

Feminist cut-outs

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Review

Women & Men's Wars Women's View of the Political world of Men

"... In

'Prologue to a Feminist Critique of War & Politics' Nancy Harstock argues that political power is gendered, and that military capacity, civic personality, & masculinity are coterminous. She introduces the erotic as one aspect of gender difference & draws out the connection between masculine eroticism and military valor. For the citizen Warrior, relationships are organised around competition with the goal of domination; the body & emotions are systematically denied in the name of reason; creativity is expressed in, and through, a fascination & struggle with death. At their heart, political communities are always threatened by the competition of their male citizens and are ultimately dependent on, & exist in opposition to the private, the household, the necessary reproductive labour of the female population, and the world of ordinary emotion. The female is by this definition, not a citizen."

(Killeen, the black notebook, pp. 228-229)

The cut-outs *Time to change male institutionalised war*, June 1986, [plate 149] and *Time to change male institutionalised war no. 2*, August 1986, [plate 151] proffer the proposal that 'political power is gendered, and that military

capacity, civic personality, and masculinity are coterminous'. They draw out the connection between masculine eroticism and military valour'. This is perhaps clearest in their erect canon/penis/hills/testicles piece. [fig. 263]

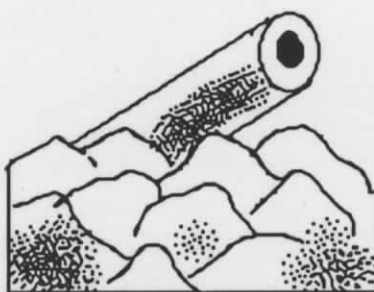


fig. 263.

Throughout both versions of *Time to change male institutionalised war*, a feminist reading is encouraged by various acropopae in which the phallus is under threat. Both have a piece with four fingers as factory chimneys aflame, and two pieces with a chopped off finger/bullet; and these phallic forms appear in the context of images of war, many of them phallic in their own right -- bombs, a warplane, gun turrets, a tank, a warship, a gun barrel, signs all, perhaps, of 'the male fascination with death'. One of the finger/bullet pieces in both versions is so flagrantly penis-like in outline that it includes even the opening to the urethral duct. There is also a broken classical column in both cut-outs. We are flagrantly here in the realms of Freudian mythology, in which any lopping of the body, or of a projecting part, is seen as a threat to the phallus, as a symbolic castration.

See also the testicles and truncated penis in *Mask with a lateral view*, February 1986, [plate 144] and of *Mask with a lateral view no. 2*, February 1986; [plate 145] and the still more clear example in *Mask with a lateral view no. 3*, August 1986. [plate 150] The title piece of *About asking when the answer is no, no. 2*, March 1985, [plate 133] contains another broken column -- another amputation of the phallus. The broken column of *Time to change male institutionalised war* also allows a specifically local reading in terms of a 'male fascination with death', since in a number of New Zealand war memorials, a 'column is cut off at an angle to remind the observer of lives cut cruelly short'.¹

¹ Chris Maclean and Jock Phillips, *The Sorrow and the Pride: New Zealand War Memorials*, Dept. of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1990, p. 98.

There are similar amputations in the two versions of *Time to change the Greek hero* -- a work whose title shares with *Time to change male institutionalised war* its unusually imperative tone, and its dispute with male heroics. *Time to change the Greek hero*, May 1985, [plate 135] has a piece showing a sculpted male torso whose lower legs are sliced off, another torso with only one upper leg intact, and a truncated classical column. *Time to change the Greek hero no. 2*, June 1985, [plate 135] proffers the same group, with the significant addition of a knife and a pool of blood: the violence implicit in such croppings could hardly be made more explicit. That the mutilated figures in these cut-outs should be male and classic perfectly accords with their title's demand.

Similarly, in *Language is not neutral*, May 1984, [plate 126] a piece of phallic tower is aflame, and further threatened by an axe, while in the corresponding piece of *Language is not neutral no. 2*, May 1984, [plate 128] the flaming tower is additionally flanked by a chopped off tail of a fish.

*Possible title from play by Renee at
Theatre Corporate
About asking when the answer is no
(asking society)
(Killeen, the black notebook, pp. 202)²*

About asking when the answer is no, February 1985, [plate 130] has a conglomerate of a house, a beheaded fish and an axehead. Another of its pieces has a hand, a foot, a goddess and a house; another, a cow's head, a whole fish and two fish tails whose fins are also punningly the pleats of a dress; yet another has a dress as a kind of headless, legless and armless body, with the dress hollowed out as if it were the skin of a body flayed. It is no accident, perhaps, that the garment should be a woman's, nor that the variously mutilated fish should show violence done to an ancient symbol of the goddess, nor that the fish should sometimes be inscribed on the dress, nor that such violence should often take place by the domestic sign of the house. The female body here is

² The play referred to here was Renee's 'Wednesday to Come', 1984, produced at Theatre Corporate, Auckland, November 1984. The lines which suggested Killeen's title were almost certainly these, as spoken by the character Granna: 'What's it all about Jeannie? It's about asking and getting no for an answer. And then asking a bit louder and a bit louder. Sometimes -- if you're lucky -- you get a little bit of what you ask for and then -- it starts all over again. And you wonder -- you do Jeannie. Do they ever listen?'

anatomised, exposed, opened, flayed, and this in the context of malic images of war: bombs, a bone, a skull, buildings aflame.

