

Painting on fragments

Domestic with warship, 5 March 1987, [plate 156] is the first cut-out where Killeen abandons his practice, almost invariable since the first cut-out in August 1978, of cutting away every image at its outlines so that there is no remainder left. Here, each image is instead painted on its own surrounding ground -- a white, roughly rectangular or simple irregular shape produced by a freehand cutting of the prepared aluminium. Whereas before, each *image* was in a sense a fragment, deprived as it was of any surrounding context and ground, now it is the grounds themselves which seem fragments.

Domestic with warship, the first of such 'painting on fragments',¹ follows directly after a Summer break from painting following the highly intricate, 79 piece cut-out, *Monkey's Revenge*, December 1986 -- a veritable *tour de force* of cutting. [plate 155] So, almost immediately after an especially difficult labour, Killeen eliminates the doubtless tiresome need to 'remake' every drawn outline by means of the metal snippers. This means that though the second and third versions of *Domestic* -- *Domestic with warship*, 5 March 1987, [plate 156] and *Domestic (black and white)*, 23 March 1987 [plate 157] -- repeat the elaborate images of the first *Domestic*, of October 1986, [plate 153] they proffer them now on white, variously shaped and easily snipped out grounds. The same is so of the images repeated in second version of *Monkey's Revenge*, that of 7 May 1987 : [plate 159] they are no longer cut away at their outlines, as they were in the first.

Such a 'painting on fragments' is continued in the next six cut-outs after *Domestic with warship* -- *Domestic (black and white)*, 23 March 1987; [plate 157] *The politics of naming*, 29 April 1987; [plate 158] *Monkey's Revenge*, 7 May 1987; [plate 159] *Stories we tell ourselves*, 25 May 1987; [plate 160] *Any item will do*, 7 June 1987 [plate 161] -- until Killeen precipitately abandons the cut-outs, with seeming finality, after completing the vast, 136 piece *Stories we tell each other*. [plate 162]

We shall come to the abandonment of the cut-outs in a moment. But first we must answer this question: how and why did Killeen come, in his 'painting on fragments', to relinquish his long established mode of cutting out?

¹ Killeen, note dated 23 . 6. 85, the black notebook, p. 225.

The first step towards ceasing to cut out the image so that it has no remainder was the abandoning, in January 1985, of the preparatory use of the cardboard template, and the adoption of a lighter gauge of aluminium. This lighter gauge metal allowed a cutting by hand, using tin snips, shears, and more importantly, a knife -- a far more 'direct', spontaneous' and rapid process than Killeen's previous method of cutting with a jig- saw.

Start cutting images directly from aluminium so that work is more spontaneous. Also eliminates tiresome need to 'remake' every work from cardboard to Aluminium.

The Aluminium 0.45 used prepainted & cut by hand with snips...

Thought this possibility through while travelling

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 206)²

4 . 6 . 85

Paintings now develop out of the drawings whereas up to until last year the use of cardboard templates helped develop the paintings first. Also with greater complexity images are harder to arrive at and need to be drawn a lot.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 223)

23 . 6 . 85

Painting more directly onto the metal (prepared)

(since Jan '85)

rather than drawing then cutting and painting.

Leading to different kinds of images -- more like painting on fragments -- less cut out.

Comes from combining drawing into the painting.

² Note written between note dated 7 . 1 . 85, and note dated 21 . 1 . 85. The 'travelling' referred to is Killeen's 1984 journey to exhibit in the Edinburgh Festival, and his travels in the same year in England, Morocco, Egypt, Italy and France.

(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 225)

This painting on 'fragments' whose margins do not coincide with the image had already appeared, if only occasionally, in some pieces of the cut-outs of 1985, following immediately upon the adoption of a lighter gauge aluminium and a more direct drawing onto the piece. It continued to appear, if still only in occasional pieces, for the rest of that year. In *About asking when the answer is no*, for instance, of February 1985, [plate 130] there is a square, white piece with two small rectangles appended, which has three whales drawn inside it; a roughly rectangular piece, with two snakes and a fish appended, whose white rectangular field supports the drawing of a leaf; and a rectangular piece with an enlarged base over whose white surface an industrial building is freely sketched.³ In each such case, on a white, simply shaped piece, various figures are drawn.

