

Migrations through the variant

---- But do you know what a nation means? says John Wise.
 ----Yes, says Bloom.
 ----What is it? says John Wise.
 ----A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.
 (James Joyce, *Ulysses*)

29.9.83.

...

*Taking of images from other works done this year
& combining them into a new work.*

*Formerly a reluctance to do this because of the
fear of confusing the identity of each work. Hence
the need to have new images for each painting.*

Is this necessary?

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 167)

Interestingly, in the above note from 1983, Killeen realises that one of the notional frames around each painting -- an identifying and closing border -- is threatened when images migrate from one work to another. And he has 'feared' the loss of 'identity' such migrations might provoke. Never mind that the repetition of forms from one painting to another is a perfectly normal modernist practice -- as with Walters' koru, or Albers' square. A painting, in conventional expectation, is meant to be like a nation in the estimation of Joyce's Bloom: the same images abiding in the same place. It is meant to be entire, unique, discrete, and self-sufficient. Irreplaceable.

However, though Killeen does not remark it in this note, those many of his earlier paintings which were one of a series had already -- as is usual with series works -- had their identity and individuation somewhat 'confused', in that their images were without fixed place or abode, peripatetically drifting out of one frame and into another. In the Comb series, for instance, the same stencil was sometimes used to make the image in a number of paintings, so lessening the singularity and specificity of each; and when a new stencil *was* used for a new painting it was still of the same generic type. The practice of dealing out the same deck of images throughout the Chance series, and the later practice of 'stamping' the same imprint over a number of works, had similarly made porous the individual painting's boundaries.

Even in the early cut-outs there had been some repetitions -- those allowed by the code of the variant or version. There had been two versions of *Regeneration* in 1978, [plates 5 & 8] for instance, and three of *Dreamtime* in 1980. [plates 48, 49, & 50] But, until 1981, such use of the variant or version was exceptional, and, except for *Regeneration no. 2*, such variants as there were of the one work shared the same title, without the addition of the differentiating numbers 1, 2, or 3, or a differentiating bracketted or concluding phrase.¹

I recall Killeen saying at the 1988 Auckland City Art Gallery McCahon retrospective that McCahon seemed to have wanted to wallpaper the whole of New Zealand -- an expression not of distaste but of wry admiration.² Killeen remarked too that from any one pictorial idea (the waterfall, for instance, envisaged as an arc or straight line dividing the rectangle) McCahon had managed to produce a large number of only slightly different variants. McCahon had worked as if there were a vast demand for his works, and this when, in fact, there was hardly any at all, since in New Zealand the art audience is so disastrously thin on the ground. Killeen, it seems, felt much the same imperative as McCahon, from whom perhaps he learnt it: the need to produce more than the small demand, the need widely to spread the word as it were, the need to erect an insistent and irrefutably substantial mass of meaning.

Laurence Simmons, I find, has independently proffered much the same motive for Killeen's variant works as I do above. 'Why does he constantly do two, sometimes three, versions of the same cut-out painting using some of the same elements? Killeen gives back to repetition its proper meaning and status: not lack of originality, nor merely the practice of appropriating artistic images in order to undermine their previous status (both of which he consciously engages in), but repetition as insistence...'³

The hope is to effect the culture, to shape it, to insert into it, at as many points as possible, one's own points of view: repetition, as a form of emphatic assertion, is a highly effective rhetorical device for gaining and holding

¹ For instances of variant works with the same title, but with differentiating numbers or a differentiating bracketted or concluding phrase, see: *Living for today, no. 1*, and *no. 2*, and *no. 3*; or *Pitch (black)*, April 1981 and *Pitch (blue)*, March 1981; or *Floating islands*, March 1986, and *Floating islands with strange birds and people*, May 1986.

² Killeen, in conversation with the author, at the McCahon retrospective, 'Gates and Journeys', Auckland City Art Gallery, 1988.

³ Laurence Simmons, "Language is not neutral": Killeen's Feminism', *Antic* 7, June 1990, pp. 75-94.

attention. Given that there is something present in the work which might engage the culture, a large body of works, through which repetitions may play, will best have this effect.

