

An ever increasing dis-integration

Killeen takes ever 'more severe risks to the integrity of object',¹ and is constantly seeking new manners of risk.

24.5.79

*Cut outs must be taken in the direction
of being less like a painting -- more broken up
rather than integrated and whole.*

*Integrated whole leads always to composition
and arrangement with all its difficulties.
and seeming irrelevance.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 79)

In March 1979, Killeen considers diversifying the material of the ground in the single work, and leaving these newly diverse grounds unpainted, so that the variety of their colours and textures might show. Perhaps *this* might make for a painting 'less like a painting -- more broken up'.

16.3.79

Copper

Chrome on steel.

brass

rusty steel

galvanised iron

must be more dynamic on the wall.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 78)

But such a diversification of ground did not appear in the cut-outs until 1981, and then in a relatively restricted number of works -- as with the painted aluminium, and the unpainted galvanised iron and the unpainted kauri ply of *Black, white, left, right, no.3*, December 1981, [plate 82] and the painted aluminium, and unpainted copper and iron of *Past experience no. 1*, [plate 86] and *Concretionary structures no. 1*, [plate 84] both of March 1981.²

¹ Peter Leech, 'Painting, Object, Relation: a decade of Mrkusich painting', *Milan Mrkusich: a decade further on: 1974-1983*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1985, p. 27.

² See too, *Island mentality no. 4*, August 1981, with its three pieces of galvanised iron and three of unpainted copper; *Living for today, no. 2*, July 1981, with its one unpainted copper piece, and two of unpainted galvanised iron. *Fragment*, and *Continental drift (copper)*, both of May 1981, will hardly count, since all the pieces are of unpainted

The following notion, however, was more immediately put into effect and was to remain thereafter as one of the cut-outs' most nearly constant conditions.

16.2.80

....

...

-- could introduce many colours while maintaining overallness of work.

(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 91)

6.81

Each work should not be conceived in an overall colour but rather each piece or shape in the work needs its own colour so that that shape's separateness from the other pieces is emphasised.

Each shape needs a character of its own.

When the work is one colour or painted the same way the character of each shape is submerged.

(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 123)

In 1982, Killeen will publicly remark the reasons for his now achieved chromatic variety:

Colour is applied to each image to emphasise the idiosyncratic nature of that image.

(Killeen, *artist's statement, Seven Painters/The Eighties*, 1982) ³

Though from 1978 to 1979 there was an ever increasing diversity and number of colours, the first cut-outs to have a different colour for each piece were works of only three pieces -- the emblematic *Rejuvenation*, in its two versions, both of November 1978 (red, blue and black in the one, red, yellow and black in the other). [plates 6 & 10] And throughout 1979 too, it is only in works of three or four pieces that each piece may be granted a different colour -- as in *Three cultures*, for instance, June 1979 (black, yellow, red). [plate 20] The principle of the complete partialisation of colour was not extended to larger works until 1980, when in a

iron in the one case, and of unpainted copper in the other -- unpaintedness here leads not to diversity, but to a new manner of unity.

³ Killeen, *artist's statement, Seven Painters: the Eighties*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, 1982, p. 26.

group of eight major cut-outs made from June to December, [plates 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 54, 55] whose pieces vary in number from 15 to 50, there was one slightly different colour allowed per piece.⁴

But doubtless I am being too literal here. The point was not necessarily to have a different colour for *every* piece, but to have a colour-differentiation of parts sufficient for the part not to be submerged in the whole. Separation must be played against submergence, the idiosyncratic against the generalised. It is significant that in the each of the eight works of 1980 where there is literally one colour per piece, Killeen nevertheless establishes an overall tonality. It is as if, in this way, the works are answering to the self-instruction, 'introduce many colours while maintaining overallness'. The colours of this group of eight are dark or darkish, variants of black, one might say. Only in the last works of the group, as in *Age of fishes*, December, 1980, are there any colours not subsumed in night. But even here there are no primaries, and nor even are there secondaries at their purest, the brightest colours being yellow ochre, Venetian red, or Wedgewood blue.