Also, there is already in early 1985 an increasing tendency towards drawing one image inside the field provided by another image even when that image and its ground still is entirely coincident -- as with the factory building and cart drawn over the turnip-shaped and coloured piece of *Looking is not seeing*, January 1985. [plate 129] In this way, too, Killeen is 'Painting more directly onto the prepared metal, rather than drawing then cutting and painting', 'leading to different kinds of images -- more like painting on fragments -- less cut out'. Here too it 'comes from combining drawing into the painting'.⁴

17. 7. 85

One reason for painting the images on shapes is that when cut out they have to fit together physically. This creates all kinds of difficulties in trying to bring things together. Drawing on a sheet of metal (like paper) is more flexible; anything can be introduced.

(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 226)

³ See, for further instances, the roughly rectangular piece with a leaf shape riveted to it, and see the signature piece, in *Tracing the lines of my face*, May 1985, and in *Tracing the lines of my face no. 2*, June 1985; or the rectangular piece with red line drawings over it, in *Floating islands with strange birds and people*, May 1986; and the pedimented rectangle of *Time to change the Greek hero*, May 1985, with its various figures of women. Again, in *Born alive in New Zealand*, November 1985, there is a white, roughly rectangular piece, with four cattle sketched on it.

⁴ Killeen, note dated 23 . 6. 85, *the black notebook*, p. 225.

Given that the pieces of the cut-out are to be hung touching, doubtless it is easier for the hanger, whether that hanger be artist or viewer, to fit simple rather than complex shapes together. But surely another motive for adopting the new 'painting on fragments' -- though it is only hinted at in the above note -- was to avoid the sheer difficulty of cutting out the outlines of so many intricate images.

To paint an elaborate image on a 'shape', or 'fragment', was far easier than cutting out that image with the shears, snips or knife. 'Drawing' an outline 'on a sheet of metal (like paper) is more flexible' than cutting, and so in a sense 'remaking', that outline -- more 'spontaneous' than tracing it over again with the shears; while 'spontaneity' is further assured by the ease of cutting the newly simple shapes of the ground from the newly paper-thin aluminium...

As always, avoiding one difficulty leads to another. Where once the image had automatically provided its colour right to the edge of the piece, now Killeen has to decide what to do with the left-over white.

20.5.87

Because I am now not cutting out around the edge of each image the question of where colour begins & ends again becomes a problem.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 249)

Generally, in this new 'painting on fragments', Killeen tends to isolate the image on its white painted ground, much as previously he had isolated the coloured piece on the white of the wall. Sometimes, however, as with the brownish wash over the outline of a stylised, truncated bird in *Domestic with warship*, 5 March 1987, [plate 156] the colour wash slightly exceeds the outline it colours. Sometimes, as with the profile fish in the same cut-out, the image is not coloured at all, but only surrounded by colour; and sometimes it is only partially edged by colour. Elsewhere, as with the butterfly piece in *Domestic with warship*, the image is surrounded with a white shape, which is itself made a figure by being surrounded with colour.

I come now to the penultimate cut-out of 1987, *Any item will do*, 7 June. [plate 161 & fig. 265]

1. 6. 87.

...

any item will do. Some items will do.

item plan

...

Like a computer -- yes no.

put all images in -- cross out those not

approved of

tick or ring those approved of

question and answer

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 252)

In the event of the cut-out itself, it seems that not just any item will do, nor just any juxtaposition of items. Rather than simply following the dictates of the above note, and suggesting an attitude to the various items by ticking or ringing those approved, and crossing out those disapproved, Killeen instead opts also to suggest possible linkages by scribbling connecting lines between the images. A gun turret and a British flag, for instance, signs of the nationalistic and the militaristic, are crossed out; while a wicker jug and a cooking pot, innocent domestic containers both, are linked. [fig. 265]

I suggested earlier that the title *Any item will do* may be taken to imply an extremity of doubt, a self-pejorative sense of the arbitrariness of the cut-outs' juxtaposition of images. I suggested it might be taken in the sense that if there is no longer any discernible reason for the gathering of things, if any item may be present, and in any relation to any other, then meaning itself is endangered. Killeen's scribbling over the already established face of the cut-out might be read, accordingly, as a kind of (desperate) after or final thought, as a last ditch attempt, in the face of the growing threat of meaninglessness, to assert, after all, and in spite of all, meaningful connections between the cut-out's parts. It might seem, if this extremity indeed be so, that we are near to the cut-outs' end.

