

Frame/ground; figuration/abstraction

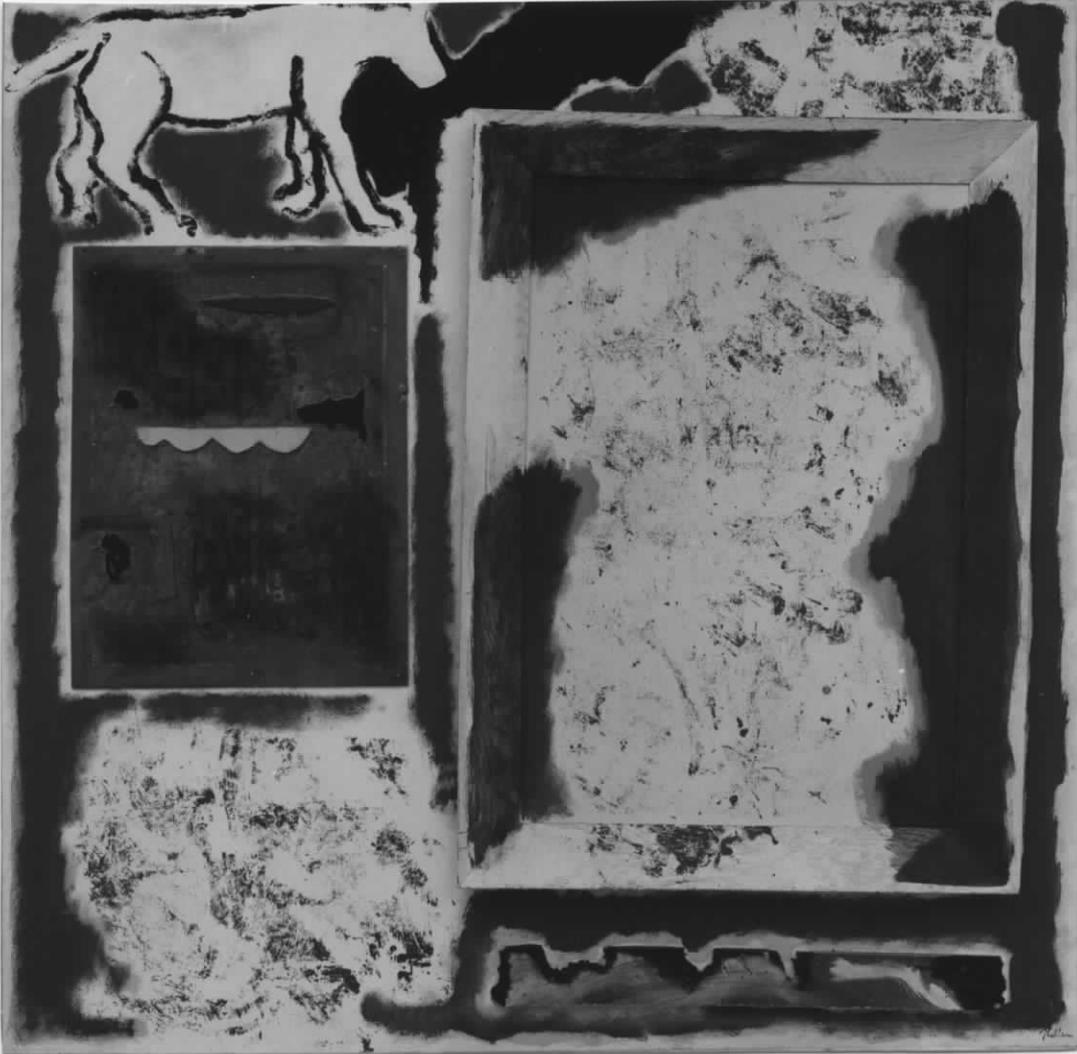


fig. 89 *Dog without a frame*, May 1972

In a group of paintings dated or datable from January to October 1972, a number of the same considerations appear as in Killeen's last series, that of September and October 1971, but in the pose now of a greater sophistication. There is no longer the deliberate *grotteness* of paint, that awkwardness, that roughness and irregularity, that thick coagulation. Killeen no longer cares for 'hard edged shapes over very difficult surface'; nor does he consider such devices as 'draw left-handed for incompetency'.¹ But there is still in all of these works of 1972 a concern for figure/ground, and for combining figuration and abstraction; while