In fact, the sense of a disparity of colour, in which the separation of the pieces is stressed, is more emphatic in some works of the 1980 where there is not actually one colour per piece. In these works, though some colours *are* repeated from one part to another, there is, nevertheless, a colour-contrasting of parts which is particularly pungent. *You are what you eat*, February 1980, is an early example, with its bright reds, greens, yellows, and blacks. [plate 38] The brightness of each part emphasises its separateness, while, at the same time, the fact that there are three pieces of the same primary red, two of the same primary yellow, two of the same bright green, and two of the same absolute black, answers to the need for 'maintaining all overness'.

So a certain unity *is* maintained in the face of dis-unity. Yet, it seems Killeen will now constantly move in the direction of risking a still larger disintegration -- a breaking up of colour, of shape, of subject, of paint application, a fissuring even of style itself.

⁴ The 31 piece *George Forster, Naturalist*, June 1980, the 26 piece *Dreamtime*, June 1980, the 27 piece *Dreamtime*, June 1980, the 50 piece *Dreamtime*, July 1980, the 23 piece *Rainbow's Reach*, August 1980, the 15 piece *Clay Tokens from Iran*, September 1980, the 26 piece *Fish Years*, November 1980, and the 32 piece *Age of Fishes*, December 1980.

3.81

Possibility -- each shape painted a different way
not only a different colour
different densities of colour layers?

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 116)

We will see this possibility put into effect in paintings like *Living for today*, no. 2, July 1981, [plate 69] which not only has one piece of unpainted copper and two of unpainted galvanised iron, but also some pieces painted with a palette knife, some with a sponge, and some with a brush. (*Island mentality No 1*, June 1981, was the first cut-out in which paint was applied to some pieces with a palette knife.) [plate 66] There are also various opacities of colour from one brushworked piece to the next in the works of 1981, depending on the number of paint layers applied; and there are variously directional strokes. And in *Living for today no. 1*, July 1981, for the first time, two tones are be applied to some of the single pieces. There may now be a diversification of colour or tone or paint application even within the single part. [plate 67]

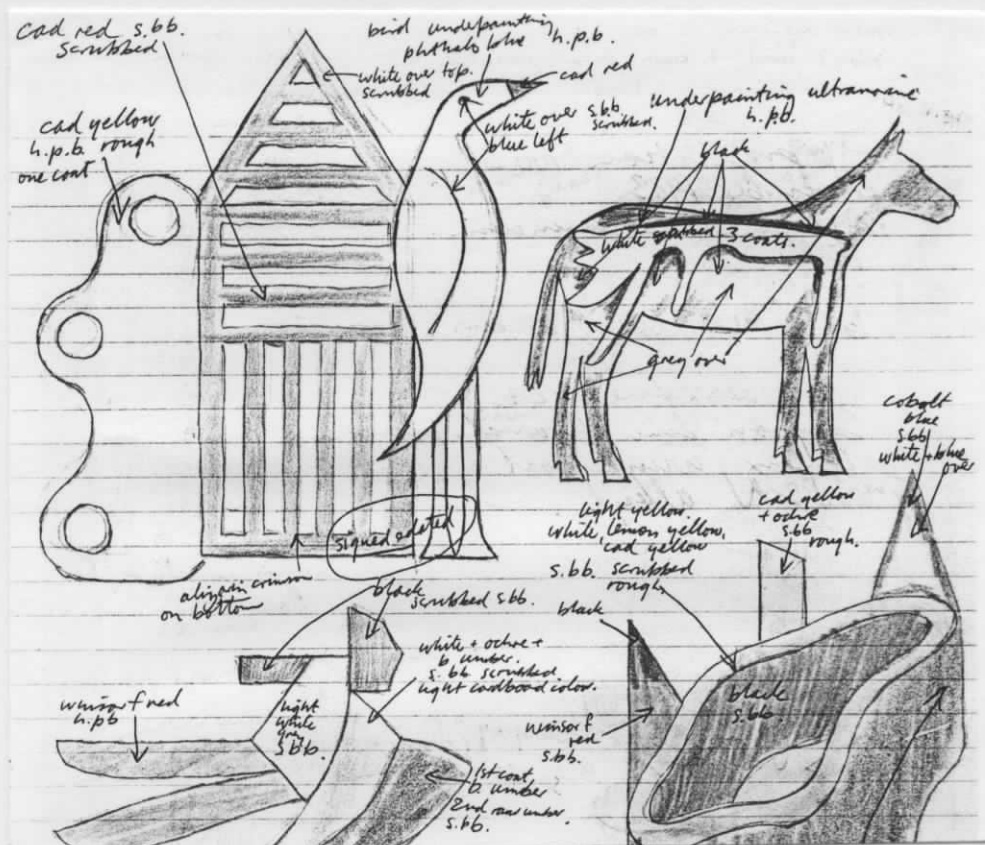


fig. 190. Record book (detail)