There is also the matter of the importance to modernist painting as a whole, and to American high or late modernist painting in particular, of repetition through seriality. As Michael Fried put it in a catalogue which Killeen had owned since 1973:

Finally, it is worth remarking on the importance to modernist painters of thinking and working in terms of a series of paintings - - an institution that arose during Impressionism in concomitance with the exploration throughout a number of pictures of a single motif, but which has come instead increasingly to have the function of providing a context of elucidation for the individual paintings comprising a given series. The mutual elucidation is both formal and expressive. On the one hand, seeing a number of paintings which represent essentially the same approach to the same formal issue makes understanding this issue easier than it would otherwise be; and on the other, the differences among the paintings within a given series serve to bring out the particular expressive intonations of each.⁴

Killeen knew such a seriality well, from his close reading of American art (at first in reproduction, and later in the flesh). And he knew well from McCahon's cross referencing of works, as Wystan Curnow has punningly called it,⁵ that one work may rub off on another, each elucidating and thus in a sense requiring the next, until ultimately, the lifework becomes itself a work -- one work, that work we call the oeuvre.

We have looked so far at the variant in its effect on the audience -- at repetition as a matter of external relations. But the variant is also a matter of internal policy. Killeen himself, as they say, has remarked that another prime reason for producing variants is:

⁴ Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland. Jules Olitski. Frank Stella*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965, pp. 45-46.

⁵ Wystan Curnow, *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon's Word and Number Painting*, National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1984, unpaginated.

... the development of better work. One of the main reasons for producing a lot is to get beyond fussiness & to allow one to work with greater ease... Production is not an end in itself it is only a way of trying out alternatives & gaining more experiece ...

Also the earlier works have less variants because of a lack of confidence in the work -- the stencil technique could easily have been used to produce many variants of a work but the development was heading in another direction -- towards developing a vocabulary.⁶

Killeen, as we may learn from the above note, regards the creation of variants both as a way of developing 'better work', and as a sign of 'confidence' in that work once it *has* been achieved -- a sign of assuredness that it is indeed an achievement.

July 1973

*Lack of work done and [lack of] confidence
have a great deal to do with what
is done in N.Z.*

*Try to do a lot without doubting...
work out what you want
and then do as many as possible --
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 90)*

'Lack of work done' leads at once to an incapacity to develop ideas, to maximise the potentialities of any given content or form, and to an anxious overworking of the single painting -- a fiddling and tightness typical of New Zealand art. 'Fussiness', in this specific and substantive sense, is a sign of 'doubt', of anxiety or uncertainty as to the work's worth. Such a 'lack of confidence' causes that tightness which the Australian artist John Nixon once described to me as New Zealand's tendency to produce 'value for money art' -- painting in which an elaborated surface is proffered as a certification of value, as proof of the manual hours put in -- as if the quality of the *image* and *idea* could not be sufficient cause and guarantor of value. The anxiety is typically double: there is an inner doubt as to the intrinsic worth of one's art -- an anxiety abetted

⁶ Killeen, handwritten comment on the m.s. of an early draft of this chapter.

by the fact that the culture does not much seem to value it, and a fear (hardly mis-placed) that the local audience may only value it in as much as it contains clear sign of laborious work. (Significantly, only work like Dick Frizzell's neo-regional realism, and Brent Wong's hyper realism still sells well during the current economic recession.)

There were also considerations for McCahon, and perhaps too for Killeen, of *elitism* and *preciousness*. For McCahon, at least, there was the motive of a certain popularism in the production of a large number of works -- almost as if *everyone* might be enabled to have one; and there was a sense of the artist as artisan. (McCahon told his students he disliked the title of 'artist'.) The hope was, it seems, to see art as a daily job, and the artist as a producer like other producers. And McCahon apparently told Killeen, some time in the years just after art school, 'You are not *producing* yet'.⁷ There was an ethic of productivity which required a workmanlike productivity, and which found in such productivity a salutary ordinariness.

One might remember Walters here too, who had found in black and white, and in his horizontal bar and circle motif, sufficient variety to impell his work for two decades. And this though both the largeness of number and the extraordinary variety of Killeen's production is closer to McCahon than to Walters, whose output, the product of a highly concentrated focus, and an extraordinary fastidiousness and self-censorship, is comparatively small.

Also, since the workmanlike habits established there had perhaps a lasting effect, it might usefully be recalled that Killeen had worked for thirteen years in his father's small signwriting business. Like Killeen's studio, his father's workshop is a building at the back of the house. Its carefully kept record books are not dissimilar to Killeen's studio record books; it has the same smell of paint, the same orderly disposition of tasks and tools, the same sense throughout of the methodical. And, as Killeen was intermittently to do from the late 1980s on, his father employs a workshop assistant. There are even the same rectangular traces of paint left on the wall around the innumerable paintings now gone that one may see in an artist's studio...

