

Combs over the ground

The comb series consists of paintings whose figures are single combs with teeth formed by a zig-zag triangulation at one edge, or more often, double sided combs formed of two such combs placed back to back. These combs, one per painting, are tilted against a white ground. The series runs from mid 1973, through 1974, and its combs occasionally re-emerge, over quite other kinds of ground, in 1975.

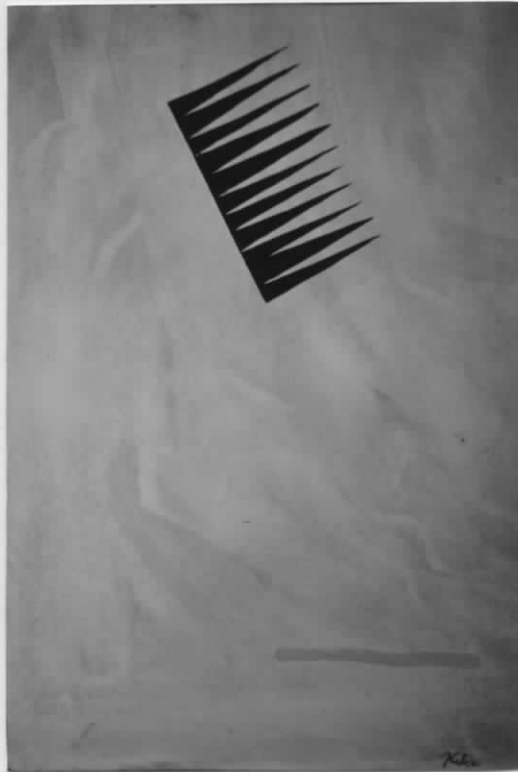


fig. 106 *Island influence*, July 1973

The first appearances of the motif come in June and July 1973, in two paintings with small, single sided combs: *Comb*, June 1973, and *Island influence*, July 1973. [fig. 106] *Comb* has a black comb, a sanded circle and a yellow stroke, each asymmetrically placed on an unmodified undercoat ground (now somewhat yellowed by time). *Island influence*, a variant on the composition of *Comb*, has on its more elaborately worked ground a similar black comb, a yellow stroke and a linoprint signature.

Killeen now instructs himself:

18/7/73

*Don't disguise the board, let it be what
it is. Don't compromise what is on it
by letting the board control it.*

*Things on a ground ————Canvas
Bigger blurred shapes on ground
Things on that
Things separate from ground*

*Canvas needs a coat of white — acrylic
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 85)*

In accord with this instruction, from August 1973 on, the painted ground is invariably canvas, not hardboard. The white acrylic ground is left untouched, but for the comb, now considerably enlarged, doubled, placed back-to-back, and off-centrally tilted upon it. (In the earliest of these works — those of August and September — there are sometimes still one or two other marks, also asymmetrically placed.)

By this continuing refusal of centrality, by the asymmetry of this tilting of the comb, and by the very largeness of the white ground around it, Killeen continues to refuse the compromising, the constricting, the composing power of the edge.

*off centre
non relation with
edge
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 84)*

*Clean shapes on canvas separate
from the ground if not attached
to the edge...
Each remains what it is
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 80)*

*Floating free
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 91)
Travelling in the white.*



fig. 107 'Cropped comb', November 1973

In every one of the comb works, through three years of examples, the comb is somewhat displaced from the perpendicular. There is no parallelism allowed of the comb with the painting's edge. So right angularity — that internal echoing of the frame's square mouth — is refused. Not only is there no acknowledgment *within* of the edge (of its composing power); there is, at least on one occasion, in the use of the device of the crop, an avidity displayed for continuance *without* — outside of — edge: there is, in Peter Leech's words of the crop, 'a clamour for continuous relation beyond edge'.¹ See 'Cropped comb', November 1973. [fig. 107]

In such continuance of the comb implied beyond edge, even more, perhaps, than in the displaced tilting of the comb within edge, the frame as container is clearly refused. So, then, is its implicit integration of the elements of the pictorial world refused: there is instead a *dis*-integration; there is what Leech would call 'a negation of the image of containment'.²

The same goes for the integrity of the painted form within. The comb at once finds such integrity as it has, and is dis-integrated, in the whiteness of ground. There is a reciprocal contamination of figure and ground. In fact, the

¹Peter Leech, 'Painting, Object, Relation: a Decade of Milan Mrkusich painting', in *Milan Mrkusich: a decade further on::1974-1983*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1985, p. 30.

²Peter Leech, *ibid.*, p. 30.

comb is penetrated by ground right through the centre of its backbone, and right through the centre of each of its teeth. Arrows of whiteness both penetrate it and form it, as, reciprocally, its arrows penetrate the whiteness of ground — its signifying form is thrust into, as reciprocally it is thrust into *by*, the very space of non-signification.

