

Flaming stumps: Killeen and the regionalist

Ah, bitter price to pay! For Man's dominion - beauty swept away!
(William Pember Reeves, 'The Passing of the Forest')

Painting to me is like chopping down trees in the wilderness and living with the
slaughtered stumps, of not seeing the beauty I look for.
(Colin McCahon)

Thud... thud
Tree's blood... thud
Thud.
(Arnold Cork, 1934)

Despite the relative paucity of regional reference in their titles, Killeen's cut-outs include many of what might be called locality's signs - both from New Zealand and from the Nationalists' dreaded 'overseas'. In *Born alive in New Zealand no. 3*, December 1985, [plate 143] for instance, there is a Maori green stone ornamental fish hook; a Maori stone adze; a Polynesian comb pattern; a spiral motif typical of Maori carving, and coloured, as Maori carving's are, with earth red. There is a sheep on an altar in one piece, and a bull in another -- the sacrificial offerings perhaps of New Zealand's pastoral economy; there are fish on an altar in one piece, and a gull in another -- offerings, perhaps, of the geographical fact of New Zealand as an island country.¹ There are volcanoes which actively smoke -- marks, maybe, of a country which is still geologically young. And, as we have seen, even the Nationalists' requisite landscape appears here, as it does in all six 'Born in New Zealand' cut-outs, in the form of a 'man with a landscape in his head'.

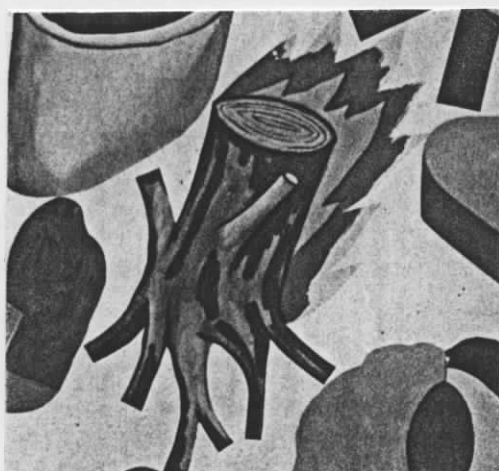


fig. 222. *Born alive in New Zealand no. 3*,
December 1985 (detail)

¹ That Killeen may regard the gull as a specifically New Zealand emblem is further suggested by the fact that a gull appears too in his much earlier painting with a 'New Zealand' title, *Alive in New Zealand*, 1971. Fish too are an often repeated element of Killeen's iconography -- appropriately, it might be said, for an island country.

There is also a flaming tree stump [fig. 222] -- a sign which appears too in *Born alive in New Zealand* -- for *Samuel*, October 1985, [plate 140] *Born alive in New Zealand no. 2*, November 1985, [plate 142] and in *Born alive in New Zealand no. 3*, December 1985. [plate 143] Though *Born alive in New Zealand no. 4*, April 1986, [plate 147] lacks the flaming stump, it proffers a related sign: a tree stump whose roots have metamorphosed into fingers. Killeen's metaphorical play with the stump continues in *Floating islands with strange birds and people*, May 1986, [plate 148] which juxtaposes the cylinder of a tree stump with that of a chimney, and includes a branch whose every twig has been sheared.

Like the 'not a landscape' pieces, these stump pieces find their fullest meaning in a specifically New Zealand context. If they are to achieve their maximum meaning effect, we need to know something of the New Zealand art and art history to which they allude.

Viewers familiar with 19th and 20th century New Zealand painting -- or with the several essays on its motif of tree stump or trunk² -- may recognise in the flaming stump two stock signs conjoined: the 19th century colonialist sign of the tree stump -- sign of the war between Civilisation and a native New Zealand Nature; and the 20th century sign of the 'Frozen flame' -- the sign of the burnt out tree of the native New Zealand forest. Both signs both refer to a specific New Zealand history: the clearing of the native forest for pastoral purposes.