¹ Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 23.

in some of the earliest of them there is a lingering concern, too, for collage, for the frame, and for the New Zealand frame of reference.

Considerations of the frame come most flagrantly, perhaps, since they are signified by title, in two paintings of May 1972: *Dog without a frame*, and *Leaf within a frame*. In both cases, we may see a painting, as good as its word, doing what just it says it is doing, performing its title for us. And, in these two works, as in others of the time, the frame, which conventionally is *outside* the painting, is placed *inside* it. So, once again, but in another way, the antithesis outside/inside is somewhat upset.

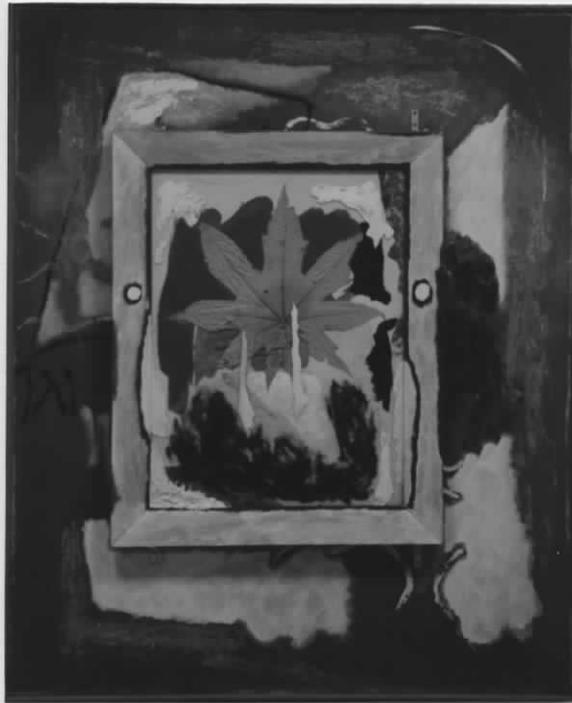


fig. 90 *Leaf within a frame*, May 1972

In *Dog without a frame*, [fig. 89] we see at once a reference to the frame as a familiar sign of depictivity, and another attempt by Killeen — and in a newly literal manner — to abet his subject's escape from the frame's enclosure. Though, in a veritable excess of framing, there are two frames present — actual wooden frames — they are *within* the painting, and the dog is painted *without* the frames. *Without...* outside the frame, not having a frame, free of the frame — here, as so often, Killeen's wit is at once visual and verbal.

The leaf inside *Leaf within a frame* [fig. 90] plays much the same game as *Dog without a frame*, but in reverse. An actual plane tree leaf is bedded in paper and gauze, and set within a frame and its glass. Again, the frame does not

surround the ground, but is attached inside it. Its form, furthermore, is invaded by the paint it frames — it is as though the frame's vertical members were eaten away by a ravenous paint, a paint which can no longer abide to be framed.

