

I will not serve: realism refused

Here I will examine a related group of works of February, March and April 1970, a group shown together in the exhibition *Richard Killeen Paintings: April 1969 - April 1970*, at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, 25 May — 5 June 1970. It will be — for the paintings themselves have so begun it — a game of hide and of seek.

This is the moment when Killeen decisively paints his realism over, when the painted ground so wells up as to cover the painted figure, all but overwhelming it in patches of colour, or so deeply drowning it, that it may be lost forever in paint. Such a painting over and out in these works of early 1970 was made all the clearer by the circumstance of their exhibition at Barry Lett Galleries, since they were shown there in the company of the realist works of the year before. What the Lett exhibition instructively offered, then, was realism of a kind, in the works of 1969, and that realism painted over, in the works of February, March and April, 1970 — an exemplary juxtaposition.



fig. 51 *Lucifer's motto*, February 1970

In addressing the problem (if problem it is) of the disparity between one series of Killeen paintings and the next, I have said that the May 25 show might seem, and did in fact seem to some, a two-person or even a group show. It might now better be said that if two person show it is, it is a show in which the second

painter (who happens, as if quite fortuitously, to have the same name as the first), is now attacking, as an art vandal, paint brush in hand, the works of that first.

Let us begin with some close-ups.



fig. 52 *Anzac spectacle*, February 1970



fig. 53 *Anzac dreamtime*,
March 1970

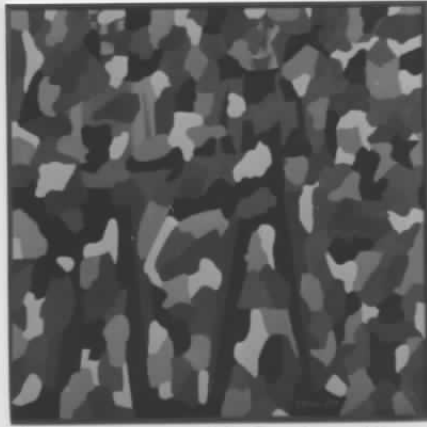


fig. 54 *Anzac with Southern Cross*,
February 1970



fig. 55 *Bus stop*, February 1970

In the patched pattern of *Lucifer's motto*, [fig. 51] there is a frontal figure of a man in cruciform pose: in that of *Anzac spectacle*, [fig. 52] four frontal men, standing in the military 'at ease' position; while, floating through *Anzac dreamtime*, [fig. 53] there are six soldier's heads, a tiger, a cross, the figure 5, and an eye. *Anzac with Southern Cross*, [fig. 54] similarly, has two men standing at ease in its pattern; in *Bus stop* [fig. 55] there is a crossing sign, two standing men and a standing woman; and in *Bus stop analogy*, [fig. 56] a zebra-crossing, two standing men, and one striding. There is an all-over pattern of paint, then, in each of these paintings, over which the various figures are floated, and into which they partially sink.

