

Framed

Putting the frame forward, pushing it onstage, ill-treated in the limelight.
(Derrida, *Truth in Painting*)

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*The edge is where the real world begins
for other people and my world ends, physically.*

The real world does not end.

(Killeen, *the blue notebook*, p. 14)

Now comes another painter into this frame, yet another Killeen. This personage first appears in the paintings of September 1971, stays for October and November, and is gone by December, a passing voice leaving but a few echoes behind. The work of this new Killeen is most memorably marked by his exuberant manner of marking the frame. His frames are painted with arcs, grids, dashes, dots, diamonds; they are foliated and figured, inscribed, stuck onto, cut into. Sometimes, as in *Godzone* October 1971 [fig. 76] (whose frame has painted on to it an elephant, a horse, a cat, a tree, a pig, a goat, a human face), the frame's painted area is considerably larger than that of the framed — than that of the picture 'proper'. The frame, in such cases, is where most of the picturing is.

The frame of *Animals* [fig. 79] is a rectangle cut askew and with a wobbly edge; that of *Passing through*, September 1971, [fig. 80] has zig-zag painted pieces attached to the verticals, and castellated, with blocks attached to the top horizontal. Two rounded blocks protrude from the verticals of *A passing sensation*, September 1971; [fig. 81] a triangular block from the side of *Living in New Zealand*, September 1971; [fig. 82]; and a piece of beading from each framing member of *Alive in New Zealand*, September 1971 [fig. 84] There are twigs and pieces of 1" x 1" on the frame of *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?*, May 1971. [fig. 17]

To understand what Killeen is doing in so painting, cutting into and sticking things onto frame, and to grasp its significance for the cut-outs, we must know what the frame has traditionally meant for painting.

The frame of a painting is a familiar sign of *depictivity*, a sign that we are seeing not the world, but a depiction of the world. It is a code of recitation, as familiar and traditional, to borrow a comparison from Barthes, as the words 'once upon a time'.¹ In naturalistic depiction, the depictive situation attempts to hide itself, so that we might seem to see reality, not a depiction. However: seeing the frame is like those examples Barthes gives of narrativity, switching on the television and opening the book.² It is sufficient to install in us — or rather, to induce us to select and to open from our mental files — the depictive codes we are about to use.



fig. 79 *Animals*, September 1971

¹ Roland Barthes, 'Structural Analysis of Narrative', in *Image - Music - Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, Fontana, Glasgow, 1982, p. 115.

² Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 116.



fig. 80 *Passing through*, September 1971.



fig. 81 *A passing sensation*, September 1971



fig. 82 *Living in New Zealand*, September 1971.

It was so taken for granted in Killeen's 'realist' works of 1969, as it was in all traditional European painting, that the frame was a sign of reality other than the world's, that it signified 'picture', that when a picture had to be signified *in* a picture, the sign of the frame was sufficient. Even where the style of the picture in a picture differed in no way at all from the style of the picture as a whole, the fact that it was framed was sufficient to show its reality was other. (Sometimes, to be sure, the style of the picture within the picture was so different from the picture at large as clearly to differentiate the one from the other — as when, amusingly and implausibly enough, Killeen includes a little Clifford Still abstraction within a New Zealand suburban interior.) [fig. 83] While even today, when so much painting has abandoned the frame, it is still so often taken for granted that the frame signifies 'picture', that I have heard it pejoratively said of the cut-outs, from which the frame has been decisively banished, that Killeen is not a painter at all, but a sculptor.

The frame gives on to the world, while at the same time it closes the depiction. Or, rather, it is the depiction closing itself off from the world, for the world is not materially framed, nor are the things in it. In the world, the eye dances, finds neither edge nor end. As Killeen was to put it in 1973, 'the edge is where the real world begins... and my world ends', whereas 'the real world does not end'.³

³ Killeen, the blue notebook, note dated '22-1-73', p. 14.



fig. 83 *Woman with Clifford Still*, January 1969

Now, by Killeen's very *excess* of the frame in these works of September, October and November 1971, by all these extrusions from the frame, and cuttings into it, and patterns painted all over it, by these very exaggerations of the frame's presence, the picture's status as an item of language, as a difference from the world, and a deferment of it, is all the more decisively marked. (A difference and deferment marked too by the very thickness of the paint in these works: a thickness, roughness, and deliberate crudity, or 'badness', which makes impossible any thought of paint's innocent transparency to the world.)

The frame, then, like that self-assertive paint, constitutes the picture as language. And, it might be added, at the level of depictivity, such a language may provide its own metalanguage — that language which speaks about language. The beckoning and the pointing figure have so far here provided its exemplar — the picture commenting on itself. The same trick, we will see, may be played by the frame.

Not to give, immediately, too much away, we may for the moment say simply this: the most obvious way a picture may speak of itself from its frame is on those occasions where the picture's title, its maker's name, and its date of making are inscribed on the frame. This happens in *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?*, [fig. 17] for instance, where the title is pronounced right across the frame's lower horizontal, and it happens too on *A passing sensation*; [fig. 81] and on *Alive in New Zealand*. September 1971. [fig. 84]



fig. 84 *Alive in New Zealand*, September 1971.