So, at the same time as Killeen quarrels with the frame's effects of enclosure, he makes a figure which allows itself — which *requires to be* — penetrated by the space outside it. So the painting (the only part which *is* painted, which is not white, untouched ground), is undone as a unitary object; the painting is undone, to quote Pleynet again, 'by the space it sets off by setting itself forth'.³ It is at once made and unmade, in so allowing into itself the incursion of an exterior whiteness. Already, as in the cut-outs to come, the signifying coloured form is invaded by whiteness, that space accepting signification, but where no signification is.

From October 1973 onwards through 1974, the combs are applied to the white ground by dry-brushing through cardboard stencils. A soft 'blur' or 'haze' is achieved on these most rigid of forms; they are 'washed out', as Killeen notes, with 'the look they have of distances and second handedness'.⁴ So now whiteness decomposes the combs in two ways. The white not only comes *between* the colours, but also *through* them, brushed as they are so thinly as to be rendered tenuous, vaporous, 'blurred', as Killeen says, and transparent to the whiteness of ground beneath.

The pale, irregularly mottled dry brushing is sometimes hardened, in some few of the comb's teeth, by adding paint of a greater liquidity and density. Other combs enjoy, in having all their teeth so painted, a greater palpability.

Stencils

Cut out of cardboard

quicker and thereness

(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 92)

³ Marcelin Pleynet, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁴ Killeen, *the blue notebook*, p. 140.

9/9/73

*I lean towards painting in which some
form of decision is made before the
painting is done*

(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 93)

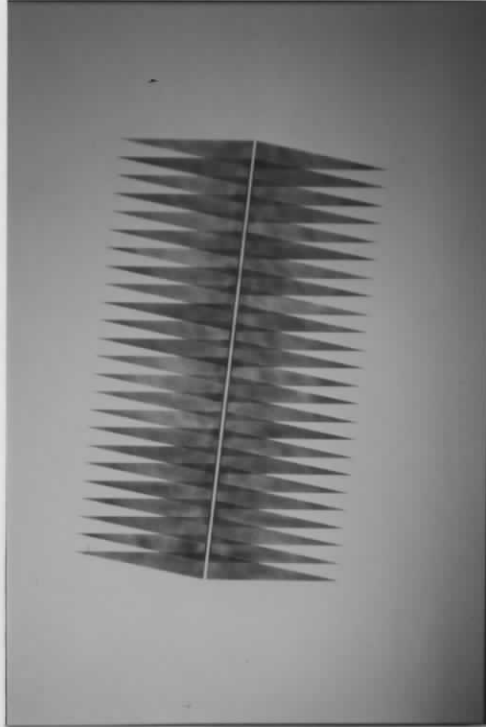


fig. 108 *Lichen*, October 1974

With the pre-forming and pre-deciding principle of the stencil, just as with the paper cut-outs of 1969, the paper cut-outs and cards chosen by chance, and the lino-cut stamps of 1972 and '73, the possibility is allowed of arbitrary placing, unencumbered by frame; and too of an endlessly repetition of the same motif. Such repetitions may come either within one work (as, say, in *Lichen*, October 1974, [fig. 108] where the same stencil is repeatedly placed in displaced overlay); or they may come through innumerable works, in which the same stencil is used with different colours and combinations of colours. [figs. 109 & 110] Furthermore, like the stamp, the stencil connotes an estrangement at once from ground, and from all marks expressive of self.