⁷ Killeen reported this incident in a conversation with the author, 30 May 1990. It might be noted here too that McCahon once produced a show at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, entitled 'Bargain Basement', which offered a large number of small, 'mass produced' variant paintings.

A further consideration. The number of paintings that Killeen could produce annually had been lowered by the very complexity of the cut-outs. (It should be remembered that *one* of the cut-out's images might have sufficed for a conventional painting, and that it is far easier to *paint* an image than to cut it out of intractable metal.) Also, the number, complexity and disparity of the pieces in each cut-out continued to increase over the years, making each work more and more difficult to achieve. So, to allow a cut-out to repeat images from another was convenient, in that it might allow a fuller exploration of the possibilities of any given idea, and a wider spread of the Killeenian word.

*paintings would have similar
images in them & would probably have the same title.
advantage -- would not have to generate as many
shapes -- concentration of effort
using images from earlier works as a resource.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 167)*

Note well: repetition means not a lessening of effort, but a *concentration* of effort, and this for a painter who has an exceptional fertility of invention, and an extraordinarily large repertoire of images -- certainly the largest of any painter since McCahon, and very probably, I think, the largest of any New Zealand painter ever.

Such a recycling of imagery as there is in the variant works was encouraged, too, by a new preparatory protocol introduced with *Pitch (blue)*, March 1981: [plate 56] the use of cardboard templates for each cut-out piece. [fig. 196] These templates functioned as a working tool, in that they provided a sort of full-size mock up of the final cut-out -- something akin to Constable's full-scale sketch for his Academy works. They were, as Killeen comments today, 'used as a means of being able to work directly on the painting at actual size', so granting 'better control of what I was doing.'⁸ They allowed for a greater rapidity and ease in cutting and colouring, since their material was at once cheaper and more tractable than aluminium, and since they did not, as did the aluminium, require bathing in acid to prepare their surface for the reception of paint. Since the templates were kept, even after the cut-out for which they prepared had left

⁸ Killeen, handwritten comment on the m.s. of an early draft of this chapter.

the studio, they functioned also as a recording tool, in that if some piece of a cut-out should be stolen or lost, they allowed a relatively easy replacement.



fig. 196. Templates on studio floor

The templates tended to lie about the studio. They tended to lie too, it might be said, in the sense of an untruth: they implied, proffered, suggested, all but demanded, a past in the present, a simultaneity previously foreign to the artist's practice...

Whatever their intended function, since the heaps of templates remained visible in the studio long after the departure of the work for which they had served as a preparatory 'sketch', they also encouraged the possibility of their further recombination and use. (As so often in the history of art, the introduction of a new technique opens the possibility of new meanings and forms.)

The template as a mode of production also proffered a new answer to that typically New Zealand problem noted by Killeen as early as 1973, the 'Lack of work done' and 'lack of confidence'. We have heard Killeen saying: 'Try to do a lot without doubting... work out what you want and then do as many as possible'. By means of this protocol of the template, Killeen *did* do a lot. He was now able

consistently to produce variations of a given work with a greater ease -- variations such as *Living for today no. 1*, [plate 67] and *Living for today no. 2*, [plate 69] both of July 1981, and *Living for today no. 3*, August 1981, [plate 73] where, in the variants after the first version, none of the images' shapes are 'new', though there are differences in their colouring. Also, Killeen was now more easily able to combine several old works to make a new work -- as with *Black, white, left, right*, which, in its four versions,⁹ [plates 77, 81, 82 & 83] combines elements of the earlier *Black, white*, in its two versions,¹⁰ [plates 78 & 80] with *Left, right*, in its two versions.¹¹ [plates 76 & 79] Here, it is not so much a matter of 'using *images* from earlier works as a resource' as it is of using whole *works* as a resource.

Though, as I have said, in the early cut-outs there were occasionally variants, it was only after the introduction of templates with *Pitch (blue)*, March 1981, that every cut-out, with only the rarest exceptions, would take its place as one of between two and five variants.¹² *Pitch (blue)* March, [plate 56] was followed by *Pitch (black)*, April, [plate 59] in which a number of the same templates were re-used, and, in some cases, rotated or reversed, so that they provided 'upside down' or 'back-to-front' versions of their first appearance.

Though there is some difference in the shapes, the disposition and the number of pieces of *Pitch (blue)* and *Pitch (black)*, the single coat of the title colour provides the most striking difference. For the next variant group, however, *Continental drift (blue)*, [plate 63] and *Continental drift (copper)*, [plate 65] both of May 1981, and *Continental drift (yellow)* April 1981, [plate 61] exactly the same templates were used, hung at the same angles: -- here, the only difference between the variants is that of colour. *Continental drift (yellow)* has half its shapes painted red and half blue, and all of them then wiped over with yellow. *Continental drift (blue)* has half its shapes yellow, and half red, and all of them wiped over with blue. *Continental drift (copper)* is self-coloured by its unadorned copper.