The tree-stump symbol is repeated throughout innumerable 19th century New Zealand landscape paintings, sometimes in consort with melancholy emblems of the passing of the Maori, or, more commonly, with other, pleasantly domestic, emblems of the coming of a beneficent European and Christian usage of land and sea (churches, houses, roads, schools, factories, sailing boats, steamers, newly grassed fields, etc.).³

The tree-stump and axe also appears in 19th century New Zealand portraits as an attribute of the colonist. A photographic portrait of the writer's great grandfather shows him manfully clutching his axe; a self-portrait drawing by Gilfillan has the artist with both axe and stump, and the artist's little boy with

² See my 'The Stumps of Beauty and the Shriek of Progress', *Art New Zealand* 44, Spring 1987, pp. 52-55, 104-105, and an article to which it proffers its homage, Michael Dunn's classic iconographical essay, 'Frozen Flame and Slain Tree: the Dead Tree Theme in New Zealand Art of the Thirties and Forties', *Art New Zealand* 13, pp. 40-45.

³ See, for instance, George O'Brien, *Dunedin from Driver's Road*, 1886, pencil drawing with Chinese white, Hocken Library Collection, reproduced *Art New Zealand* 3, December/January 1976-7, p. 22.

a tomahawk. The axe head in Killeen's *Born alive in New Zealand no. 2*, [plate 142] *Born alive in New Zealand no. 3*, [plate 143] and *Born alive in New Zealand no. 4*, [plate 147] recalls at once this pictorial tradition of the axe, and the historical role of the axe in Europeanising the New Zealand landscape.

In the 20th century, while the stump does not entirely disappear,⁴ the most common icon of civilising destruction is the skeleton of a burnt-out tree. The burnt tree is a sign with something of the same ambivalence in its connotations as that 19th century sign of the tree-stump: it is -- often undecidably -- a mark of pleasurable excitement at change, or it is the agonised sign of an irretrievable loss.

The burnt-out tree could also be marketed and consumed as an emblem of New Zealandness, because it was so commonly present in the New Zealand paddocks of fact, as well as in the paddocks of paint. New Zealand, courtesy of its 'charred trees', might now be known as 'unique', as like 'nowhere else in the world'.⁵ Such trees struck visitors to New Zealand, and likewise New Zealanders returning to the country, as the clear sign of New Zealand's *difference* -- that very kind of difference the Nationalists sought. The painter Eric Lee-Johnson, for instance, remarked of these 'mute skeletons of the New Zealand forest': 'When on my return [to New Zealand] in 1938, I saw these familiar ghosts lining my route up through the King Country ... I knew I was home'.⁶



fig. 223. E. Mervyn Taylor, *Ravaged Soil*, 1950

⁴ See, for instance, Eric Lee-Johnson, *In the Backblocks*, 1950, pen and wash drawing, Auckland City Art Gallery, reproduced Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980*, Collins, Auckland, 1982, p. 138. Here the stump is surrounded by the skeletons of burnt out trees.

⁵ E.H. McCormick, *The Inland Eye*, Auckland Gallery Associates, Auckland, 1959, pp. 7-8.

⁶ Eric Lee-Johnson, 'Eric Lee-Johnson', *Arts Yearbook*, H.H. Tombs Ltd., Wellington, 1947, p. 72.

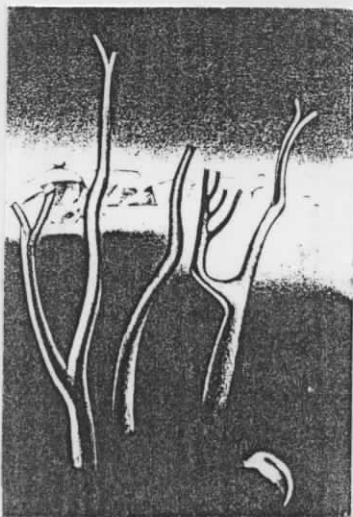


fig. 224. Gordon Walters,
Waikenaï landscape, 1944

In Lee-Johnson's painting, these ghosts became something of a trademark. They were by no means confined to Lee-Johnson, however. Gordon Walters, Russell Clarke, Rita Angus, John Holmewood, E. Mervyn Taylor, [figs. 223, 224] Louise Henderson, John Weeks, Patrick Hanly, and many others, all produced versions of the skeletal tree. The symbol was especially popular in the 1940s and 50s, when the burnt-out tree was commonly offered as an *objet trouve* of national identity. (Christopher Perkins' *Frozen Flame*, c.1931, [fig. 87] and Eric Lee-Johnson's *Slain Tree*, 1945, [fig. 88] in which Nature is symbolically crucified, are the best known examples.)