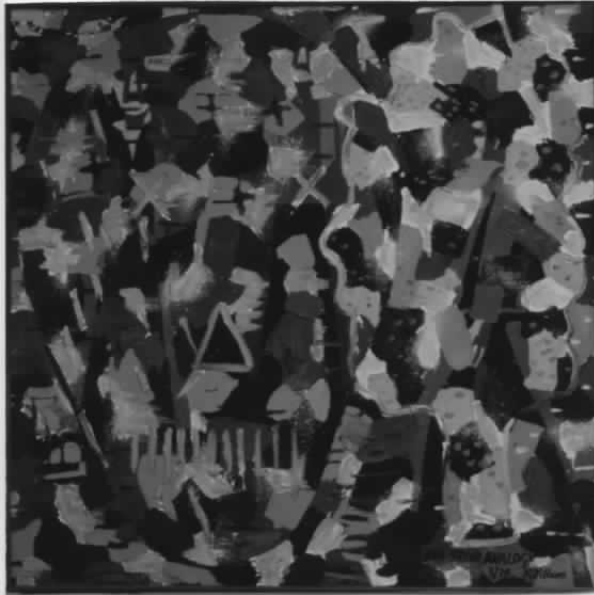


fig. 56 *Bus stop analogy*, February 1970



fig. 57 *Soldier with man passing*, February 1970

As well as these more or less clear signs, there are other more or less *unclear* signs: signs which are deliberately hidden or lost. The all-enveloping patchwork of *Lucifer's motto*, for instance, is so designed as to assume within itself the hidden shape of a map of the U.S.A., which may or may not be discerned surrounding that cruciform man. Disguised in the all-over patching of *Anzac spectacle*, there is a pair of old-fashioned circular spectacles, and a war memorial monument. In *Anzac dreamtime*, similarly lost among all the patches and figures, there is a female profile, a profile outlined in part — for at least some faint ease of visibility's sake — with grey. Among the patches of

Anzac with Southern Cross, almost entirely concealed, though pointed to by title, are the four requisite stars of that cross.

Again, some of the patches of *Soldier with man passing* [fig. 57] will assume, for some viewers, the shape of a soldier's profile in steel helmet, which, like the subtle emanation of an aura, surrounds the striding man. To the left, the patches are worked into a gravestone cross, whose outlines interlock with the military profile. And there is a skull hidden in the paint patches of *Bus stop analogy*, and a hidden profile; and there is an aeroplane somewhat less well hidden in *Bus stop*.

I will discuss the connotations — the meanings — of these signs in the next chapter. For the moment, it is their form alone, the mode of their presentation, and the very structure of their mark which concerns me...

Connotation, as the dictionary has it, is an additional meaning, in its etymology, literally, a *mark in addition*. It is, one might say, a layer of meaning laid over or under the primary signification — it is additional, that is, to the clearly denoted meaning. In *Lucifer's motto*, in *Anzac spectacle*, *Anzac dreamtime*, and *Anzac with Southern Cross*, in *Soldier with man passing*, in *Bus stop analogy*, and in *Bus stop*, not only is a certain political connotation everywhere immanent, as we shall see: the pictorial structure *itself* echoes the structure of connotation. If in connotation, as Roland Barthes has said, 'meaning proliferates by layering',¹ so too is meaning literally layered in these paintings.

Functionally, connotation, releasing double meaning on principle, corrupts the purity of communication: it is a deliberate 'static', painstakingly elaborated, introduced into the fictive dialogue between author and reader, in short, a countercommunication (Literature is an intentional cacography). (Roland Barthes, S/Z)²

Correspondingly, in the structure of these paintings, a countercommunication is marked: there is a deliberate difficulty introduced of reading, as if one word were layered over another, which was itself buried in a

¹ Roland Barthes, S/Z, p. 8.

² Roland Barthes, S/Z, p. 9.

jumble of meaningless marks, half sunk in the mud of meaning; and all this with a cunning whereby significance might be reduced to silence. That map of America, those spectacles and that monument, those stars, that cross and that soldier, that skull, might easily, in such a cacophony of marks, be missed.

The map, say, is lost for a while, or lost, for some viewers, forever. And if you do, in the end, see the map, that evasion which was, nevertheless, awaiting you? You have endured a mere delay, a delay in paint. And if you don't uncover it? You have endured, unknowingly, a refusal of the map, a refusal in paint. You have suffered, if indeed one may suffer unknowingly, a concealment and a loss of meaning. A loss (already) staged by the painting.

In such circumstances, we may appropriately speak of the *camouflage of meaning*... And, indeed, the patchwork here irresistibly calls to mind the patches of military camouflage patterns — including those already depicted by Killeen on his realist soldiers of 1968. Camouflage is made a connotation of the all-over patches, since we are provoked by the conjunction of the painting's imagery of war with the painting's hiding things in pattern, to think of *war's* hiding things in pattern — to think of *its* countercommunications of the visible.

