

## Into abstraction!

*Into abstraction!*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 23)*

Perhaps the exclamation mark of this enthused or risible moment should be replaced with a question mark: *into abstraction?* This is the first question Killeen asks of abstraction: is it possible for me? Is it possible here in New Zealand?

*In typical New Zealand fashion of having to prove, and do everything yourself before something becomes possible -- now comes the effort of finding whether or not abstraction is possible for me.*

*Walters and Mrkusich don't provide any sort of base to work from.*

*It can't really be said that they have explored the possibilities enough beyond creating themselves a style.*

*This may be too much to ask, but here so much depends on one or two people*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 98)*

Though we shall see that Walters does after all turn out to provide something like 'a base to work from', Killeen is right. In New Zealand, high culture is spread painfully thin on the ground, and nearly no art arrives from without. One has constantly here to re-invent that distant rumour, the wheel, to check that it works.

There are questions, too, of abstraction's much-vaunted purity, of its proclaimed autonomy, its total freedom from 'nature'. Must all 'associations' be removed from abstraction, all connotations of the world? Can they be? Should they be?

*Must all associations be removed?  
 What about associations with pure  
 painting?  
 (Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 97)*

What about them indeed. Doesn't any abstract painting connote at least that: 'abstract painting'? An 'abstract' with rectangles of red, yellow and blue must connote 'Mondrian' to those in the know. A black labyrinth might cause in us this association: 'early Stella'.

*Stella's best paintings (the symmetrical  
 early ones) attempt to remove a  
 lot of associations and yet they depend  
 very much on their relation to  
 Islamic art. The Protractors  
 have the feeling of the 30's and  
 are not so successful maybe because  
 the original material is not as good.  
 Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 97)*

*The difficulty seems to lie in finding an  
 image which contains no associations  
 but which is not thin and empty  
 like a design  
 Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 97)*

The very titles of Killeen's combs announce layers of connotation: *Comb; Nosferatu; Tree; Black shadow; A bit of backbone; Vertebrae; Golden shadow; Break up; Filament; Key; Grey Death; Spine; Lichen; Palm; Palmate; Tutenkamon; Three red spikes; Peacock's reason*. Killeen's is not, not even now, a purely formalist art. No *Painting no. 101* for him, or *Painting red*, no proclamation of painting's autonomy such as we may see in the paintings of Mrkusich or Don Peebles; no minimalist literalism about painting's materiality.

If what the pure high modernist title attempts is a silencing of painting to verbal meaning, a repression, a castration of verbal meaning, what Killeen's titles assert is that each form bears with it its shadow of meaning, or filament, that thread of meaning which winds about each form.

The blue notebook lists off some possible connotations of the combs and/or of their titles.

*palm-tree leaf of which symbol of victory*

*-- martyrdom or pilgrimage*

*palmate -- shaped like a palm*

*-- also entirely webbed -- duck's foot*

*ganoid -- large sub class of fish*

*characterised by angular rhomboidal*

*polyganal or circular scales*

*Asterolepsis -- n. A genus of gigantic*

*ganoid fishes -- fossil only*

*filament -- fine thread or fibre -- incandescent*

*wire -- stalk or stem*

*root teeth incisors -- canines molar*

....

*prickle needle thorn briar nettle*

*antenna digit foliage*

*pollex -- the*

*deckle edge dog tooth notchy*

*thumb*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 130)*

The title *Island influence*, July 1973, at the very start of the Combs, points to one of the largest connotatory prospects which the series (and the several following) will open out. It points to the islands of Polynesia, to the primitivist: the whole European appropriation of the 'primitive' in art -- or, in a more particularly New Zealand context, to Pakeha appropriations of the Polynesian, or, more particularly still, to Gordon Walters' homages to one form of Maori art: the *koru*.

Killeen disclaims any *specific* Polynesian meanings in his work:

*any meaning that the design has is not the reason for using it. ie polynesian art.*

*The meaning and the design is irrelevant.*

*The reason is that it exists.*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 136)*

And yet, as with Stella's use of Islamic art, or of art moderne or deco forms, and as Killeen's title *Island influence* affirms, the appropriated signs will inescapably carry with them, into their new usage, some connotatory trace of their former use. *Styles* mean. The 'primitive' zig-zag or triangulation, or the koru motif, though their original, specific meaning is lost, and is of no particular interest to the artist, will bear with them still at least this, generalised, connotation: 'the primitive', 'the maori', or, 'maoriness'.

Or -- and this too is quite foreign to their original intent -- Polynesian forms may be appropriated as a sign of national identity: a stock use in New Zealand high art as well as in low. Louise Henderson, for instance, once said of New Zealand embroiderers: 'They may look at Maori patterns and find inspiration in their designs... Through this one may attain a national art'.<sup>1</sup> In works by Christopher Perkins, Colin McCahon, Dennis Knight-Turner, Tony Fomison or Barry Lett, 'Maoriness' or 'The Polynesian' might be called the attempt to embroider a national or regional sign; and the same might be said of Walters' *koru* motif.

Killeen is perfectly aware, of course, as the naive regionalist is not, that such local European moves to possess 'the Maori', however nationalist their motives might be, are predicated upon an international modernist move to appropriate the 'primitive'. He is aware that the 'primitive' is seen, used, consumed through specifically modernist eyes. He knows that 'Polynesia' comes to him through eyes filled with American modernist painting, through painters like Noland, Albers, Davis and Stella.

