

## Across the Vistula: marks on the ground

The page is white but it has been written on from time immemorial; it is white through forgetfulness of what has been written, through erasure of the text on which everything that is written is written.

(Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*)

I have reflected that it is permissible to see in this 'final' *Quixote* a kind of palimpsest, through which the traces — tenuous but not indecipherable — of our friend's previous writing should be translucently visible. Unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, inverting the other's work, would be able to exume and revive these lost Troys.

(Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*')



fig. 100. *Area of feeling*, December 1972

Now come the briefest of marks — dabs, drops, imprints — over a sanded ground made vast by their paucity: marks like footprints, like drops of 'blood in the snow',<sup>1</sup> a 'mark on the mind', a 'mark on an area of feeling', a 'love bite', a 'black spot', a 'something died here',<sup>2</sup> 'my mark surrounded by the edge of everything', 'a mark for me and a mark for you'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 63.

This series of the brief mark emerges in six works of December 1972: *Forseen, forsaken, forlorn, forgotten, forever; Area of Feeling; [fig. 100] Footsteps; Fishfingers; Across the Vistula; [fig. 8] and Dog Years.*

2/12/72

*Big shapes create cumbersome relations.*

*If the ground becomes a problem keep  
rubbing off until the problem disappears  
with the addition of past efforts.*

*The ground should be non-existent but  
not by means of contrived figure  
ground evenness. Nor should it  
just be a place for things.*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 58)*

The ground in these works is not yet materially 'non-existent' — that does not happen until the cut-outs — but it is signified as the place of the appearance and disappearance of the figure. It is an evanescent space, where figuration is *rubbed out* — literally, sanded away — while its traces ('the addition of past efforts') are allowed, hesitantly, fugitively, tenuously but not always indecipherably, to remain. The ground becomes, in Bryson's phrase, 'an indeterminable debris of revisions'.<sup>4</sup> Killeen calls this board formed by the addition and subtraction of things, the traces of which, imperfectly wiped out, remain, the 'Board that remembers'.

We might call this the palimpsest effect, or the palimpsest principle (*palimpsest* — writing ground or manuscript on which the 'original' writing has been effaced to make way for a second writing).

*Or, again, in reference to the printer's stone: 'When a stone has what is called a past (like a woman who has had several lovers), however well pumiced it may have been, there comes a time when it recollects in love the name of one of those former lovers, when (for example) the astonished printer sees, on the proof of a poster, the mark of an ancient Daumier, like a memory involuntarily touched upon...*

<sup>4</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: the Logic of the Gaze*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1983, p. 92.

(Francis Ponge, cited by Jacques Derrida) <sup>5</sup>

The principle of the palimpsest, of the stone with a past, will determine too the layering effects in a number of cut-outs from May 1987 on. There, transparent, image bearing tissues will be laid over other transparent, image bearing tissues, with a layer of white paint between, so that the image on the final tissue appears in sharp black, while that on the tissue beneath is a pale and barely discernible trace. Painting here operates by effacing. In *Stories we tell ourselves*, 25 May 1987, for instance, a number of pieces include transparent overlays. [plate 160]

By means of the palimpsest effect, Killeen's painting narrates its own temporal unfolding, the history of its own failures and erasures, in a kind of stuttering speech which tells. It loses and finds time in its speaking. It becomes a sum of past efforts. It becomes the ground which remembers and forgets. No ground, so Killeen's palimpsests say, is ever a *tabula rasa*: no surface is virgin, there is never a blank space, a place free of previous images, on which to begin. And such a priorness of the image is an irreparable condition faced by art and the mind.

Killeen allegorises painting as a process of forgetting, as an erasure in which new figures are enabled to come into being: he sees the figures created in a history as erased in an oblivion in which new figures arise. He marks, that is to say, in these lost Troys, a certain *mortality* of the image, where images are given as irreparably *in* time, as existing in a history, and as mortal therefore, subject, just as their mortal creators are, to the erasures of time, to oblivion and death.

In a sense, Killeen's palimpsest effects are 'only an extreme statement of what is in fact the habitual, the ancient process: a first image is placed on the canvas in order to induce in the painter a reaction that will replace it'.<sup>6</sup> Every painting is, as in Picasso's famous phrase, 'a sum of destructions', so that what Killeen at once makes explicit and refuses here is the classical 'mystification of opaque pigment handled always under erasure', where 'the brush traces

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Ponge, cited by Jacques Derrida, *Signsponge*, transl. Richard Rand, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

obliteratively, as indelible effacement',<sup>7</sup> and 'the medium does not exist in itself, except to erase its own production'.<sup>8</sup>

On the 'Board that remembers' we may watch the image come into meaning, or fade out of meaning, as we watch it come into or out of being, into or out of that space where no signification is. Thus, the six vertical triangles in *Across the Vistula* [fig. 8] are the sanded off objects of a past, a faded by not quite forgotten endeavour at figuration, as are the reddish glows about the red, horizontal marks — memories and past as *stain*. With the ground of *Across the Vistula*, as with the grounds of the rest of this group of six works, the more generalised haze, too, is the remains, unexhumable and unrevivable, of innumerable past efforts of paint.