In his record book for March 1981 to June 1984, it now becomes necessary for Killeen to invent a system of coding in order to record the increasing diversities of surface within each given work. There is something faintly obsessive and hopeless, even in the attempt: the surfaces have simply become too varied to record them in words. [fig. 190]

p.k. palette knife
h.p.b. house painting brush. 25mm?
s.b. soft brush.
taped -- masking tape used. not always noted.
r.b. rough brushed
cardboard colour refers to the natural colour of corrugated card.
b.b. bristle brush
s.b.b. small bristle brush
1 2 coats
(Killeen, cut-out record book, p. 1)⁵

'Subjects', too, provide an occasion of increasing diversity within the single work.

16.5.80

*Should all the pieces relate to one subject
 or should they be brought together in some arbitrary way?*

*Having a subject is one way of bringing pieces
 together, but the other way any pieces can be used together.*

*There always seems to be the necessity to have
 a point to the work.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 99)

That is, whatever diversity of 'subject' is allowed within the one work, there needs still to be some reason for bringing the images together -- the completely arbitrary will not do. We shall come back to this, but, for the moment, the following note may suffice, with its nicely perverse and paradoxical way of remarking Killeen's rationale for inclusions.

⁵ Killeen, cut-out record book for period March 1981 -- June 1988, p. 1.

11.80

...

*put in anything except
what you don't want
which is different from putting
in what you do want*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 109)

The preparatory drawings for the cut-outs are themselves an incitement to disunity of subject, since they are governed by a protocol in which 'any pieces can be used together'.

4.81

...

*The key to what I am doing lies in the pad in which
I draw out new shapes. This is the source
of everything.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 118)

Pages of pots, say, pages of bones or of plants, each image offering, sometimes, only the smallest difference from the others on the page. [fig. 191]