Perhaps unfortunately for such a dramatics and poignance of end ('the rest is silence'), Killeen comments in its margin:

*not so much a worry about meaninglessness but just
a different way of doing it and a different meaning*

Gave opportunity to show what was being selected & rejected. -- that was the idea

I might rephrase, in answer, that the title 'Any item will do' is a response to the constant claims of those who can see no reason for the presence (or absence) of any given image in the cut-outs. It serves to show, in the face of such disbelief, that there is indeed a reason for the selection and rejection of images, to demonstrate that various compatibilities and incompatibilities between the images do exist. The scribbled links, in such a reading, are a kind of meta-scribble, or meta-commentary, where Killeen marks connections in the already established cut-out, demonstrating connections which might (already) be seen to exist. It is as if Killeen acts here, in this scribbling, as a first viewer of the cut-out, and as its first commentator; his scribble mimes what we ourselves might do with the eye and mind.

The image in Killeen's cut-outs is akin to the Word in Barthes' account of modern poetry: 'It shines with an infinite freedom and prepares to radiate towards innumerable uncertain and possible connections. Fixed connections being abolished, it 'plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections: it is a sign which stands.' It is 'an act without immediate past, without environment, and which holds forth only the dense shadow of reflexes from all sources which are associated with it'. Under each image, then, 'there lies a sort of existential geology, in which is gathered the total content of the Name, instead of a chosen content, as in classical prose and poetry'.⁵

The image 'is no longer guided *in advance* by the general intention of social discourse'. The consumer of such an image, 'deprived of selective connections, encounters the image frontally, and receives it as an absolute quantity, accompanied by all its possible associations. The image, here, is encyclopaedic, it contains simultaneously all the acceptations from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose. It therefore achieves a state which is possible only in dictionaries or in poetry -- places where the noun can live without its article -- and is reduced to a sort of zero degreee, pregnant with all past and future specifications'. Each image 'is thus an unexpected object, a Pandora's box from which fly out all the potentialities of language'.⁶

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, transl. Annette Lavers & Colin Smith, Jonathon Cape, London, 1970, pp. 54-55.

⁶ Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 54-55.

Killeen, in *Any item will do*, tries, to the contrary of his usual practice, in which the viewer is 'deprived of the guide of selective connections', and in which 'fixed connections are abolished', precisely to *select out connections*, to guide the viewer to them. He inscribes a relational discourse over the face of a non-relational discourse, scribbling over the cut-out, with all the tentativeness of the glance, to show us what *we* might do...

Now that the painting is a work like those Killeen imagined in the months immediately preceding the first cut-outs, a work consisting of pieces like 'small paintings hung at different levels and positions',⁷ and now that each image has its own surrounding ground as in a conventional, non cut-out painting, there is no intrinsic reason why each might not be offered as a painting 'proper', in its own right. And so Killeen is enabled to act in accord with the following note:

25.6.87

Experiment with idea again of painting on large shape

Use polystyrene support with edges rounded on front.

Muslin painted on with acrylic photocopied images used.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 253)

In the polystyrene paintings answering to this note, it will seem as if each piece, now fattened and enlarged, had escaped the company of pieces in some cut-out or other. Their shapes will still, like the pieces of the cut-outs, be mostly organic or irregular (Killeen will not soon return to square or rectangular painting -- though even that is to come). That some of the polystyrene paintings are 'figurative' in outline -- as with *House*; 3 August 1987, [fig. 266] which has the shape of a house -- serves still further to suggest that their origin is indeed in the single piece of a cut-out.