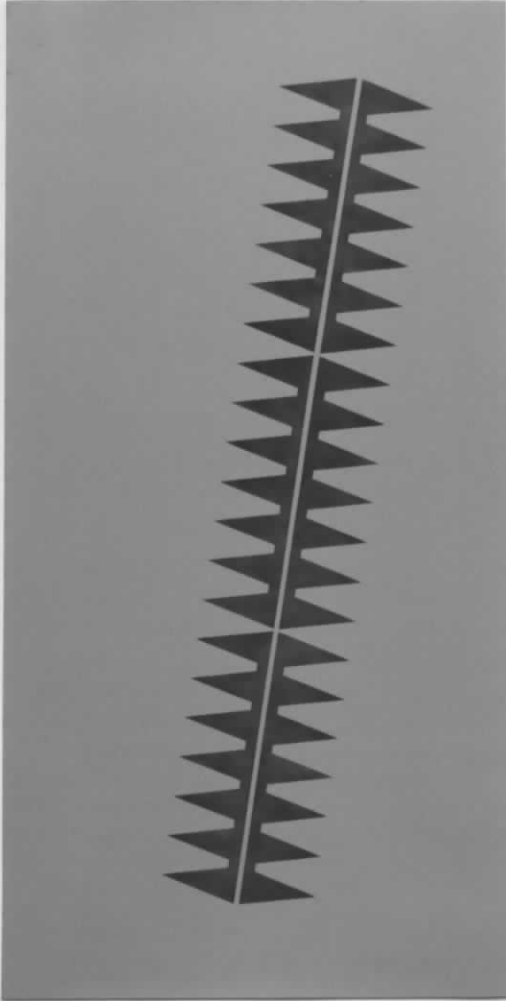


fig. 109 'Red comb', September 1974

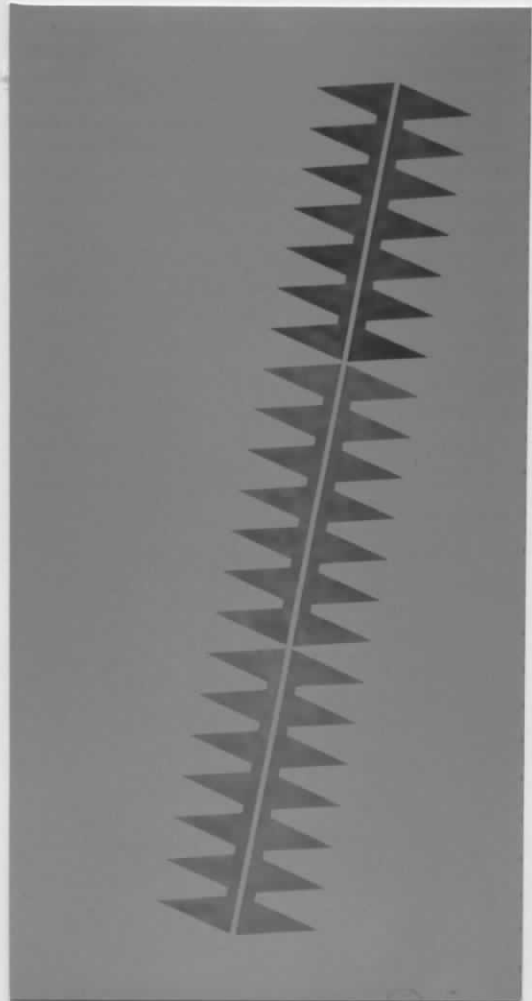


fig. 110 'Green, red and yellow comb',
September 1974

As well as these conveniences, the stencil makes possible a certain rapidity of painting, in accord with this instruction:

July 1973

Don't torture the paint. Most NZ painting does.

(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 89)

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

Try to do a lot without doubting.

*Reworking and doubt give the painting a
particular look.*

*Work out what you want
and then do as many as possible —
putting everything clearly down on the
canvas and leaving it
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 90)*

Killeen *did* do a lot, in so putting everything clearly and confidently down on canvas and leaving it — at least eighteen full-scale paintings in November, 1973, for instance, and a large number of works on paper. The exhibited combs [fig. 111] were but a small proportion of the paintings actually made.⁵ There were seemingly endless variants of colour, of shape, of tone, of colour symmetry and asymmetry within the comb; variants of relation (non-relation) of comb to edge, variation of the relation (non-relation) of figure to ground.

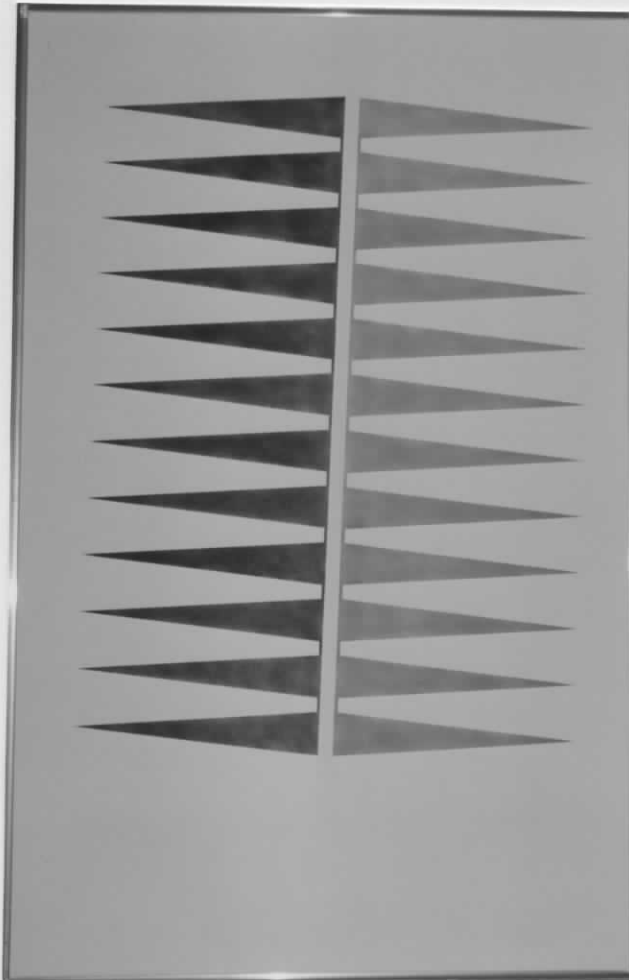


fig. 111 *Palmate*, April 1974.

⁵ Six combs and three grid paintings were exhibited at 'Richard Killeen: Exhibition of Paintings', Petar James Gallery, Auckland, 1 August - 23 August 1974; and there was a further exhibition of combs, 'Richard Killeen: Paintings', at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 1 April - 19 April 1975.