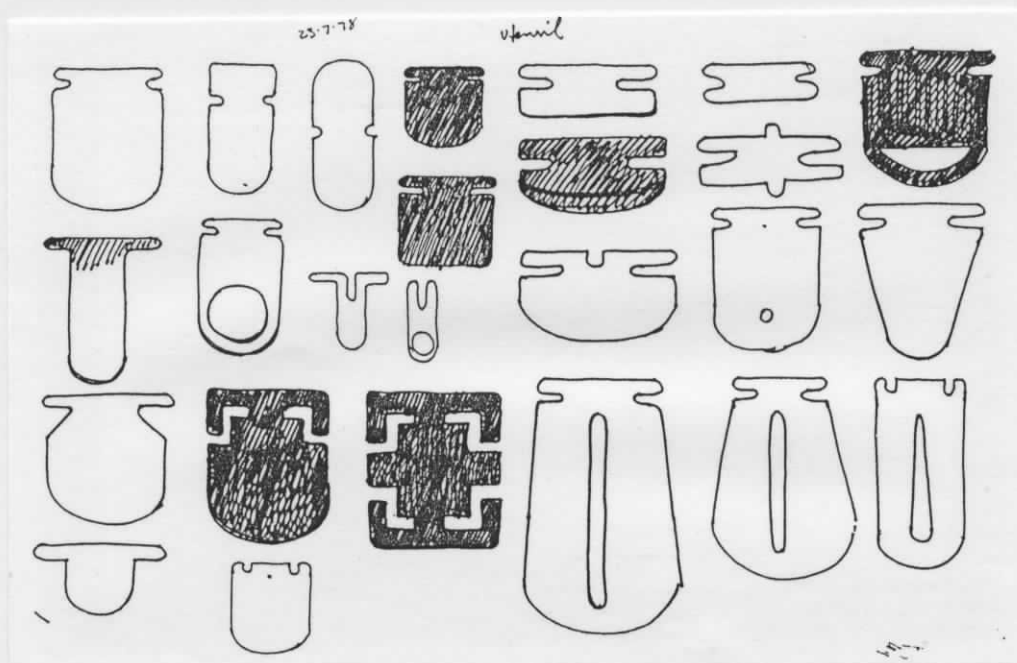


fig. 191. Sketchbook page, dated 23. 7. 78

Later, a group of Killeen's cut-outs will refer to the computer programme of *stacking*: the arrangement of catalogued images in notional layers overlapping into retrievable but invisible 'depths'. Killeen's group of 'Stack' titled cut-outs will specifically remark the fact that each of their pieces is selected from a compendium formed over time -- that every cut-out is composed according to the palimpsest principle, since each is a depository of images of diverse date. In *Stacks -- months and days*, for instance, of July, 1990, [figs. 3 & 193] we see the notional ring-bound pads (the computer icon for 'stacks') and the notional file cards on which the cut-out's images have been gathered. There are fifteen images of ring-bound pads; one rectangular piece shows what might be file cards stacked one behind another; and there is a single file card shaped piece bearing a computer-distorted insect. One pad is dated June, and one card dated Friday, while the figure 13 on another pad might mark a day of the month, and the clock on another a time of that day. Here, even a head may seem to have its own ring-binding, as if in acknowledgement and proof that it comes from a pad -- 'the source of everything'. The mind itself is allegorised as a pad, in which images are gathered over time.



fig. 193. *Stack -- months and days*, 12 July 1990

But we are jumping the gun.

23 . 5 . 80...

Assemble later into groups of images & shapes otherwise the whole will follow a preconceived line with no surprises. Don't draw with painting subject in mind.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 100)

Killeen's protocols of preparatory drawing encourage disunity, since, though they are preparatory as in the traditional preparatory sketch, they are made with no specific work in mind. They are a kind of prefabrication without plan, a making ready for an as yet inconceivable work. As Killeen will write in February 1982:

Shapes and subjects are collected as a separate occupation and used as a resource material to build paintings at a later date.

This introduces elements that could not have been thought of at the time a painting is being worked on.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 129) ⁶

To ensure that my choice of images is wider than my thoughts at a given time I collect and draw images as a separate occupation so they may be used as a resource when a painting is made.

(Killeen, artist's statement, Seven Painters: the Eighties, 1982) ⁷

So the cut-out represents not a moment in time, governed by one thought and one mood, the time of the painting's actual painting: it is a collection of past and disparate moments. This might seem traditional enough -- like, say, Durer's watercolours from Nature, which will later find their place as landscape backgrounds in his finished prints, or like Zeuxis's drawings from the various maidens whose parts will furnish his final Helen. In such traditional cases, the fragment may remain implicit, at most, in the finished work -- a kind of shadow in the radiance of the classically unified body. Traditionally, every endeavour is made to smooth over the cracks between the disparate parts. But Killeen goes somewhat further, since often nothing, or nearly nothing, is invented specifically for the occasion of the painting -- the painting's each and every image may be transcribed from a vast diversity of previous drawings; and since the diversity and disparity and fragmentation of parts is in the finished work positively *flaunted*.

Killeen has recourse in the cut-outs to a kind of vast inventory of images: he does not offer *himself* (interests and thoughts of the moment), but fragments of

⁶ Killeen, '7 Painters draft', February 1982.

⁷ Killeen, artist's statement, *Seven Painters: the Eighties*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, 1982, p. 26.

visual *language* -- of a language which is prior, as all language is, to the person who speaks.

The use of such an inventory is akin to Killeen's method in the Samplers, where, in a sense, in making depositories of images of diverse date, he made an inventory of his own oeuvre. But the disparate parts are now gathered not from previously completed paintings, as they were in the Samplers. Rather, the cut-outs are a sampling from drawings specifically made as a resource for such sampling, though with no particular cut-out in mind.

Killeen had long aspired to the disunity of subject this protocol of drawing obtains. Already, in the blue notebook, in August 1971, he had considered

*The possibility of using whim and circumstance
to try to eliminate stylistically
consistent paintings
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 28)*

and this directly after a page on which there is inscribed the isolated phrase 'You as invention'⁸ -- 'You', that is, as a merely cultural concoction, a contrivance, a false story, a mere superstition, in which a diversity of voices is fictively proffered as one. So the undoing of a unity of 'subject', in the sense of the painting's 'theme' or 'topic,' is an undoing too of 'subject' in its specialised, philosophical sense: that of the individual person, the ego or 'I'. So it implies 'the death' -- or at least the undoing of -- 'of the author', as in Barthes' notorious phrase.