⁹ One of November and three of December 1981.

¹⁰ Both of November 1981.

¹¹ One of October and one of November 1981.

¹² Even after Killeen abandoned the use of templates, in the last months of 1985, the habit of variants persists.

It seems that Killeen's first response to the convenience of the template is to accept the repetitive and so more rapid mode of shape-production it allows; and, as a correlative, to produce an almost systematic variation of colour, much as Albers, say, had done with his square inside square, or as Stella had done in the 36 one foot square versions of the *Benjamin Moore* series, in which each of six designs was executed in one of the same six colours.¹³ Furthermore, the colours are now applied in a manner which accords with the old self-instruction: 'Try to do a lot without doubting, work out what you want and then do as many as possible' -- they are wiped quickly on with a sponge. In March 1981, probably in reference to *Pitch (blue)*, Killeen notes:

*Shapes -- painting of
if the decision is to paint a work
by hand, roughly & quickly & say blue
then that is it, no amount of fiddling
will make that better.*

*Whether the painting succeeds or not
lies in the decisions that were made earlier
& if the result is not liked or accepted
then those earlier decisions must be changed
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 116)*

Again, as in 1973, Killeen might say:

*Stencils
Cut out of cardboard
quicker and thereeness.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 92.)*

Or:

*9/9/73
I lean towards a painting in which some
form of decision is made before the
painting is done.*

¹³ William S. Rubin, *Frank Stella*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, p. 75.

(Killeen, *the blue notebook*, p. 93.)

He has returned to the pre-forming and pre-deciding principle of the cardboard stencil used in the Combs of 1973 and 1974, of the paper cut-out figures used in some of the 'realist' paintings of 1969, the paper cut-outs and images on cards used for the Chance series, and the linocut stamps of 1972 and 1973, all of which allowed the possibility of an endlessly repeated placing and so a certain rapidity and concentration of production.

I say that Killeen's *first* response is to accept the more rapid and systematic mode of production the template allows, and to approach a systematic and rapid mode of colouring. It is only the first response, since typically, after only eleven cut-outs,¹⁴ made from March to May 1981, Killeen abandons any attempt at systematic and/or rapid colouration. He turns from the sponged sweep of one colour, or leaving all the metal naked, to multicoloured and immensely various works whose colour is applied with various textures and tools -- works in which even the single piece may now be variously coloured and toned.

No sooner does Killeen develop a 'style' -- a style such as might afford a more normal painter at once a 'trademark', or identifying sign, and some years of work -- than he drops it. There is here, as so often with Killeen, a kind of double and contradictory motivation at work: the desire to create at once the convenience of a style and a means by which a large number of confident looking works might confidently be produced, and the desire to undo all such conveniences, to turn instead to a perpetual adventure with the disparate and new. And yet, though there will never again be such an exact repetition of shapes from one cut-out to another as in the cut-outs of March to May 1981, the template principle here established was to have a permanent and major effect, in that all of his work, from the template cut-outs of 1981 on, will partake of the code of the variant.

And, in the end, Killeen's repetitions of the image from one work to another will no longer be confined to variant works, any group of which shares the same name, and is produced within the space of a mere one or two months.

¹⁴ *Pitch (blue)*, March; *Tools and weapons*, March; *Eastern influence*, March; *Pitch (black)*, April; *Change in four colours*, April; *Continental drift (yellow)*, April; *Island drift*, May; *Continental drift (blue)*, May; *Continental drift (copper)*, May; *Triangle spider*, May (destroyed); *Fragment*, May. Of these, two are left in naked metal, *Fragment*, May, and *Continental drift (copper)*, May -- the first in galvanised iron, the second in copper. More exactly, such works are clear varnished, so that they may permanently seem to be naked and unoxidised metal.

Encouraged, perhaps, by his experience of the template, Killeen will come occasionally to let his images migrate over longer temporal distance than in these examples from 1981; he will let them travel even outside the boundaries of the numbered variants, into a far wider temporal and spatial spread. In the end, he will make all of the imagery and all of the years of his earlier work available to himself as a 'resource material to build paintings at a later date'.¹⁵ The cut-outs too will become, in a sense, Samplers...

¹⁵ Killeen, '7 Painters draft', February 1982, the black notebook, p. 129.