Could it be that 'the female' is antithetically posed against 'the male' in these cut-outs?

In both versions of *Time to change the Greek hero* [plates 135, 137] there is a piece showing a house with a female inside, and a piece showing a Suprematist woman with various images of a prehistoric goddess, both of which pieces might be seen as the antithesis of the classic Greek hero piece, the phallic factory piece, and the piece with the modern military tank. Likewise, in both versions of *About asking when the answer is no*, [plates 130, 133] there is a piece where the goddess crouches as if to give birth, conjoined to a Suprematist woman, beings antithetical, perhaps, to the phallic bomb and the skull, and to the axe and the flame of the other pieces.

Similarly, in both versions of *Time to change male institutionalised war*, [plates 149, 151] there are a number of 'domestic' items (a house with a woman at the front, a suburban house, pots, female profiles, a dress) which might be said to function antithetically to the imagery of war. Again, the otherwise inexplicable appearance of a warship, an industrial glove and a phallic factory tower amongst the various images of domesticity in the cut-outs *Domestic*, 24 October 1986, [plate 153] *Domestic with warship*, 5 March 1987, [plate 156] and *Domestic (black and white)*, 23 March 1987, [plate 157] might be read as a 'threat' or 'opposition to, the private, the household, the necessary reproductive labour of the female population'. In such a reading, the warship of *Domestic with warship*, and *Domestic (black and white)*, would be the antithesis of the houses of various styles, the beehive, the shell as natural house, the child's drawing of a house, and antithetical too, to the child's garment, the window blind, the kitchen chair, the cake, the sexual organs of flower, the domesticated animals and plants.

However, many of the images in these cut-outs refuse any too easy recuperation in antithetical terms. The bulldozer, for instance, in *Domestic with warship*, and *Domestic (black and white)*, which might seem a male machine *par excellence*, clears the space for the New Zealand domestic house of Killeen's suburbia paintings of 1969. The tree stump in the same two cut-outs is the standard sign in New Zealand art of the felling and domestication of the native

New Zealand forest. Both images, that is to say, admit the possibility that a certain violence is implicit within the domestic itself.

One might think here, too, of all the burning houses in Killeen's art, the first of which, painted in 1970, was entitled *Suburban disturbance*.³ Perhaps the disturbance comes as much from *within* the domestic as without; perhaps the household is as much woman's prison as woman's refuge; perhaps there is already a violence implicit in women's confinement to the reproductive and the domestic. (Killeen's later use of the title, *Housetrap*, [fig. 39] a house-shaped painting, would tend to bear out this view.)⁴

Furthermore, in both versions of *Time to change male institutionalised war*, [plates 149, 151] there is a Suprematist woman -- a female figure drawn in active pose and in a geometrical or Suprematist style -- so that essentialist and dualistic feminism which would regard woman as essentially peaceful, and men as essentially warlike, is somewhat displaced.

Also, there are -- as so often with the cut-outs -- a number of images which cannot easily be related to the title's directives at all, unless we are to take it that the geometric is invariably male, and the organic female, an essentialist dualism it seems the Suprematist woman already refutes.

Time to change male institutionalised war, and *Time to change the Greek hero* are the most buttonholing of Killeen's titles, but even here, it seems, even under the jurisdiction of these most sloganeering of words, the cut-out's meaning is not fixed in advance of the spectator's reading: it remains alive in a constant play. Nor is this only a matter of a certain ambiguity and multivalence in the images. As I have said, the very form of the cut-out, in its disjunctiveness and its perpetual shifting, seems to disallow any clearly oppositional posing of the standard dualities in which the male is traditionally privileged -- male/female, active/passive, warlike/domestic, public/private, geometric/organic, nature/culture, intellect/emotion, and so on.

However, there *is* one place in the endlessly dispersed play of the cut-outs where dualities can permanently be juxtaposed. I mean in those multi-image

³ *Suburban disturbance*, oil on board, 1970, 685 x 685mm., the artist's collection.