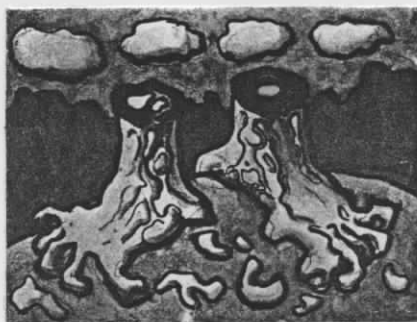


fig. 225. Eric Lee-Johnson, *Stumps*



fig. 226. *Born alive in New Zealand no. 4*, 1986 (detail)

Nationalist attempts emphatically to show horror or pity at the destruction of the native forest were liable to produce as much bathos as pathos, and sometimes they fell, whether intentionally or not, into the comic or grotesque rather than the tragic mode. Consider, for instance, a drawing well known to Killeen, Lee-Johnson's Disneyesque drawing, *Stump*, [fig. 225] whose amputated feet claw at the ground. The tree stump whose roots have metamorphosed into fingers in Killeen's *Born alive in New Zealand no. 4* [plate 147, fig. 226] is not only a generalised reference to the anthropomorphic writhings of the burnt out trees of 1930s, 40s and 50s New Zealand painting -- it is also a particular reference to those of Lee-Johnson's stumps, which play the same metamorphic game with roots and fingers and toes.

Sometimes, much as it used to be in the 19th century, the association is still made between the destruction of Maori culture, and the destruction of the native forest. Russell Clark's pen and wash *In the Urewera*,⁷ brings the Maori disconsolately to stand amidst the skeletal remains of a forest: native person, and native tree, their fate and their melancholy isolation are shown to be one and the same. That painters like Clark, Taylor and Lee-Johnson knew and were sympathetic to 19th century conjunctions of 'kauri forests cut down and destroyed' and 'the native race dying away', is suggested by the reproduction, in *Art in New Zealand*, in 1932, of the 19th century painter J.C. Richmond's *Detribalised Natives, Taranaki*, in which a stand of isolated and dying trees is made symbolically, by the words of its title, to stand too for the Maori.⁸

I do not wish to imply that Killeen's juxtaposition of items of prehistoric Maori technology with the European axe, stump and flame is cast in the same triumphal or mourning mode as the 19th and 20th century depictions of the Maori amidst a native Nature destroyed. Though doubtless each of these cut-out stumps and Maori artifacts bears with it its own connotational and historical freight, they are, as always with Killeen, simply presented as signs, with no hierachical ordering in which one culture might triumph and the other repine. In any case, the stump or frozen flame as a sign of Europeanisation and Christianisation was *itself* an artifact of a now dead or dying culture -- Killeen's reissuing of it is, in a sense, a mere memorial to a Nationalist art.

⁷ Russell Clark, *In the Urewera*, 1957, pen and wash, private collection, Auckland, illus. Michael Dunn, op. cit., p. 45.

⁸ J.C. Richmond, *Detribalised Natives, Taranaki*, illus. *Art in New Zealand*, March 1932, p. 175.