Camouflage — the disguise of guns, ships, etc., effected by obscuring with splashes of various colours, smoke-screens, foliage, etc.; means of disguise or evasion. (From the French *camoufler* disguise, and the Italian *camuffare* disguise, deceive.) Camouflage, in the Killeen case, too, is a disguise effected by obscuring with splashes of various colours, foliage, etc.; a means of disguise or evasion.

The obvious question is: why here disguise, why here evade? To grant the pleasure of something discovered with difficulty? As in some game of hide and seek? To grant the pleasure of discovering in oneself a superior perspicacity, of perceiving that which a less penetrating glance might not? In part, perhaps, but this is hardly a sufficient motive for Killeen to put himself and us to such trouble, and to risk us not becoming aware of the game at all.

Might the difficulty of discerning a map, a soldier, a skull or a cross among patches of paint serve to mark that paint comes *first*, that figuration is second, that painting is *painting* before it is signification? Isn't it precisely its effect to make us remember, as in Maurice Denis' famous old proclamation, that

'a picture, before it is a warhorse, a naked woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a plane surface, covered with colours arranged in a certain order'?

Might not the difficulties of reading be the mark of a certain hesitation in the face of that current theory which was the radical result of those earlier theories of such as Denis? The theory (which Killeen's notebooks show that he well knew)³ of 1960s American formalists like Stella, that painting is, or should be, only that which you see; that there is, or should be, nothing else; that meaning is never, in any case, *in* the painting, but is only carried to it by its complacent or compliant viewer.

Might there have been a fear, consequently, in these paintings whose subject is war, of succumbing to a moralising painting, a 'Victorian' or 'literary' painting, such a painting as bows to a (moral) system anterior to itself? A fear of making such a painting as has insufficient regard for itself to stand independently of the world and alone? For it is a curious and perhaps otherwise inexplicable fact that when Killeen's notebooks do speak of contemporaries other than New Zealanders, they speak only of formalists, of abstractionists such as Noland and Stella, those who proclaim the autonomy of art, and never of figurative painters, those who might, on the face of it, seem to share far more with Killeen's figurative style.

The question of the medium's transparency to the world is crucial here. Certainly, that question had been — if somewhat tentatively and intermittently — raised in the realist paintings. But it is in these paintings of the May 25 show that we first see exhibited the change to a more fully asserted refusal of paint's self-effacement — a making *impossible* of any claim of paint's transparency to the world. The structural effect of the layering here is inevitably to distinguish painting from its referent, so that, freed from the task of representing the world, painting is allowed to present *itself*.

Yet, at the same moment, and by the same means, these paintings focus on the reading of figurative imagery, making a difficulty of it, and a spectacle, showing the eye again and again — sign of that sense through which we must make sense here — making it, inevitably, self-conscious for us. And the mix of styles in the one work — relatively 'realist' bits floated above or behind 'abstract'

³Killeen's persistent use of Stella's terms 'all-over' and 'democratic' for a non hierarchical composition is sufficient to prove his awareness of Stella's theories.

colour patches serves further to pose and to render problematic the fact of representation. By means of the mixing of styles, the representationality of representation, the depictivity of depiction, is brought to mind, and it is made conspicuous that any claim to transparency is a lie.

In short, the referent comes unstuck from these paintings, it falls behind, and gets lost in the paint, where it may well remain unfound. Killeen's painting, to bend slightly Simon During's words of modernism, 'turns inward by passing off its vehicle — paint — as its content',⁴ so that we have a first content, 'paint', and a second (embarrassed) content, which has turned away. Meaning is silenced, is exiled, its only defence is its cunning.

Such a realism is perhaps a genuine correlate of modernist painterly abstraction: a realism which does not proclaim itself as transparent to the world, as does realism proper, but which is not yet, as in abstraction proper, ready to abandon all care to refer to the world — something like that, we will see, will come later in Killeen's work, only to be itself abandoned soon after. Such a painting both asserts its independence of the world and does not; its independence of the world is revealed, while its referentiality to the world is (at least in part) concealed, and, it may be, lost to some of its viewers, forever.

⁴ Simon During, 'Towards a Revision of Local Critical Habits', *And* no. 1, October 1983, p. 87.