Over this indeterminate ground come determinate 'marks' (dots, dabs, strokes) and determinate 'figures' (birds, beasts, a geometric abstraction) — the figures formed by monoprinting off greaseproofed paper. *Area of feeling*, for instance, [fig. 100] has, floating over the sanded ground: three dabs of red earth, each with a deliberate, 'faked' run appended; dabs of yellow, of black, and of white; and two monoprinted outlines of a pig. So, in these six works, as in the immediately previous series, the marks of 'figuration' and the marks of 'abstraction' are combined. But the marks have become more fragile, and more equal in such formal weight as they possess, as together they float, lightly, over their indifferent ground.

The figurative images, here, are reminiscent of those of children's stamps, since their size and subjects are similar, and since, as monoprints, they are literally prints or stamps — with the same blurs and bleedings of pigments as in stamps, the same unequal adherence to ground resulting from inequalities of the hand's stamping pressure, and the same possibility too of an endless and arbitrary placing.

With 'stamps', with monoprint figures, and with such brevity of mark, there is, as I say, the possibility (and some connoted sense) of arbitrary placing. But, in all six works of this group, nearly every mark, and every figure, is, in fact, symmetrically placed to the right and the left of a vertical axis; and in all

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<sup>7</sup> Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 96. (One might except, as Bryson does, Oriental calligraphic painting.)

but *Forseen, forsaken, forlorn, forever*, where it is displaced to the left, that axis is centrally placed. The very indeterminateness, the very random look of the marks, is thus refuted by a determinate symmetry.

Two effects jostle here, each dislodging the truth of the other: 'symmetry', and 'lack of control'. On the one hand, the paintings follow up this suggestion:

*Try not using a big overall shape for  
control in those  
terms...*

*Put things down on the board that do  
nothing and go in no direction that  
you can foresee*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 58)*

On the other hand, the paintings answer also to this determination:

*... symmetrical control. plus asymmetrical  
elements*

*Balance divided by a centre*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 59)*

Such symmetrical control continues, and becomes flagrant, in the next group of works, a group of tall, vertically proportioned boards, painted in January 1973, of which *Past and present* was typical. (Killeen has since destroyed this group.) In *Past and present*, symmetrically placed marks might have been called the present, existing over that past composed of vestigial presences, the sanded ground. Near the top and again near the bottom of the panel there was a monoprinted double spiral, marking a central vertical axis; approximately half-way up, there is a symmetrical display of four lino-printed hooks.

*Symmetrical control is related  
to the way a man's eyes are positioned.*

*The left is repeated on the right to  
give a feeling of balance. The same  
thing doesn't apply vertically.*

*Really only need one side of the board.*

*People look symmetrical.*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 65)*

'Symmetrical control is related to the way a man's eyes are positioned.' Hence, perhaps, the somewhat literal references to eyes throughout these works, as in *'Eyes, goat, and cows'*, which had stacks of eyes about a central vertical axis, or as in *'Spaceman'*, where the spaceman was centrally placed, so its eyes arrived on the right and left of the central vertical axis. All these eyes might also have been seen as yet another instance in Killeen's work of eyes as a show of the fact that, as Duchamp once said, one can see seeing. Here, yet again, as in Killeen's realist works, and as in the Anzus works and elsewhere, there was represented the organ of our own seeing at work, so that, again, our own seeing was made, as it were, present to ourselves.

In any case, even if with such a naturalistic excuse as the fact of the symmetrical arrangement of the eye in the head, symmetry, that most flagrantly artificial of composing systems, has here won out. And so the painting's edge has again won out, since the central vertical axis of this symmetry is defined in relation to edge. So, painting's edge must be reconsidered.

*The edge is a line*

*The edge is no different from any other edge.*

*The edge is arbitrary in general but not in particular*

*The edge is where the real world begins*

*for other people and my world ends, physically.*

*(Killeen the blue notebook, p. 64)*

In the panels of a related group of works painted in January 1973, there is a more conventional proportion of the two edges of height to the two edges of width, so that the panel becomes wider and we less conscious of edge. Furthermore, the number of marks is reduced to something like that allowed in the Vistula group of December 1972, so granting the signs a wider, freer, less edge touched space in which to play. By means of these devices, Killeen manages to ameliorate, at least to some degree, that all-controlling power of pattern, and that dictatorship of the edge, which symmetry too entirely admits.