The hole of the world, May 1972, [fig. 91] offers not only a painted frame, but also a sheet of glass partially painted over. That glass, which ought properly to act as a window to painted ground, has itself become a ground, painted partially over, and so half impervious to the eye. Once again, that which should be *outside* the painting is *in* it. Furthermore, the title allows a pleasing pun, and another play on New Zealand's *Island mentality* — the whole of the world, or the (arse)hole of the world, as in the vernacular phrase for the too small place which displeases, for a frame too confining.



fig. 91 *The hole of the world*, May 1972

Such irritations of the frame, as I have said, are of the utmost importance in establishing the pre-conditions of the cut-outs. Once again, the possibility is adumbrated of a painting *without a frame*, a painting without restraining edge. The very exacerbation of consciousness of the frame in these paintings of 1972, the very ill-treatment of the frame, is the necessary precondition of a future framelessness..



fig. 92 *Bear trap*, February 1972



fig. 93 *Unfinished* 1972

In other paintings of this series, the ground suffers an actual rather than a painted destruction: literally, *a cutting out*. In *Bear trap*, February 1972, for instance, [fig. 92] there are two ragged, roughly triangular holes in the hardboard, punched out with a hammer, into which the depicted bear might be imagined as falling. In *'Unfinished'*, 1972, [fig. 93] there are two triangular holes, neatly cut out, symmetrically disposed between two geometrically patterned wings. *Blank*, August 1972, [fig. 94] has a zig-zag edge, whose openings are enclosed by a frame.



fig. 94 *Blank*, August 1972,

So, at the same time as Killeen disputes with the frame's effects of enclosure, he makes a ground which allows itself to be penetrated, and roughly at that, by the space outside it. The painting begins to be destroyed as a unitary object 'by the space in which it presents and inscribes itself, by the space it sets off by setting itself forth'. It becomes 'a structure, in short, that loses its autonomy through the differential order that governs its situation'.² So, for the first time, as in the cut-outs it will be, if here only in brief, violent fissures, the real white of the wall is let into the work.

Already, then, the painting at once inscribes itself and effaces itself, in allowing within its borders the invasion of an exterior whiteness; already, as Pleynet has said of Mondrian's whiteness, Killeen's painting marks "the

² Marcelin Pleynet, 'Mondrian Twenty Five Years Later', *Painting and System*, transl. Sima N. Godfrey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 98.

'nonrepresentation' that does not empty but institutes emptiness",³ already, as more absolutely in the cut-outs, the signifying matter is invaded by whiteness, that space accepting of signification, but where no signification is. And so here, as more completely in the cut-outs, the painting *itself* is made to seem a figure on ground; the white, receptive wall becomes a ground on which the painting may settle as figure...



fig. 95 *Quick and the dead*, May 1972

³ Marcelin Pleynet, op. cit., p. 98.



fig. 96 *Search and destroy*, February 1972



fig. 97 *Ace*, February 1972,

In nearly all the works of this series, figuration and abstraction come together in one painting, as in the cut-outs they will; there is a kind of scattering together of both. Large patches or planes of colour act as ground for outlines which are (mostly) figurative images; there is an endeavour, already, as in the words of a Killeen note, 'to try to eliminate stylistically consistent paintings'.⁴

Scattered throughout the series there are, as I say, the outlines of 'figurative' objects — one, two, or three per painting. The *Quick and the dead*, May 1972, [fig. 95] has a steel helmeted soldier, a figure holding a kite shape, a kite shape alone, and a bear. *Search and destroy*, February 1972, [fig. 96] has a steel helmeted soldier and a bird; *Ace*, February 1972, [fig. 97] has three horses and one rider, a bear (?).

Killeen now realises:

*If I line everything up and put a
lot of things in it it becomes one
of those pictograph paintings.
Nothing has more meaning than any other...
Has no irrelevancy or gaps
that are very important.
The other way — if I put in
a few things that seem significant
then I am selecting according to
a particular heading.
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 41)*

One group of works within the larger group made from January to October 1972 would seem to respond especially well to this note: a group of which *Collective conscience*, April, *Coming and going*, May, and *Look over your shoulder some time*, April, are exemplary.⁵ Here, the images enjoy a sudden multiplication. They are scattered all over the surface, in a more or less even density; they do not seem subsumable under a heading; none seems more important than another; none seems relevant or irrelevant, since no master subject appears to which they might be made to subservise. Each of these qualities will reappear in the cut-outs.

