N.Z. titles, N.Z. frames

A certain New Zealand too, and a certain New Zealand painting, constitute an imprisoning frame from which Killeen endeavours an escape. Or rather, it is a frame which he tries to re-place. I mean that New Zealand and that New Zealand painting which claims to discover itself in an isolation from the rest of the world, and in difference from it — an isolation expressed either as a melancholy and self-dramatising sense of loss of the world beyond, or as a patriotic and positive refusal of it, a would-be deliberate and self-induced blindness to all art beyond New Zealand's framing shores.

Killeen endeavours in these paintings, at the same moment as he endeavours to complicate the boundary line between the picture and the world — fissuring the frame, sticking things onto it, painting on it, or zig-zagging its edges as if with pinking shears — to complicate too the boundary line which ought, according to fifty years of Nationalist art commentary, to run between New Zealand and what seems to lie beyond its fringes. He begins to undo that snug, sea-tight inside of an interiority or identity to itself which New Zealand Nationalist art discourse, from the 1930s to the 1970s, had constantly proclaimed. (A certain kind of inside can be terrible. Or stupid.) He considers:

Ticket to the world
Goddam damn
Home Sweet ~~Hooooooome~~
Hoooohhhhm
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 47)

Boundary
edge of my world.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 35)

He considers New Zealand as an island as he considers the picture as an island. He makes lists of New Zealand titles:

Born in New Zealand
Alive in New Zealand
The day of the small country

Postcard from here to the world
Having a lovely time
Stamps
...
...
Wish you were here
For funny reasons.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p.30)

He paints pictures whose titles refer to New Zealand, or to the world seen as beyond (that stock theme of New Zealand art and letters: *Distance Looks Our Way*);[1] he paints paintings whose subjects (in the words of a cut-out title) are tied together with the theme of an *Island mentality*, which theme, nevertheless, he undoes from within.

Godzone, September 1971, **[fig. 76]** to take just one instance, puns in its title with that stock saying of a self-satisfied New Zealand: 'God's own country', and it teases too the reactionary Christianity of so much New Zealand painting; while around its frame-zone roam various beasts, none of which is indigenous to New Zealand: an elephant, a horse, a goat, a pig, a bear — or is it a dog? We are some way here from that Nationalist painting in which, from the 1930s to the 1970s, New Zealand birds, beasts and plants are 'elaborated into expressions of the local soil and hence local character, a modern form of totemism in which one identifies oneself with lower forms of life, adopts them as badges, not décor'.[2] We are some way from a Binney native bird, or from the bronze kiwis which support the handrails of the National Gallery staircase...

From the historiated frame of *Godzone*, a face looks in to that face which looks out from the framed off square. So the boundaries of inside and outside are complicated; so a snug interiority to itself of place is somewhat undone, so an ironic play is made with effects of opening and closure. The same is so in *From here to the world*, December 1971, **[fig. 7]** which has an aeroplane fly in a sky which breaks through into the Polynesian geometrics of the painting's border-zone. (It is no accident that there should be a plane here — the coming of the

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[1] *Distance Looks Our Way: the Effects of Remoteness on New Zealand*, ed. Keith Sinclair, Pauls Book Arcade for the University of Auckland, 1961.

[2] Robert Harbison, *Deliberate Regression: the disastrous history of romantic individualism in thought & art, from Jean - Jacques Rousseau to 20th century fascism*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1980, pp. 140 - 141.

passenger plane had definitively shrunk the seas separating New Zealand off from the rest of the world.)

In *Wish you were here*, November 1971, **[fig. 85]** a camel is a clear sign of the foreign — of the touristic romance of travel (another proud New Zealand topos: 'New Zealanders are the best travelled people in the world'). Here too the 'foreign' is fitted inside a frame whose colours and forms connote Polynesia; here too the signs of 'without' are inscribed on the 'inside'. So, in these paintings, the fiction of New Zealand as an inviolate being, an inviolable essence, alive only in its own interiority, is somewhat undone.

In *Alive in New Zealand,* September 1971, **[fig. 84]** there is the McCahonian dark hill and light sky, an established emblem of place, as there is too in *Living in New Zealand,* September 1971; **[fig. 82]** there is also a gull, reminder of that sea distance which New Zealanders regard, and which seems in turn to regard them: 'Distance looks our way'.

fig. 86 *Been Rock?*, September 1971

Been Rock?, September 1971, **[fig. 86]** with its (mis)named and identifiable subject, a lighthouse and rock in Auckland harbour, might well serve as a regionalist emblem of place, but it too gazes out over the sea's horizon, and it too is accompanied by gulls, while its lighthouse disintegrates into an eye (no blindness to the 'foreign' here), and in its name the real Bean Rock disintegrates into a derisory pun. What might have been a regionalist emblem

of place is here only a question, an emblem submitted to doubt, of which the query mark and derisive pun are the signs. As for the emblems of identity: 'Been there, done that': are they not posited by Killeen's paintings as somewhat *passé*?