This group of January 1973, painted in the same month as the tall, thin lot, returns to the qualities of the *Across the Vistula* works of December 1972: to fragile, weightless marks, consisting of 'abstract' dabs, and monprinted

'figures', which, despite their symmetry of arrangement, might seem arbitrarily, and only momentarily, to have settled on the pale, sanded ground. In *Dance with Death*, for instance, the skull marks the top of a vertical axis, and a rectangle marks a point approximately half way down; while diagonal strokes shoot between the skull and the panel's lower corners.

Killeen's paintings, which once, as in the *Battle for the mind* works, were bristling with signs, are now, in the works of December 1972 and January 1973, all but bereft of them. Such few brief marks and imprints as are allowed to remain on the comparative vastness of the ground (seldom more than six, or six clusters), have made of its emptiness a solitude. And then, in the paintings made between January and July 1973, such marks are made to seem all the more fragile, by the complete abandoning of symmetrical control.<sup>9</sup> [fig. 101]

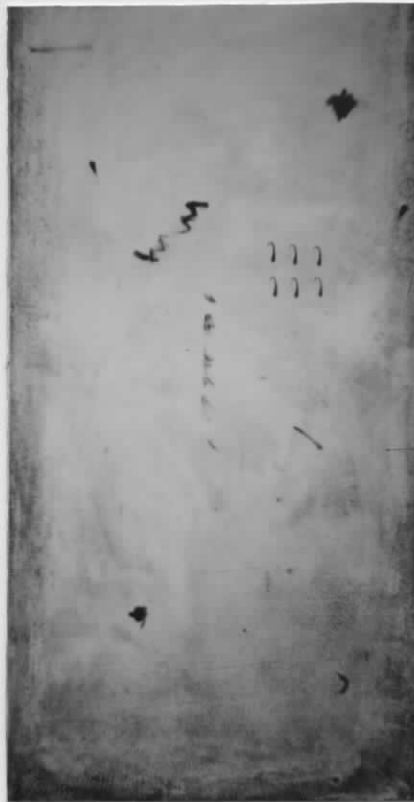


fig. 101 *Shoso in*, April 1973

Disencumbered of their symmetry, Killeen's marks and imprints seem all the more detachable from their ground. If the sign is material (the 'thing', as Killeen calls it), and the ground immaterial, a pale emptiness merely, then what is left of the unitary object — the painting? The painting is all the closer,

<sup>9</sup> There are three exceptions to this asymmetry known to me: *Information*, April 1973; *Hooks in the Sky*, March 1973; and *Stardust*, March 1973.

now, to that point of undoing where the 'the ground', as Killeen says, 'should be non-existent'.

Such a floating of signs in the pale space of non-representation offers Killeen enormous possibilities. The investigation of these possibilities includes works as diverse as the chance-governed works on the white or 'sky' grounds of 1970; the Vistula works on pale grounds of 1972; the present works of 1973; the Combs and the Grids which we will see in a minute, asymmetrically placed on white grounds in 1973 and 1974; the Laces on white grounds which follow them in 1975; the Grids on aluminium sheet in 1978, pressed so close against it that the wall seems their white ground; and what — if only with hindsight — we might call the culminatory moment of the cut-outs themselves.

To bend Marcelin Pleyne's words again to Killeen:

*Once the symbolic apparatus of colour/matter and white/emptiness had been set in place, [he] would never cease playing it out from all angles, until the painting opened out onto a new space in which it no longer stood as a real object... (the white of the painting responding to the white emptiness of the general architecture, itself articulated as a determination of colour-matter).<sup>10</sup>*

It is not, of course, that the cut-outs are Killeen's goal. He can hardly in 1972 or 1973 be an apprentice to a later master that he has not met, even if that master be himself in a later incarnation. One is in danger, no doubt, in looking back, of adopting the heroicising format of a biography with a great moment, that moment to which the whole life leans. And this is particularly so, perhaps, since it is the cut-outs which have made Killeen the most influential painter of the post McCahon/Walters/Mrkusich generations in New Zealand; since it is the cut-outs which have led to his being the only New Zealand resident artist to exhibit regularly outside Australasia; and since it is they, of all Killeen's works, which are the works which his public and the artist himself regards as his most important. (Nor, for what such confession is worth, would I have been writing on the early Killeen had he not done the cut-outs.)

What we should perhaps stress here then is that — if only intermittently — Killeen played out the figure/white ground game, from 'all angles', from 1970

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<sup>10</sup> Marcelin Pleyne, 'Mondrian, Twenty Five Years Later', *Painting and System*, p. 98.



on, 'until', with the cut-outs, 'the painting opened out onto a new space in which it no longer stood as a real object'; and we should stress, too, that the cut-outs, even if they should today irresistibly seem to us the culminating moment, are but one moment — even if the longest, and in the artist's and his culture's terms the most successful moment — in this long playing and serious game.