The move to drawing directly on the prepared aluminium ground in January 1985 had come from 'combining drawing into the painting'. Now, in June 1987, an increased production of drawings, and an increased 'liking' for the

⁷ Killeen, the black notebook, p. 29.

compositional fixedness drawing at once allows and demands, provides a further and final provocation for the abandonment of the cut-outs.



fig. 266. *House*, 3 August 1987

27.6.87

It seems that following all the drawing I have been doing & liking, I am once again wanting to make the kind of decisions that are not possible when the images are cut out & movable.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 254)

It seemed the cut-outs had come to an end:

Nov 10 1987

McLeavey show.

Last show containing new cut-out paintings.

2 cut-outs

Domestic with warship

Stories we tell each other.

New works

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 258)

The 1987 Peter McLeavey Gallery show was a mixture of cut-outs (*Domestic with Warship*, 5 March 1987, and *Stories we tell each other*, June 1987), and of the new, non cut-out, polystyrene works.⁸ So Killeen marked the moment of the cut-outs' abandonment, by presenting two samples of the last cut-outs, and four works of the kind which replaced them. His next two exhibitions, at the Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland, 30 May 1988 -- 17 June, and that at Peter McLeavey Gallery 9. August 1988 -- 27 August 1988, consisted entirely of the new Polystyrene works, and related drawings, so marking what seemed to be the cut-out's definitive end.

I say 'what seemed to be the end'.

'How are we to know if a discourse is finished?', asks Roland Barthes. 'This is quite as arbitrary as the beginning. Hence there must be some sign for the end, a sign of closure.'⁹ That Killeen, in the privacy of the black notebook, writes 'Last show containing new cutout paintings', hardly constitutes a public sign.

In a sense, perhaps, the two large cut-outs -- the next but penultimate, 129 piece *Stories we tell ourselves*, 25 May 1987, [plate 160] and the final, 136 piece *Stories we tell each other*, 25 June 1987 [plate 162] -- the cut-out with the largest number of pieces of all the cut-outs - act as what Barthes would call an 'epilogue (*peroratio, conclusio, cumulus*, crowning touch)', and so provide that rhetorically necessary act of conclusion -- a summary '*enumeratio, rerum repetitio*'.¹⁰ The fact that *Stories we tell each other* comes, as Killeen says, 'with old paintings behind' in transparent overlay,¹¹ as though it bears with it a memorialising

⁸ The polystyrene paintings exhibited in company with the two cut-outs at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 10 - 28 November 1987, were: *Another poet with sexist buildings*; 15 August 1987; *Soft house*; 14 August 1987; *More sexist buildings*; 19 October 1987; *Travels with a leg*, 30 July 1987.

⁹ Roland Barthes, 'The Old Rhetoric: an aide memoire', in Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, transl. Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, New York, 1988, pp. 79-80.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 80.

¹¹ Killeen, note dated 25 . 8 . 87, the black notebook, p. 253.

palimpsest of its long history, might add to the sense that this last of the cut-outs is a finalising summation of all that had come before.

Yet there was no clear sign of the final end of the cut-outs, except that Killeen announced to his dealers the end, which end doubtless they announced, as a news flash to various viewers, so granting these works an exceptional historical import. Otherwise, all that was certainly visible was that the cut-outs had been, and perhaps only for the moment, for a mere half and one shows, interrupted by the arrival of the polystyrene works.

Each series, as I have said -- the Comb, the Grid, the Lace, and so on -- potentially endless though it may have been, does end in this oeuvre which so persistently crops itself off. Killeen's oeuvre, in its very persistence, had persistently worked like this, like the crop: in the effect of an *aposiopesis* -- a sudden breaking off in speech. Yet no series had been maintained so long, or so satisfactorily, or with such variance within, as the cut-outs -- if a series it is.

The first cut-outs had themselves come, as I have shown, as a shock and surprise, seemingly without exordium or prelude -- from nowhere, as it were. Only hindsight has mitigated this shock. Apart from hindsight, nothing, as Barthes might say, could make the cut of the knife less harsh, nothing exorcised the arbitrariness of their beginning, nothing *tamed* the break of the cut-outs into the silence where before there had been none. Likewise, nine years later, nothing tamed the suddenness of the break away from their speech.

Though, after an absence of one and a half years, the cut-outs were unpredictably to return in 26 November 1989, their sudden ending, with *Stories we tell each other*, 25 June 1987, conveniently provides my own *aposiopesis*.