The frozen flame as a major motif was well burnt out by the 1960s. As early as 1958, Peter Tomory, the director of the Auckland City Art Gallery, had, in his influential essay 'Looking at Art in New Zealand', condemned as 'illustrative', and hence as pleasing only to 'literary art critics', the 'cliche in which burnt forests and tortured trees writhed about the hills'.⁹ No more dead trees please.¹⁰ The use of such a motif as the dead tree in the search for a national style had, so it seemed, done no more for New Zealand art than to 'send it up a picturesque *cul-de-sac*'.¹¹

Nor, even, was the dead tree seen any longer to possess the merit of a peculiar New Zealandness, since in its use, as Tomory had rightly remarked, the English painters 'Paul Nash, John Piper and Graham Sutherland were liberally borrowed from'.¹² Thus the dead tree was deprived of the very virtue -- New Zealandness -- for which it had previously been praised. And Eric Lee-Johnson, painter of *Slain Tree*, who had shone so resplendently in the eyes of an immediate literary entourage (A.R.D. Fairburn, E.H. McCormick, etc.), had come, in the face of painters like Angus, Woollaston and McCahon, to seem irreparably minor...

So the adventures of the dead tree in New Zealand art appeared to have come to an end. We have seen that the burnt-out tree appears at least once, however, in the painting of the 1970s -- in Killeen's *New Zealand Landscape painting Tradition?* [fig. 17] But it comes then only in quotemarks, as it were, or in italics, in another moment, and another labour, of critically 'Looking at Art in New Zealand'. It comes as part of a painted critique of the old New Zealand Nationalist school, as a mere example, in Killeen's deconstruction of the Nationalists' invented New Zealand.

Are the fires of the 40s and 50s burning again in Killeen's various versions of *Born in New Zealand*? I think not. The flaming stump appears in Killeen's work, I would say, not simply as a sign of Nature, or of a specifically New Zealand Nature, but as a conjoined reference to that old Nationalist icon, the innumerable

⁹ Peter Tomory, 'Looking at Art in New Zealand', *Landfall*, June 1958, p.157. (My italics.)

¹⁰ I take this phrasing from 'Notes from the Centres', *The Arts in New Zealand*, no. 4, vol. 17, June/July 1945, p. 48: 'No dead trees please. No lively red sheds; no ploughed fields; no roads; no nothing.'

¹¹ Peter Tomory, op. cit., p. 167.

¹² Peter Tomory, op. cit., p. 167.

burnt-out trees of 20th century New Zealand paintings, and to the innumerable stumps of 19th century New Zealand painting. Killeen's flaming stump is but the sign of two signs, in which, as in all signs, nature is already irretrievably lost.



fig. 227. *Floating islands with strange birds and people*, 1986 (detail)



fig. 228. *Interdependence*, March 1970.

The same goes for the juxtaposition of a stump and a smoking factory chimney in one of the pieces of the cut-out, *Floating islands with strange birds and people*. [plate 148 & fig. 227] Tree stump and chimney: they are the signs conjoined of that old antithesis of country and city in New Zealand Nationalist discourse; they are the marks, now conjoined, of the stumps of beauty and the shriek of progress; they are a quotemarked marking of previous Nationalist marks. They too form part of Killeen's reading of national icons, a reading which stresses their iconicity, and which is thus a reading of New Zealand culture, not of New Zealand nature -- or rather, of the way that, inevitably, Nature is a construction of culture. (Already, in 1967, Killeen had shown a factory chimney, in *Chimney and cloud*, June 1967. [fig. 26] And in 1970, at the time of Killeen's first interrogations of the culture's icons, he had proffered the factory chimney

instead of the requisite rural idyll. [fig. 228] Now, however, the conjunction of rural myth with urban fact is made explicit.

Nationalist painters proper, from c.1930 to c.1970, had tended resolutely to keep factory chimney and tree-stump apart: they preferred, in any case, to stick almost entirely to the depiction of a benign and idealised rusticity, which banished to pictorial invisibility all signs of urban industry, or even of the modern technology actually used in New Zealand's agrarian work.

