28 *'Funnel and cloud'*, July 1967

By such migrations as these we may see that Killeen's signs are indeed detachable. And, increasingly each form is a sign prefabricated in a decision which precedes the painting, and which is chosen for its canonic generality: a

kind of normative cloud, say, or tree, or hill, devoid of much specificity of occasion or place. (Here, Killeen departs from Angus and Binney, whose paintings were still topographical, in the sense of being a portrait of some given spot, and comes closer to McCahon's generality, which, with such signs as black hill/white sky hoped to sign a painting with the general signature 'New Zealand' rather than to capture a view.)

Clouds, which up to 1968 might sometimes be altocumulus, now all become cumulus, and are always white, and somewhat brushmarky, and shadowed with grey. The sky is of an invariable blue, smoothly graduated from the bright pallor of its base to the saturated azure of its zenith. Hills are stippled, with the same dark green of an invariable bush, a 'bush' wherein all of the native forest's diversity of species, all of its rich irregularity, is reduced to the dense, evenly textured mass of some uniform substance. Grass is turned into a green, patterned striation. Each material substance is granted its own kind and colour of mark. Killeen has a consistent system of signs for things, as if in a key to a map.

And each sign is a fragment...

I have so far spoken of a fragmentation in which whole depicted objects are so broken off from each other as to seem detachable from each other and from the picture plane. There is also begun in these works another effect of fragmentation: that of *cropping* — the slicing off of some part of a depicted object by means of the painting's edge. It is a device, we will see, to which Killeen will have increasing resort through 1968-69.

The functioning of the crop may best be explained by resort to a term borrowed from classical rhetoric. Cropping's effect is that of a *synecdoche*, a figure of speech in which the part is named, but in which the whole is understood. Just by chance (but what is chance in such matters?), a common example given of the synecdoche (in dictionaries, in grammars, in handbooks of rhetoric) is that of sail for ship, and one of Killeen's most vivid crops in 1967-8 comes in his '*Funnel and Cloud*', where he gives, as if in a modernised version of that exemplar, a funnel to signify ship, a funnel as the part by which the whole will be easily understood. [fig. 28]

Crops were common, as Killeen would have known, in American Pop painting of the 1960s. They play a large part in 'New Realism', 1967, a Diploma

of Fine Art with Honours thesis by Killeen's friend and fellow student at the Auckland University School of Fine Art, Ian Scott. In Scott's characterisation of Diebenkorn's paintings, for instance, 'all the forms seem to continue beyond the edge of the canvas, giving the impression of being part of a larger whole. The effect is gained by... showing forms which complete themselves outside of the canvas edge....'⁷ Scott says much the same of Hopper, that 'his paintings are open, in that they continue themselves outside the picture's edge, giving the impression of being part of a larger whole'.⁸

I have thought of Scott's words here because Killeen, who was soon to exhibit with Scott in a two person show at Barry Lett Galleries, and who was, like Scott, regarded as a sort of New Realist, shares with him also an alertness to the edge, an attentiveness to the way the edge may make a bar, a scission, a mentally fillable blank.

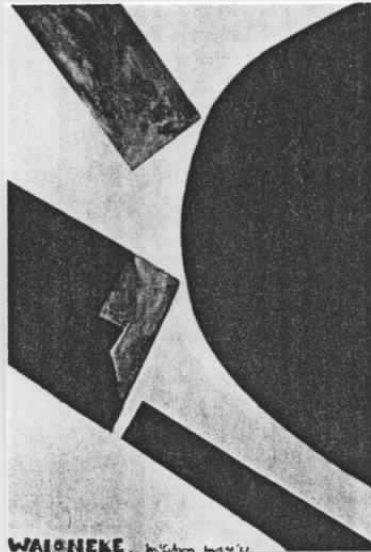


fig. 29 Colin McCahon, *Gate*,
Waioneke, 1961

Behind this sensitivity to the edge, and behind Killeen's and Scott's use of the crop to suggest a world continuous beyond the frame, stands their teacher, McCahon. In both his abstracts (*Gate*, *Waioneke*, 1961) [fig. 29] and his landscapes (*Landscape Theme and Variations Series A*, 1963), McCahon makes much use of the crop. In the *Gates*, for example, forms seem to fly free of the frame, their diagonal twist denying that horizontal and vertical grid imposed by the frame's square mouth, while, by effects of cropping, it is further implied that

⁷ Ian Scott, Ian Scott, 'New Realism', Honours thesis for Diploma of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, 1967, p. 132.

⁸ Ian Scott, *ibid.*, p. 35.

the depicted forms continue in a world beyond that arbitrarily sliced by the frame. It seems likely, too, that Killeen and Scott learned not only from McCahon's paintings, but also from McCahon's teachings on the frame and edge. Consider what McCahon has to say about his first sight of Mondrian's works.

What really impressed me was that, though they were often very small, they had an openness and scale that extended beyond the actual edges of the painting...⁹

Killeen may have learned from such McCahonian analyses at the very least a certain attentiveness to the frame, and perhaps too a desire to escape its confines...

The blanks made by Killeen's crops of 1968 and 1969 *are*, as I say, mentally fillable. Crops, in as much as that part of the object which is cropped is easily restored by the mind, are perhaps no more than a mere apocope. **Apocope**: the removal of a letter or syllable at the end of a word, as in 'curio' for 'curiosity' (from the Greek *kopte* or cut). Likewise, though *inside* the picture's cutting edge, too, there is an increased and increasing sense of fragments, each somewhat impervious to the next, fragments whose 'flat, clean-cut areas, bounded or organised by firm, clean-cut lines',¹⁰ serve to establish an early precondition of the literal cutting out of the cut-outs, the mode of composing them is still syndetic. **Syndetic**: of or using conjunctions (from the Greek *desis*, or binding together). See the signs 'chimney' and 'cloud', for instance, of '*Chimney and Cloud*', which are still conjoined by the sign 'sky'. [fig. 26]

Not until the cut-outs, when there will be no conjoining ground or sense, or framing edge provided, nor even any finally real world signified behind, may we speak of Killeen's works as truly *asyndetic*, as so devoid of conjunctions as hardly to be bound together at all. In the cut-outs, finally, each thing will be but a floating raft of meanings, in a flotilla dispersed, open to a perpetual drift.

⁹ Colin McCahon, 'All the Paintings, Drawings and Prints by Colin McCahon in the Gallery's collection', *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, no. 44, 1969, p. 14.

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: its Origins and Character*, Harper and Row, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, 1971, p. 14.

Yet even there, we will see, where there is no frame by which a crop might be performed, Killeen will occasionally refer to the convention of cropping. In *Potter Wasp*, April 1979, [plate 14] for instance, one of seven otherwise 'complete' elements of the cut-out is a lobster, half cropped with what Killeen has called 'an invisible stopping - like a frame'.¹¹ Having escaped from the picture frame, it will amuse Killeen occasionally to look back to it, and to those traditional tricks he had once used in trying to deny its restrictions...

¹¹Killeen to the author, cited in my 'The Escape from the Frame', op. cit., p. 35.