

Grids on aluminium: 1978

With the grids on aluminium, for the first time in years, the white solicitude of the ground is forgotten. The colours are spread all over.

These colours are like Pop's in Barthes account: 'Pop colour is openly chemical; it aggressively refers to the artifice of chemistry, in its opposition to Nature'.¹ If there *is* a Nature here, it is not the 'vegetal, scenic or human (psychological) Nature', as Barthes has defined it,² not that vegetable humus of canvas and earth, that agricultural pathos indulged by the New Zealand Nationalists: it is today's new Nature, a Nature of industry, of high tech. and commerce.

These colours, Pop and Judd and Stella and industry derived as they are, arrive as an assertive difference from the colour of such earlier New Zealand painters as McCahon and Woollaston. They refuse the New Zealand Nationalist rhetoric of roots and soil, the Nationalist temple of the New Zealand earth, in which soil is made the stuff at once of Nation and the Christian God.

Nor is Killeen alone in refusing the pathos and power of the native earth. Nor is it a matter of sharing only with his close associate Ian Scott, whose *Stripe* and whose *Lattice* series have colours which are as quite as Pop as Killeen's. With the arrival of a whole new generation of painters, the 1970s assert an end to earthiness. One might consider, for instance, Hartigan's *Landscape 4*, 1975,³ painted on mirrored glass: a mirrored world, a world of surface, a world which refuses to give to depths where roots might take hold; a world coloured by a lurid and flagrant artifice - the colours of neon, of comics, a purely metropolitan palette - the landscape of a video-game screen: EARTH GAME OVER. Or consider the acid green and yellow of Wong Sing Tai's *Black Freighter*, 1974,⁴ the colours of a sci. fi. moon, painted on perspex -- we are no longer on earth at all.

¹ Roland Barthes, 'That Old Thing, Art', in Paul Taylor, ed., *Post-Pop-Art*, Flash Art Books, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989, p. 28.

² Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 30

³ Rachel Power collection, illustrated Francis Pound, *New Image*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p. 42.

⁴ Auckland City Art Gallery collection, illus. *New Image*, p. 26.

Glass, perspex, aluminium -- not canvas or board. Even the literal ground of the painting is no longer a vegetable tissue -- no Nationalist compost is possible, no pastoral pathos, no place where the old Nationalist art might take root.

EARTH GAME OVER.

Killeen's technical and procedural notes for the aluminium grids conveniently put into words something of what is suggested by the look of the paintings themselves. 'Epiglass Rustkill' precedes 'Acid Etch', which is followed by 'Preparakote' in the early, handpainted grids, and by Dulon 2D primer in the sprayed: then come the colours of, say 'Dulon Acrylic Lacquers', of 'Ford Vermilion Fire', say, 'Ford Canary', or 'General Motors Azure', which car colours are finished -- it is only fitting -- with a cut and a polish.

So Killeen's colours are car colours, even if not always quite as flagrantly as in the 'Wildfire Metallic' of *Blue Cross*, June 1978, with its glitter of powdered metal. They may be -- and should be -- polished as a car is polished. They are colours so streamlined as to be flagrant, commercial, pop.

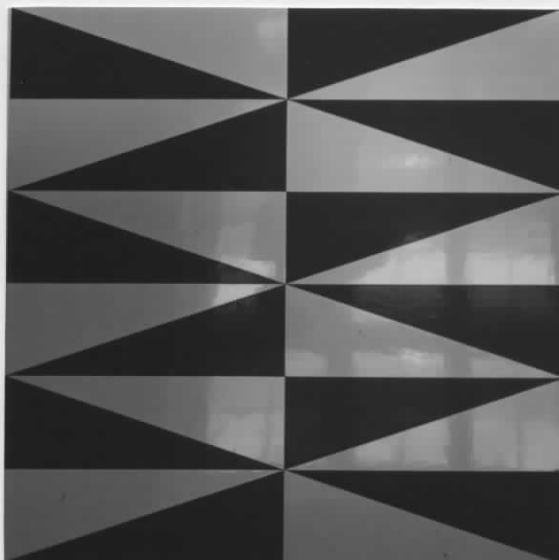


fig. 148. *Positive and Polynesian*, February 1978

Such exceptions as there are to the rule of commercial, 'chemical' colours tend to have their exceptionality marked by title: as does *Positive and Polynesian*, for instance, [fig. 148] with its unaccustomedly sonorous red-brown and rich cream, colours akin to the organic tissue and dyes of tapa -- or to McCahonian creams and earth reds, which colours, in company with

McCahonian white and black, were themselves perhaps derived by McCahon from the earth colours of traditional Maori painting.