New Zealand Myth -- factories
cities not
landscape

Woman flying over factories
landscape
(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 238)

The 'New Zealand myth' to which Killeen refers has it that New Zealand is a rural nation; when, in demographic fact, most New Zealanders live in 'cities not landscape'. It is against this myth that the factory chimneys of *Born alive in New Zealand no. 1*, [plate 141] *Born alive in New Zealand no. 2*, [plate 142] *Born alive in New Zealand no. 3*, [plate 143] and *Born alive in New Zealand no. 4* [plate 147] most tell. [fig. 229]

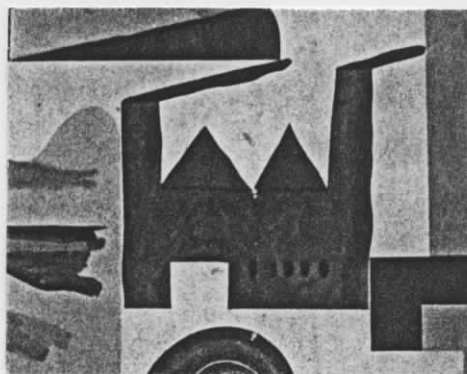


fig. 229. *Born alive in New Zealand no. 3*, December 1985 (detail)

Regionalist painters had long preferred, like Rita Angus, to see New Zealand as 'essentially medieval':¹³ in this pleasant regression into the timeless

¹³ Rita Angus, artist's statement, *A Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand* no. 3, 1947, p. 68.

stasis of a pastoral past, they might make New Zealand over again in the immemorial tradition of the pastoral ideal. So New Zealand regional realism had offered itself as the propaganda of a kind of Country party. It was the repository for all that happiness, all that productivity and prosperity of which the New Zealand rural myth was the claim and the promise. It reflected -- and actively shaped -- the ideal of New Zealand as a pastoral Utopia, an ideal shared by the culture, for which regionalism was thus the instrument and public scribe. But now, in New Zealand painting of the 1980s, factory and tree-stump, city and country, technology and Nature, which the regionalist had so long wished to keep apart, are clearly juxtaposed.¹⁴

Such a juxtaposition coincides with an identity crisis in New Zealand. A crisis revolving round this question: is New Zealand a purely farming country -- is it an endless rural idyll, to be supported at all costs, or is it to be something else? Will the New Zealander be only, as in the title of a Killeen drawing of 1969, and as in that Killeen cut-out piece of all six versions of the cut-out, *Born alive in New Zealand*, a 'Man with a landscape in his head'? Are New Zealanders to live under the sign of the Nature goddess -- as in Rita Angus's goddesses in New Zealand landscape,¹⁵ and in that piece of *Born alive in New Zealand -- for Samuel*, [plate 140] which has a hand taken from Egyptian depictions of the sky goddess, stretched protectively over four cows?¹⁶ Or might the New Zealander be like the double profile, the two-faced and computer drawn piece of Killeen's *Domestic (black and white)*, 1987 [plate 140] with office block and factory chimney in mind? [fig. 230]

The Labour government of 1984 had abandoned much of the vast apparatus of a kind of social security for farmers -- the endless handouts of guaranteed prices and subsidies, of export incentives, and massive rebates rewarding the buying of new machines -- they had brought New Zealand farmers out from the golden glow of the long supported pastoral ideal, and into the harsh glare of the marketplace (a harsher light, according to farmers complaint, than the much vaunted harsh clarity of New Zealand's implacable sun).

¹⁴ For other examples of the tree-stump motif in New Zealand painting and sculpture in the 1980s, see the works of Denys Watkins, Gavin Chilcott, Dennis O'Connor, Robert Jesson, etc., discussed and reproduced in my 'The Stumps of Beauty and the Shriek of Progress', *Art New Zealand* 44, Spring 1987, pp. 52-55, 104-105.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Rita Angus, *A Goddess of Mercy*, 1946-47, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch.

¹⁶ The hand of the goddess appears too in *Born alive in New Zealand no. 1*, *Born alive in New Zealand no. 2*, *Born alive in New Zealand no. 3*, and *Born alive in New Zealand no. 4*, and in *Floating islands with strange birds and people*, but in these cases as an isolate piece.