Killeen had even imagined, in his fervour to escape consistency, the somewhat impracticable method of working on a single painting over a number of years. Years before the cut-outs, Killeen had imagined this possibility:

*Same painting could be
worked again much later
could also start on old
failed paintings...
Include new ideas with the old ones.
The style shouldn't confine one to finishing
the painting all at once but should be wide*

⁸ The blue notebook, p. 28.

*enough to accept bits placed
in later for different reasons.
This way a painting could
slowly be brought to fruition without
stylistic constipation.*

*Start the painting anywhere -- add to it as
ideas come -- build it up over a
period of time -- anything being possible --
Do not worry as to whether it works
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 28)*

Another device for obtaining a new multiplicity is the amplification of number. After 1979, with the single exception of the three piece *Murdering Beach, Dunedin*, February 1980, [plate 39] Killeen will never again return to three piece cut-outs like *Rejuvenation*, November 1978. [plate 6] There will be a constant tendency, rather, to enlarge the number of pieces: *Black crawlers*, December 1978, [plate 9] will have 30 pieces, the vast *Chance and inevitability*, July 1982, [plate 88] the biggest of the cut-outs in area, since its pieces are so large, will have 85, while *Stories we tell ourselves*, May 1987, [plate 160] and *Stories we tell each other*, June 1987, [plate] 162 will have the largest number of pieces of all: 129 and 136 respectively.

*A number of pieces is needed to attain a
democratic result rather than an emblematic one.
(Killeen, 7 Painters Statement Draft, February 1982)⁹*

Significantly, both the four piece *Regeneration* (November 1978) [plate 5] and the three piece *Rejuvenation* (November 1978) [plate 6] had come with the unusually peremptory instruction: 'hang as shown on box lid'. The paucity of pieces results in the emblematic; the emblematic disallows that usual Killeenian democracy in which the viewer is permitted to 'hang the pieces in any order'. Nor is the democracy which the emblematic defeats is a matter only of the viewer's freedom to arrange the work. The emblematic is that in which one thing, of all the world's

⁹ Killeen, the black notebook, p. 129.

multiplicity of things, is granted a singular importance: an unwanted hierarchy is already implicit in the emblematic.

Such a privileging defeats that democracy of things in the natural world which Killeen had long wanted his work to reflect:

*Everything has the same
importance as natural phenomena.
In keeping with this thinking, the
natural system can do without
many single things (a species of
insect or bird fish etc bacteria)
but there is no known point of collapse.
Everything is equally important in the system
but can be done without.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 145)*

Killeen 'himself', as they say, remarks his painting's development towards dis-integration. If in 1979 he had issued himself the directive 'the cut-outs must be taken in the direction of being less like a painting -- more broken up rather than an integrated whole',¹¹ by 1982 he is able happily to note such disorder as an achieved and established fact.

6. 82

*The general direction has been towards less ordering
of painting & more chaos.
The reason for this is that as the painting came
to be considered a part of the world as an object
it became more under the constraints & laws that
govern everything else in nature. Therefore anything
that is done by an artist does not need to be
'ordered' as it is already controlled by the
system that controls the things around us.
It is necessary to look for (it is no longer enough)
something else to say other than 'I can make
order in my painting'. It is also not enough*

¹⁰ Killeen, note dated 24 . 5 . 79, the black notebook, p. 79.

*to say 'This painting is an object in the real world'.
The things to be said are a complicated
use of subject matter to do with the complicated
ways in which we understand our lives.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 135)*

One might well put Killeen's claim that his works reflect natural law against the aleatory works of the Americans -- against Morris's felt pieces, say, where falls of the material were thought to be sufficiently governed by natural laws as to require no artistic intervention. These Americans might well announce with Killeen, 'I no longer think it is an artist's job to order his view of the world'. Such ideas were to be seen in innumerable American paintings and texts.

Another -- and infinitely fertile -- device of disorder is the introduction of a variety of styles to the single work, as will dramatically happen in the huge *Chance and inevitability* July 1982, and in the various cut-outs called *Frameworks*, where completely different stylistic 'frames' will clash within the one work. (This device I will examine in a moment, under the heading 'Frameworks'.)