⁴ *Housetrap*, 12 August 1987, acrylic and collage on shaped polystyrene, artist's ref. no. 740.

pieces where several images are riveted or painted together. In both versions of *Time to change the Greek hero*, for instance, there is a piece where a knight's phallic armour abuts three fish -- symbols of the goddess of pre-patriarchal times; and a piece which opposes the pediment of a classic temple to the inverted pediment of the pudenda of a pre-classical goddess.⁵ The title piece of *About asking when the answer is no, no. 2*, March 1985, juxtaposes a castrated classic column with a woman's dress, while another piece here and in the first version conjoins bombs, a skull, and a flower, and another has a house cut by an axehead -- further instances, perhaps, of 'threat' or 'opposition to, the private, the household'. *The politics of difference no. 2*, April 1984, [plate 123] and *Pawns, tools and the politics of difference*, May 1984, [plate 125] both have a piece where a geometrical, Suprematist woman is put back to back with a woman organically drawn.

It is not that Killeen necessarily believes in that essentialist feminism which would have it that men are 'naturally' aggressive, and women are 'naturally' nurturing. The concern in all these 'feminist' works is rather *The politics of difference* -- how sexual difference is politically/socially/aesthetically coded and so created. The concern is, in the words of two more cut-out titles, the *Stories we tell ourselves*, or the *Stories we tell each other*.⁶

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The (M)other Tongue. p. 16

*Literature is crucial to disrupting patriarchy, they say,
because "the stories we tell ourselves about who we
are or hope to be play a primary role in creating
& sustaining our identities..."*

(Killen, the black notebook, p. 229)

Let us return to where we began, to Killeen's attending to the proposition that 'political power is gendered, and that military capacity, civic personality and masculinity are coterminous'. We shall see that for Killeen too it was a return.

⁵ At the first Sue Crockford gallery, Albert St., Auckland, where the first version of *Time to change the Greek hero* was shown, an inverted pediment permanently fixed above the entrance door was intended to signify the same thing as Killeen's inverted pyramid, according to a typology which saw the upward pointing triangle as male, and the downward pointing as female.

⁶ *Stories we tell ourselves*, 25 May 1987; *Stories we tell each other*, 25 June 1987.

The politics of difference, March 1984, [plate 120] *The politics of difference* no. 2, April 1984, [plate 123] and *Pawns, tools and the politics of difference*, May 1984, [plate 125] each have a piece depicting a phallically knobbed Australian Pensioners' League building -- a monument to the citizen warrior, a bastion of malic, nationalist and warlike values. Here, we see monumentalised a male civic/military body which has a large and conservative political power. The Pensioners' League is the Australian equivalent of the Returned Servicemens' Association in New Zealand. The R.S.A. is the body which controls the celebration and memorialisation of the country's war dead on Anzac day. Such rites 'play a primary role in creating and sustaining our identities' as New Zealanders; the stories of Anzac heroism and sacrifice are amongst the most powerful stories we tell ourselves.

Killeen's first solo show, as the non-amnesiac reader will recall, was an exhibition devoted to a critique of New Zealand nationalism and war. One of its major topics was the *Anzac spectacle*. Such Returned Servicemens' spectacles as Anzac parades had, so it seemed to Killeen, and to many protestors of his generation, the function of making 'the calm inevitability of war' seem our 'inevitable destiny' in the present. This was why, in the 1960s, Anzac ceremonies and monuments were the site of anti-war demonstrations -- protests whose theme was the same as that of Killeen's 1970 painting *Lucifer's motto* -- 'I will not serve'.



fig. 264. *Man with monument*, 1968

Nor even was Killeen's 1970 Barry Lett Gallery show the first occasion of his noting a New Zealand glorification of war and death. In *Man with monument*, 1968, [fig. 264] Killeen had already posed war as part of the New

Zealand Arcadia. *Man with monument* has a figure in football jersey (rugby, racing and beer were the Holy Trinity of New Zealand's national religion, according to what was at the time a stock topos of middlebrow liberal culture). The footballer appears, bust length, in hieratically frontal pose, against a monument of stone, or concrete, block. The figure and frame partly obscure a Roman lettered text on the edifice:

THE
 O R I O U
 D E A D

The inscription, with six of its presumed letters missing, or present only in part, might provoke, in Professor Tony Green's words of another inscription on another painting, 'a problem, for the beholder, of epigraphy'.⁷ But for the New Zealand viewer the given signs are sufficient: the inscription is already written: THE GLORIOUS DEAD. Not only is it the inscription of the monument in front of the Auckland War Memorial Museum -- once the site of anti-Vietnam war protests, and the model for Killeen's painted monuments. Killeen can rely on the fact that New Zealand viewers carry in their minds innumerable New Zealand small towns, in the melancholy emptiness of whose public spaces the only civic proclamations, and the only civic monuments, are their war memorials. Every town has one.