For the present, in any case, the marks are 'simply' reduced in comparative size, number and visual weight, and are so chancily placed on the ground, that the vast space in which they appear all but engulfs them — a 'Space age painting?', as Killeen teasingly notes. His 'objects' now lose all 'sense of place':<sup>11</sup>

*Stardust*

*Through space sideways*

*Upside down inside out*

*No top or bottom — in or out*

*No up down in out.*

*Nowhereness*

*Nothingness*

*Finite infinity*

*on forever — in*

*Across to the edge ——— move*

...

*Matter and antimatter*

*Earth and space — bodies — Down to earth*

*Bodies suspended*

...

*Things and nothings.*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, pp. 70-71)*

Given this vacuum, forlorn of all symmetry, in which all fixedness, all direction, all place is undone:

*Why does a format always have to be chosen?*

...

*Between the devil and the deep blue sea*

*Between cliché and somewhere*

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<sup>11</sup> Killeen, the blue notebook, note dated 4/73, p. 72.

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 75)*

The format, the conventional rectangle (that cliché) the frame, that thing, that material space of closure, is inept, is quite inappropriate now, to enclose his unenclosable, immaterial, directionless, placeless space.

Since at this stage Killeen can see no way out of the rectangle, with its composing, defining edge, the search must continue for ways, even within the confines of the edge, of refusing its composing power. While considering this, he inscribes the name 'Newman',<sup>12</sup> thinking here of how Newman's vertical 'zips' are still, as the forms are in all painting 'up to now', an internalised reflection of the painting's vertical edge — the very thing Killeen wants to avoid?

25/5/73

*The edge is the composition*

*The composition is not taken from the edge.*

*It is not an extension of the edge*

*in the way it has been up to now (Newman)*

*From the centre outwards to the edge not*

*from the edge inwards*

*Eventually the parts cannot remain*

*justified by the space idea.*

*They must be positive and only themselves.*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p 75)*

This note represents what hindsight might call another prophetic moment. 'Eventually', with the cut-outs, the parts *will* 'be positive and only themselves', and not 'justified' by a painted, surrounding space. But, for now, there is still the interminable problem of the ground: isn't it, in its own way, just as troublesome as the edge?

*The white ground*

*what is it?*

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<sup>12</sup> Killeen's 'take' here on Newman clearly reflects the concern in current American art and art criticism with what Michael Fried called, in *Three American Painters*, which Killeen bought in 1974, a 'deductive structure'. In Fried's account, the vertical bands in Newman's paintings 'amount to echoes within the painting of the two side-framing edges; they relate primarily to these edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas. They demand to be seen as deriving from the framing edge -- as having been "deduced" from it.' (Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland: Jules Olitski: Frank Stella*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965, p. 23.

*The problem of making it atmosphere  
 Objects on a plain white board...  
 ... The eye travels between them without  
 interruptions. Does the board have to be  
 anything?  
 Travelling in the white  
 White interruption.  
 (Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 74)*

*The board is not part of the painting?  
 (Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 76)*

*Jasper Johns  
 The thing itself — no space — nothing.  
 (Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 77)*

The parts, the 'things', the signs, must eventually 'be positive and only themselves', so that, as say in Jasper Johns' *Flag* canvases, there is just the 'thing' itself, the 'figure', and no ground left over at all, or so that, as in Stella's shaped canvases, any remainder of the rectangular board left after painting the figure is regarded as not part of the painting, as a mere left over, which must then be cut entirely away.

Killeen will not, until 1978, the year of the cut-outs, make the shape of the figure and ground entirely coincident, so that there is 'no space — nothing' outside of the figure; nor until then will he ever cut the remainder left over from the figure away.<sup>13</sup> For the moment, he may only progressively whiten the ground, until he comes again to a point where he will refuse any longer to sully it, any longer to make what he calls 'contrived dirty boards'. Then, by so acknowledging and stressing the actual whiteness of ground, and its very quality of non-signification, he may answer his question, 'does the board have to be anything?', and, by leaving it absolutely untouched, at least *symbolically* cut it away.

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<sup>13</sup> It is significant that it should be another American, Jasper Johns, mentioned here as a model for the absolute coincidence of figure and ground, since it will be after a journey to America that Killeen will perform his final cutting away. For a fuller account of Killeen's relationships with American art and criticism of the 1960s, see my later chapter, 'The American connection'.

But already, he realises he must find a way to make the time come when the signs will 'be positive and only themselves'. It is a significant realisation — an absolute requisite for the cut-outs.