There is another, related, function of the frame, which art historians, only too willing heirs to the Renaissance tradition of the picture through a window, have tended to ignore or deny, and, with the almost invariable vandalism of their reproductions, to destroy. The frame may serve to stress the materiality, rather than the representationality, of painting.

Other ornaments done by artificers that are added to the painting, such as sculpted columns, bases and pediments, I would not censure if they were done in real silver and solid or pure gold, for a perfect and finished picture is worthy to be ornamented with precious stones.

*(Alberti, de Pictura, 1435)*⁴

One does not ornament or stud with stones, or frame in ornate and cumbrous gold a 'view', one may only ornament a 'thing'. Yet the materiality and metalanguage of the frame is almost entirely ignored in the writings of art historians, and almost invariably censored by their reproductions: it seems they regard the frame as a thing of no account. Killeen does not make the same mistake. Killeen was stressing just this traditional '*thingness*' when, in 1971, he stuck things — blocks of wood, twigs, etc. — all over his frames, in a kind of aggravation and irritation of the frame's material presence.

⁴ *Alberti On Painting and Sculpture*, op. cit., p. 93.

Such a realisation of the essential 'thingness' of painting was an essential precondition of the cut-outs. If a painting is a 'thing', not a window or view, then there is no inherent reason why that thing must be rectangular: it might, if it could be prised apart from the convention of rectangularity, be made any shape at all.



fig. 85 *Wish you were here*, November 1971

Killeen had also the (disappointed) hope that by so materially establishing the structure of the frame, he might then find inside it that 'freedom' he sought. It is as though he begins to accept the truism that freedom is to acknowledge and to work within the given restraints, happily to hum, as it were, while decorating the bars of one's cell. As he wrote next to a sketch of a zig-zag patterned frame similar to those of *Wish you were here*, November 1971 [fig. 85] and *From here to the world*: December 1971, [fig. 7] it is 'a method of holding the board to say this is a painting, a board'; and, 'Establish the board and then perhaps anything goes'.⁵

*It would seem that the confining influence
of a pattern round the edge is necessary for
me at the moment. It is the difference
between working and not working. The problem*

⁵ Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 36.

*is one of the centre rather than the
edge — the edge is easy and would not
be needed if the centre could do it all.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 37)*

If the centre could do it all... The edgeless painting hovers here for a moment as a mental possibility. The possibility is sensed of a painting without closure, without end or beginning, a painting of which the cut-outs will come to be exemplary — a painting which need no longer be, which *can* no longer be, contained within the restraining edge of a frame. Not only is the very exacerbation of consciousness of the frame in these paintings of 1971 the precondition of a future framelessness: it leads (already) to the thought of that possibility, even if the thought comes, for the moment, to nothing.

Later, the ragged edge of the cut-outs will function like the three dots preceding or following a sentence, suggesting a continuous tearing out from the endless presence of language (*tear along the dotted line*). Here, in the paintings of 1971, the zig-zag or comb edges, the irregular bosses and projection, and the prolongation of the painting onto the frame, and of the frame into the world, suggest much the same thing.

See *passing through*, for instance, [fig. 80] whose zig-zag edge passes through into the world as the world passes through into it. If there is everywhere in these paintings a reciprocal contamination of the painting and the frame, so there is of the world and the painting. Killeen's mangled, marked, fringed and infringed upon frames 'complicate the boundary line that ought to run between the picture and what seems to lie beyond its fringes, what is classed as the *real*'.⁶ 'The painting is no longer the snug, airtight inside of an interiority or an identity to itself (even if the motif of outside or bust may sometimes play a reassuring role: a certain kind of inside can be terrible), but rather a different kind of placement of the effects of opening and closing'.⁷

Killeen senses for a moment here, as I have said, the possibility of a painting without edge. Conversely, a painting is momentarily envisaged which

⁶ Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 42.

⁷ Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

is *all edge* — in which the patterned edge is so extended inward as to take over the whole painting surface.

*When the pattern
moves all over it makes quite a nice
thing but it is back to square one.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 37)*

Back, that is, to the already considered and rejected abstraction, that painting through whose square mouth Killeen fears there will be nothing but what he calls the 'non saying' of 'mere pattern',⁸ nothing but the unwanted conventionality of high modernist abstraction.

He will come, in 1977 and 1978, to that presently rejected point — to paintings whose whole surface is constructed by a diamond grid, to a time when diamonds will seem to him the painter's best friend. But already, in *From Here to the world*, and in *Wish you were here*, the diamonds of the frames may be seen slightly to spill over into the painting's inside — the process is already, as it were, underway.

*I don't know if the pattern could be made
to work as a structure for something
else. I think not — you get 'the
painting is the structure' type with things
off over the top.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 37)*

That point too he will come to — when over the structure of a geometrically patterned ground figurative signs will be allowed to float, as, most notoriously, in *Frogshooter*, 1976.

⁸ Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 36.