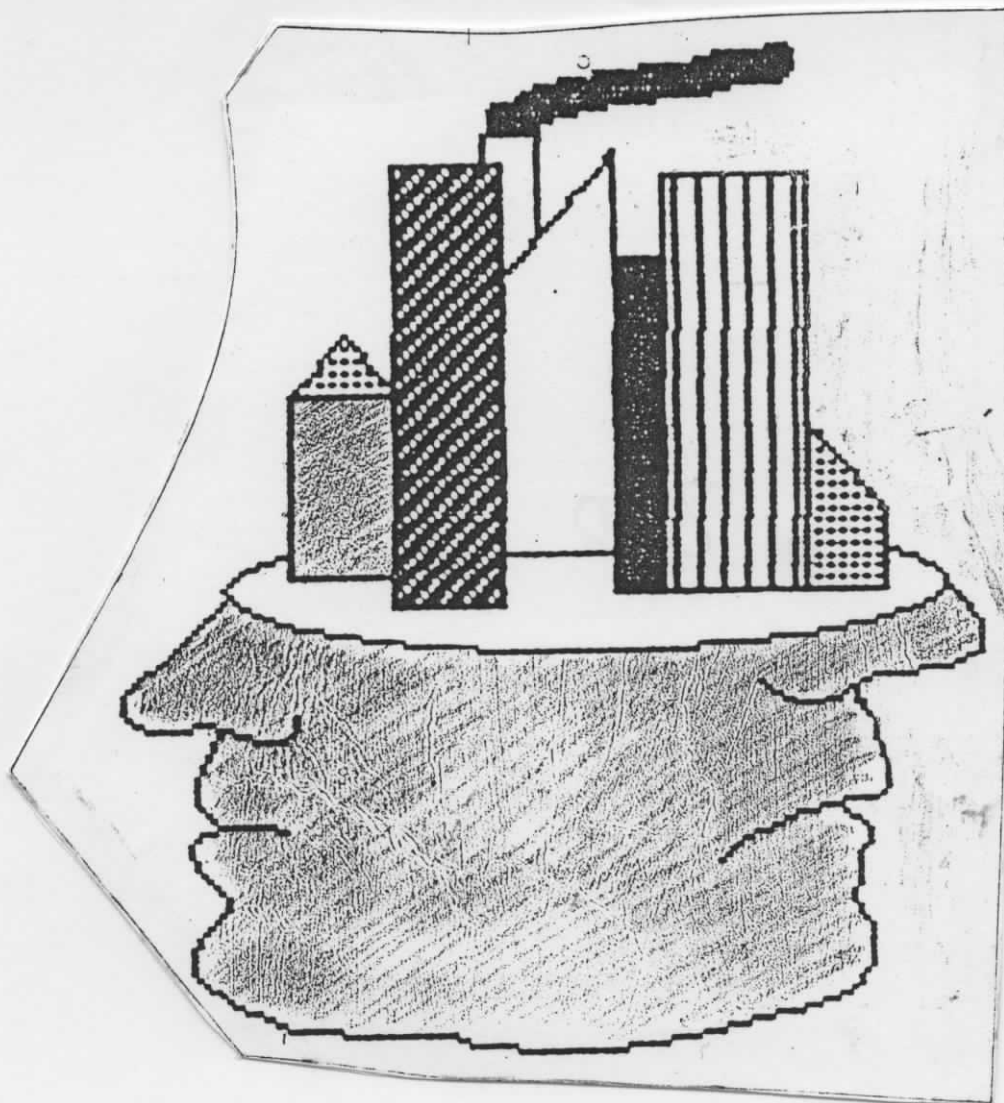


fig. 230. *Domestic* (black and white), 1987 (detail)

The myth of New Zealand as an endless rurality, and the economic basis of this myth, were in the 1980s all of a sudden under threat. If New Zealand is not, as fifty years of regionalist painting have maintained, a purely pastoral paradise, then what is it? (What could, what *should* it be?) Killeen's *Born alive in New Zealand* cut-outs are part of this questioning in which a whole culture partakes.