So, in *Man with monument*, two of the most characteristic cults of New Zealand culture, and conscious assertions of national identity, are conjoined, the cult of rugby and the cult of the war dead, both of which assert national identity in terms of the male.⁸

The footballer's expression is sombre, eyes staring blankly (so signifying by the absence of focus outside itself a focus within), and the corners of his mouth are turned down (a classic sign of sorrow), as if he is thinking of the dead. The footballer is not signified as seeing the text (his back is to it), but he may be

⁷ Tony Green, m.s. copy, 'Silhouettes on the Shade', p. 7, later published under that title, *Splash*, vol. 1, no. 2, December 1984, but with this and the following passage I quote deleted from the published version.

⁸ Sir Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, revised edition 1969. This was Killeen's New Zealand history text at school, and he owns the revised edition. Sinclair notes there, without dismay, that New Zealand's sense of its own national identity was formed by two things above all: war and rugby football. Sinclair further elaborates this theme, again without regard for its essentially male nature, in his *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity*, Allen and Unwin & Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, 1986.

imagined as inwardly speaking it in memory. 'The inscription is a Memento Mori, an invitation to remember Death, even in the midst of happiness.'⁹ It is as if the footballer hears in his head the speech of death: ET IN ARCADIA EGO: Even in Arcadia am I.

It is no accident that I have twice borrowed, and shall borrow again, the words Tony Green used when writing of Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*. For in *Man with monument*, as in the Poussin painting, it is possible to read 'death as an interruption of happiness in Arcadia' -- here, a happy, healthy land of blue sky, green fields and sport (though not, alas, erotic sport as in Poussin); and here too the overlapped letters might be seen as 'an interruption of sight, and of literal reading, for the Beholder, as a reminder of mortality, also, therefore'.¹⁰ Here too, 'the painter's business is to choose what to make visible and what to hide',¹¹ here, as in Killeen's 1970 paintings with their camouflaged Anzac spectacles, there is a certain interruption of sight, and reminding of mortality, and here too meaning at once proliferates and is partially concealed by layering.¹²

In Killeen's 1968-1970 examinations of militarism, however, it might seem a mere accident, or an unconsidered reflection of fact, that the military figure should in every case be male. The pre-cut-out paintings did not assert gender as *theme*. It was not until his encounter with such feminist critiques as Harstock's that Killeen came consciously to consider that the military and the nationalistic might be specifically and erotically male. Only then, as in the three versions of *The Politics of difference*, did Killeen's work come to juxtapose the military, the male and the nationalistic with depictions of woman, and with images which might be called 'female' -- fish, dresses, flowers -- and with women punningly depicted as pawns and tools.

⁹ Tony Green, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁰ Green, op. cit., p. 8.

¹¹ Green, op. cit., p. 9.

¹² Killeen himself links *Man with monument*, 1968, to the Anzac paintings of 1970, when he considers re-using its title for the 1970 series.

Anzac day
Lucifers motto
 ...
Man with monument
 (Killeen, *the green notebook*, p. 52)

Nevertheless, Killeen's earlier critiques of New Zealand 'citizen warriors' had in a sense prepared him for his encounter with the Barstock claim that 'political power is gendered, and that military capacity, civic personality and masculinity are coterminous'. They were his oeuvre's own "Prologue to a Feminist Critique of War'. So the oeuvre builds upon itself, and takes the new to itself. It is itself a *concretionary structure*, in which meaning proliferates by altering and addition.

Given his particular history and geography, another part of that Bartstock passage must also have immediately struck Killeen: the claim of an essentially 'male' creativity 'expressed in and through a fascination and struggle with death'. That claim would perhaps have seemed to him telling in two ways: telling of his former teacher, McCahon, the painter generally regarded as New Zealand's finest, and telling of New Zealand culture at large.

We are brought back here to McCahon saying to his students, 'All great art has death as its subject'. We might be reminded here too of one of the most intimidating machines of McCahon's oeuvre, the vast *Victory Over Death 2*, 1970, a painting officially chosen as representative of its country, and presented by the New Zealand government in 1978 to the people and government of Australia. McCahon, so it seemed and would always seem to Killeen, was in his death obsessed art indicative of a whole culture's obsession: a culture peculiarly malic -- *the negative society*, as he called it in his *Social document*, a culture whose very identity was formed in violence and death. It was against this McCahonian and Christian darkness, and against a whole culture's celebration of a 'creativity expressed in and through a fascination and struggle with death', that Killeen come to pose an exhibition and series in 1989: *Lessons in Lightness*.¹³ So the oeuvre turns and returns...

¹³ Richard Killeen, *Lessons in Lightness*, exhibition, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, 2 September - 27 September 1989. For a discussion of Killeen's 'Lightness', see my *Richard Killeen: Lessons in Lightness*, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, 1989; and my 'Killeen's stacking, naming and lightness', in *Richard Killeen*, Workshop Press, Auckland, 1991.