If the colours of these grids are generally 'industrial' rather than 'artistic', so are Killeen's techniques of getting them onto the metal. He uses sellotapes as a mask to achieve a mechanical precision of edge, sliding them first, like a signwriter, across the cloth of a trousered thigh, to remove any excess stickiness which might pull the paint from its ground. (We are some way here from McCahon's famous remark following the bleeding failure of his masking tapes in the first series of *Gates*: 'It seems the only way is not more masking tape but more interest in the human condition'.)⁵

From March 1978 on, in the cause of a still more immaculate flatness, and of a more perfect adherence of paint to ground, Killeen uses the spraygun rather than the brush. Sprays and tapes: techniques more typical of the painter of cars than of the painter of art, techniques in which the much-vaunted 'hand' of the artist, that fleshy organ of psychology, expressiveness, and individuality, is decisively banned.

Nor was Killeen alone in his adoption of an industrialising technology. Ray Thorburn had used cellulose lacquers for his modular, op art paintings, since 1970. (In Thorburn's case, the paint was applied, not by the artist himself, but by professional car sprayers.) Greer Twiss's sculptured figures in the same decade were coloured with a lollyish red, or the brightest and most synthetic of blues, and their traditional bronze had been replaced by synthetic resin. Ian Bergquist's non figurative sculptures too were cast and coloured with synthetic resins. Darcy Lange's Caro-like welded steel sculptures were sprayed with bright primary coloured lacquers, and with black and white lacquers.

It seems that at least one of the first viewers of the aluminium grids realised that their paint might be posed against a New Zealand past. Michael Dunn's review of their first showing, at the Data Gallery, Auckland, 26 April to 25 May 1978, rightly remarked: 'They have a basic painted character that differs from the associations of hand-made or crafted constructions of an older generation of local painters'.⁶

⁵ Colin McCahon, in *Colin McCahon / A Survey Exhibition*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972, p. 28.

⁶ Michael Dunn, 'Richard Killeen: New Paintings 1978', *Art New Zealand* no. 10, Winter 1978, p. 18.

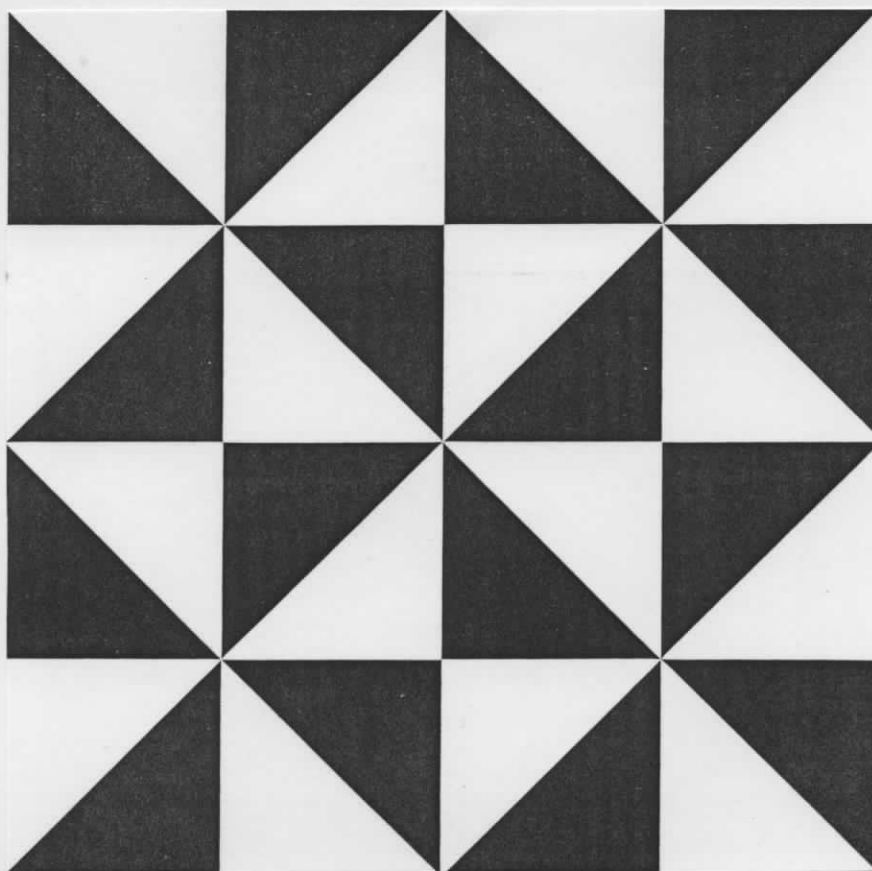


fig. 149. *Black grid*, December 1977

So much for the colour and its manner of application. What of the form? Killeen grids on aluminium, like the preceding 'grids various', are constructed of a grid of squares or rectangles each diagonally bisected, so that two triangles are formed within each. Dunn describes them like this:

*In structure the new paintings are remarkably simple. Their format is either square or rectangular. Most are divided in half vertically, and there is a grid formed where horizontal divisions are carried across the whole surface. In some, Killeen divides the picture into equal parts, as in *Integration*; on others, such as *Time and Balance*, he makes larger and smaller divisions. Each rectangle of the grid is bisected on the angle to form triangles with apex and base alternating at the centre and the outer edge of the work.*

(Michael Dunn, 'Richard Killeen: New Paintings 1978')⁷

⁷ Michael Dunn, op. cit., p. 18.

As Dunn notes, 'The straight and static grid base of the painting is constantly besieged by thrusting diagonals, optical effects and brilliant colour clashes and interplays. Paradoxically, while the format is simple the effect is not.'⁸

The triangles, as Dunn observes, 'seem to want to form into larger groupings'. The thirty two triangles of the square-gridded square of *Black grid*, [fig. 149] for instance, tend to be gathered together by the mind to form into a large square tilted on the diagonal. Then a further, perfectly perpendicular square is liable to arrive within that. Such effects constantly form, if only to unform again.

Most often, however, the grids are constructed of horizontal rectangles, rather than of squares. With this grid of rectangles, there is often a tendency, at least for a moment in observing their dance, for the viewer to read the triangles formed by diagonal bisection of the rectangles as a series of kite shaped, horizontally arrayed quadrilaterals, stacked one above the other, and to read the triangles between them merely as fill or ground. See *Integration*, March 1978, [fig. 150] for instance; *Crest*, 1977; '*Black, red and silver*', 1977; '*Black and grey*', 1977; *Token*, 1978; *Ensign*, 1978; and *Positive and Polynesian*, 1978. [fig. 148] Yet no reading stays constant.

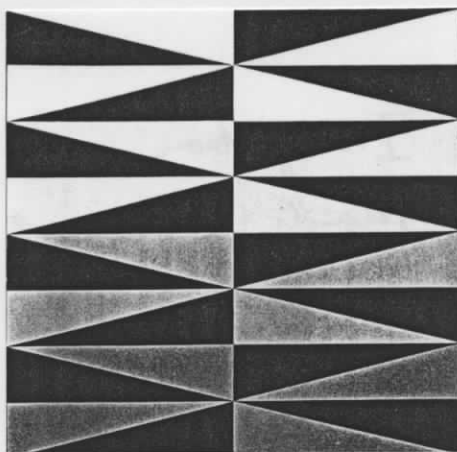


fig. 150. *Integration*, March 1978

In looking at the harlequin-like patterns of these Killeens, I can't help but think of Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins*, where an incapacity mentally to grasp the shift of things from the left to the right, and vice versa, when one turns

⁸ Dunn, op. cit., p. 18.

in one's tracks is an incapacity which is at once the mark and the cause of the narrator's madness. In these grids, as in that Nabokov passage, there is a constant 'wiping the slate of one's vision', a 'pivotal swing' or 'swivel'. 'An opposite revolution of the decor' is constantly forced upon us, where figure becomes ground, and ground, figure -- an absolute 'about face', a 'reversion of the vista' which occurs with 'the neutral flash of a slide change' in a projector. The shifts of figures and grounds in *Black grid*, for instance, [fig. 149] in which a tilted square gives way to a perpendicular square, occur with an almost indiscernable lurch, the brisk flip of an octopus turned inside out.

One might expect the grid to be the most stable of forms. Yet here there is a constant instability, a kind of irritability of the forms, a dazzle, a dance, a ceaseless slippage and slide, an incalculably intricate motion. The title *Can can*, June 1978, has a nicely high-spirited sense of this: *cancan* -- high-kicking dance with display of legs and petticoats.

If, in his last series of grids, Killeen had introduced a kind of interference pattern, in which one grid overlaid, and so interrupted and made partially or completely illegible another, here the interference occurs within the play of the forms of a 'single' grid against *itself*. The grid's unreadability and 'doubleness', is now shown to be an internal condition, inherent in its very structure.

It is as though there were certain flaws inherent in the mechanism of the grids. Or in the mechanism of our minds. We seem to be unable to precipitate a decision. Or, at least, for any decision to grip. A symptom, perhaps, of some larger disorder in the order. Of disorder in order itself.