We need to see what these paintings are set against, to see what frames them, in order to see what it is that provokes them so to go over the edge. From the 1930s on, New Zealand art was judged — by painters and critics alike — for its New Zealandness. Critics reviled painters for not painting 'real' New Zealand subjects; they celebrated those who did. Painting, it was endlessly said, should be painted *of* New Zealand, *for* New Zealanders, *by* New Zealanders.

One might, for instance, set *Born in New Zealand* against Professor James Shelley's requirement that the real New Zealand be painted by New Zealanders, not foreigners: 'the interpretation of New Zealand requires a specialised viewpoint.. that of the native born painter'.[3] Or one might put it against the anti-internationalism, anti semitism, and anti-cosmopolitanism of the still revered and endlessly quoted New Zealand poet and critic A.R.D. Fairburn:

> *The Jews are a non territorial race, so their genius is turned to dust and ashes. Their works of art have no integrity — have had none since they left Palestine... I had rather be beside a smelly New Zealand tidal creek. Cosmopolitanism — Semitism — are false, have no bottom to them. Internationalism is their child — and an abortion... Jewish standards have infected most Western art...*[4]

One might set *Been Rock?* against the requirement, endlessly expressed in Nationalist New Zealand criticism, that the artist should stay home and 'paint motifs in his familiar surroundings that have a deeper significance to him than the undigested feast of strange places he might visit abroad'.[5] (For an artist to go abroad at all was and still is to be liable to accusations of disloyalty to New Zealand's isles in leaving them.) The lighthouse of *Been Rock* is on the one hand an emblem of island place, and plausibly one therefore of regional or national identity; while on the other it is a sign whose function it is to display

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[3] Professor James Shelley, *Christchurch Press*, 25 March 1933.

[4] A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to R. A. K. Mason, *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, edited by Lauris Edmond, Auckland, 1981, p. 80.

[5] 'Criticus', 'Canterbury Society of Arts Exhibition', *Art New Zealand*, June 1932, pp. 261 - 262.

itself to the world beyond. It is akin, in this sense, to those war memorial monuments which Killeen had painted in 1968 and 1970: it too might be called a symbol of the New Zealand condition. The lighthouse, like the First and Second World War memorial, speaks for the New Zealand condition precisely because it is an emblem which finds itself as a proclamation of New Zealand's place in a larger world.

Killeen's questioning of the Nationalist frame comes clearest, perhaps, in *The New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?,* whose query mark is like that of *Been Rock?*, a clear sign of his interrogation of that tradition in which he was begun. The white twig stuck on the frame, and the leafless tree painted inside, might well remind New Zealand viewers of the 'dead tree school' of New Zealand painting — of the dead tree painted to record, to celebrate or to revile the destruction of the native forest for pastoral purposes. They might well recall those innumerable skeletal trees in Nationalist work of the thirties, forties, and fifties, whose anthropomorphic posturings had served, among other things, to display a sense of national identity. (Perkins' *Frozen Flame*, c. 1931, and Eric Lee-Johnson's *Slain Tree*, 1945, are the best remembered examples.) **[[figs. 87 & 88]**

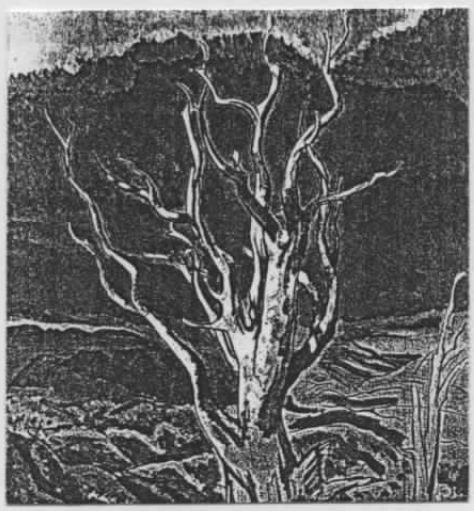

Fig. 87 Christopher Perkins, *Frozen flame*, c. 1931

Fig. 88 Eric Lee-Johnson, *Slain tree*, 1945

In Michael Dunn's words:

> *The symbolic potential of the dead tree could hardly escape painters who were looking for some qualities in their work to give it some national character. Like Perkins (who wanted local artists to turn to indigenous subjects) Lee-Johnson hoped to gain distinctive imagery from local subject matter. It was natural enough about the time of New Zealand's Centennial in 1940 that reflections on a national identity should occur and be integrated into a painter's consciousness.*
> *(Michael Dunn, 'Frozen Flame and Slain Tree')* [6]

Borrowing, and carefully misplacing Dunn's words, one might say that Killeen's *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?*, with the frozen flame on its frame, and the whole series of 'New Zealand' titled works of which it is a part, are a critical *re*-reflection on the questions of national identity: they are the site of its dis-integration in the painter's consciousness. They are a counter-reading of the standard icons of mainstream N.Z. artistic culture, a reading which emphasises their iconicity, makes them problematic, and asserts, by means of the sign of the eye, the problem of reading itself. (In the eye of *Been Rock*, the sign of sight is signified, sign of the sense by which pictures are read. Elsewhere, the act of reading the picture is represented in those spectator figures who stare in from the frame — as in *Godzone* and *Wind*, September 1971.)

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[6] Michael Dunn, 'Frozen Flame and Slain Tree: the Dead Tree Theme in New Zealand Art of the Thirties and Forties', *Art New Zealand* 13, p. 43.

And all this at the moment when, in the minds and works of a new generation of New Zealand painters, the Nationalist movement was coming apart... So the end of the Islands and Landfall[7] culture, and of its invented New Zealand, is announced — so Killeen's paintings of 1971 may serve to mark the moment when it becomes an ancient artifact, merely. (Or an artifact which haunts, a ghost which is never quite dispelled.)

Killeen's *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?* is painted in the face of the ubiquity of the Nationalist landscape as subject, and in the face of the Nationalist claim of 'a general orientation towards landscape'[8] as an essential part of the New Zealandness of New Zealand art. If it teases those painters who provoked and answered the critical demand for a national content in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, it teases too the paintings of Colin McCahon, which best answered the same demand in the 1950s and 60s. As I have said, the inscribed title of *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?* has the word *Painting* brightest, just as McCahon tended to emphasise by a superior brightness some of *his* painted words. So Killeen questions not only the New Zealand landscape tradition in general, but questions too, even while adopting something of the McCahonian manner, the McCahon style of landscape painting in New Zealand, that most prestigious landscape style of all. *That* New Zealand frame questioned.

So the long sustained fiction of New Zealand as an isolate being, an inviolable essence, alive only to its own interiority, begins in the 1970s, finally, to be undone. In the 1970s, I say. For all the Nationalist rhetoric begun in the thirties — the interminable litanies of harsh clarity, of roots and native earth, of islands, distances and landfalls in perilous seas — challenged though it was by the 'international' modernism of painters like Milan Mrkusich and Gordon Walters, never entirely lost its force until the 1970s, when a new kind of painting came, which had no care at all for the old Nationalist concerns — except, occasionally, to utter critiques of them. Nor were these rhetorics entirely defunct until the 1980s when, as Roger Horrocks has observed, the metaphor of 'frames' came to replace that old one of 'roots' and 'soil'.

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[7] The literary magazines, *Landfall* and -- to a lesser degree -- *Islands*, were major organs of Nationalist dissemination. Their very titles mark the importance to Nationalist culture of island and landfall metaphors -- of the *Island mentality*, in Killeen's title's post-Nationalist phrase.

[8] Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, Collins, Auckland, 1969, p. 9.

> *If 'roots' is one of the key words for the 1930s writers such as Curnow, 'frames' seems to have a corresponding importance today... 'Frame' refers both to the painting as tangible object and to the painter's or viewer's frame of mind.*
> *(Roger Horrocks, 'The Invention of New Zealand')* [9]

Horrocks is right. Let's gladly accept the currency of the metaphor of the frame. We need to add to Horrocks' remarks only that it was Killeen who, in these paintings of 1971, first thrust the frame to consciousness. If my last chapter examined Killeen's assertion of the frame as a material object, this chapter's task has been to look back at Killeen's first looking back at the frames of mind in which a New Zealand had been for forty years painted, discovered, invented — to show how, as Roland Barthes has memorably said, *the frame creates the scene...* [10]

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[9] Roger Horrocks, 'The Invention of New Zealand', *And* 1, October 1983, p. 20. Horrocks's remarks of the frame as a metaphor were provoked, so he said there, by my *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*, Collins, Auckland, 1983.

[10] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. Richard Miller, with a preface by Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, New York, p. 54.