⁴ Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 28.

⁵ This group was hung together as a group in Killeen's solo show at the Petar James Gallery, 1972.



fig. 98 *Collective conscience*, April 1972

Collective conscience [fig. 98] collects a monkey, a dog, a leaf (or a tree), a bicycle, a panther looking over its shoulder, a pistol, a bird, a Greek vase, and a dog. *Look over your shoulder some time* has a fish, a car, a star, a horse?, a snail, a dog looking over its shoulder (the only figure which could be claimed as clearly relevant to the title, though it also appears in *Collective conscience* where no such relevance is clear), a bird, and a winged insect. *Coming and going* has coming and going over its surface a panther, a bicycle, and another member of the cat family. *Battle for the mind no. 1*, January 1972, has a web-footed bird, a pig, a steel helmeted soldier, a woman walking in high heels, an aeroplane.

*Remember when the objects and the rest of
the painting wouldn't relate?
Both remained separate from each other
and caused a disjointed look in
the work. I have succeeded in
uniting them both in 'Battle of the
Mind' etc by reducing the objects to lines
and therefore having them play a more
important part in the painting style.
Now they should become separated again...
Objects should not become
descriptive again, nor is collage wanted...
In the Battle ones, notice was taken
by the background, or, parts that
are not objects, of the objects in that
parts would be painted around them.*

*This may be a mistake. The objects
and subject cannot be picked out in
this way...*

*It seems important that the surface
should not be constructed like in cubism.*

Each part should be free to come and go.

(Killeen, the blue notebook, pp. 45-46)

Now each part of the painting is equal in pictorial weight, no part, whether linear figure or patch, proclaims itself as more 'real' than another part. This, as Killeen realises, is a gain in pictorial unity, undoing the 'disjointedness' of much of his previous work, where images seemed to have no relation at all to the painted ground. After finishing these paintings, however, Killeen has come to feel that the patches on which the images are set are too much like frames, too much like that density of facets which increases towards — and is — the central figure in classic cubist painting. Nevertheless, the images *do* still seem relatively free to come and go, or as nearly free as they can be, before each is made detachably separate from ground, literally and materially, in the cut-outs.



fig. 99 *The Gods have it*, July 1972

In the works which follow the *Collective conscience* group, we may see a certain simplification, a return — though without collage, this time — to the manner of earlier paintings like *Ace*, *Search and destroy*, or *Bear trap*, of February 1972. The number of 'objects' is reduced to something like the number allowed in those earlier works, as is the number of the 'abstract' coloured planes

or patches; and the ground, with little or no modification (only some sanding of layers, or some washing of translucent colour) is often allowed to come through.

In these post *Collective Conscience* works, which stretch from July to October 1972, it is not so much that figurative images float *on* the coloured ground, or that the coloured planes are modifications of the background which 'pick out' the images by being an area around them: rather, plane and image are granted something approaching a complete formal separability and equality, as both are let free, to come and go, over the painted ground. *The Gods have it*, July 1972, [fig. 99] has, as well as its somewhat symmetrically placed colour patches, a linear rendition of a three-headed mask of some 'primitive' god, and another of a Renaissance print of a putto with sword.

We are not really so far, in these works made between January and October 1972, from the mixing of 'abstract' shape and 'figurative' image in the cut-outs. Already, the 'abstract' and the 'figurative' parts approach a formal equality. If, as I say above, a number of the qualities of these works of 1972 reappear in the cut-outs themselves, it is because they will have helped to provide that shifting base from which — or so analytic hindsight reveals — the invention of the cut-outs becomes possible. But at this point, Killeen's painting comes again (or is brought again by the new size and power of the paint patches in such works as *The Gods have it* to consider the claims of abstraction.

4/9/72

At the stage still in which objects designs etc that have identifiable sources are being used. At the moment the associations are important (associations with sources) but it is possible they may have to be eliminated sometime in the future.

(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 53)