*Gene Davis*

*Hawai -- striped bark cloth -- Noland*

*Fiji*

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Henderson, 'Embroidery a Living Art', *Art in New Zealand*, September 1941, p. 38.

*Kula Exchange system*  
*sheet of tapa Auckland Museum*  
*from Fiji*  
*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p.1 06)*

Of another, non European, 'Other', (if not 'primitive') culture, Killeen writes:

*Egyptian ornament (Fortova -- Samalova)*  
*For examples of modern hard edge*  
*abstraction. Contains Noland, Stella, Albers*  
*etc*  
*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 111)*

One aims, in the words of a later note, not at a Jasper Johns target painting, but at 'Polynesian targets': one sees a Polynesian circle through the circular sights of the contemporary Americans Kenneth Noland and Jasper Johns. In using the geometric patterns of a tapa, a sort of 'New Noland (Zealand)' may be made, and one sees a tapa with eyes which have seen Persian carpets, and Egyptian wall paintings, [fig. 112] and which are heirs to Greek geometers.

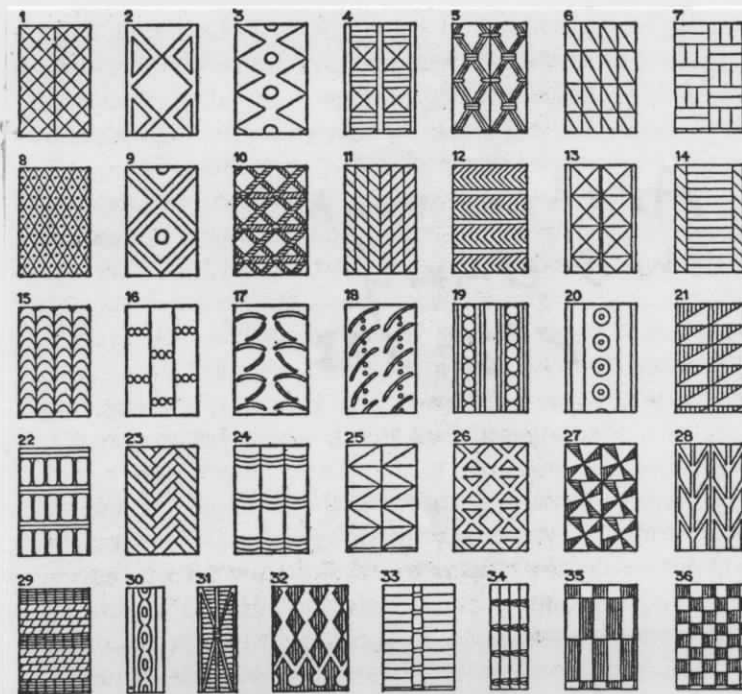


fig. 112. From W.B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt*, fig. 99

*Polynesian targets.*

*Polynesian persian*

*formalist trap*

...

*New Noland (Zealand)*

...

*pythagoras*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 1)*

One cannot appropriate another culture: one may only appropriate some of its signs.

*Western culture is stuck with what it has got,*

*it cannot assume another culture*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 114)*

Nor can one *equal* another culture's most characteristic manifestations; nor can one see it outside the position of one's own cultural concerns.

*No matter how hard we try can we ever*

*equal primitive societies and civilisations*

*in their complexity of design or the*

*Americans in their simplicity of design*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 114)*

Killeen's art will return again and again to the modernist question of 'the primitive', and so will this account.

One further amenity of abstraction for Killeen is it that it allows him a new means of escape from the cage of 'personality', and into the 'open' space of a painting 'where my identity must not be cause and must not be present'. It offers a relief from that stock creature of New Zealand art discourse, the expressionist, the purveyor of biographical pains. Breaking free from that tyranny in which the single authorial vision oppresses the viewer, abstraction opens to the possibility of a multi-viewpointed art.

9/11/73

*Personal meanings lead to an art that is*

*closed and obsessive rather than open  
simple and free...*

*A personal and therefore particular meaning  
only has interest to the extent that  
it is strange. The idea that this  
has come from one person, is individual  
and unique. Most NZ painting  
is like this*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 103.)*

Here, Killeen shows himself to be very close, for the moment, to the art critical stance of Petar Vuletic of the Petar James Gallery, where he had solo shows in 1972, 1973, and 1974. One might compare Killeen's note above to a characteristic Vuletic proclamation:

*The bulk of art produced in this country is just not worthy of being considered as serious art. What many erroneously consider to be the mainstream of New Zealand painting can loosely be described as being indigenous regionalist, based as it is on a naive and simplistic view of what painting in this country should be about, namely, a concern for explicit local subject matter such as supposedly unique New Zealand landscape forms, birds, pebbles, black singlets, harsh New Zealand light. Add to this a messy preoccupation with autobiographic trivia and you have in the work of McCahon, Binney, Smither, Harris and Nigel Brown the perfect recipe for producing a confused mess...*

*(Petar Vuletic, in Auckland Metro, 1981) <sup>2</sup>*

Killeen's note continues:

*Personal painting  
implies that this is one person's stand  
and that one person's view of  
the world is being pushed at you.  
Personal painting contains things that  
are unnecessary to the painting but*

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<sup>2</sup> Petar Vuletic, cited Francis Pound, 'Petar Vuletic: Dealer, Critic, Heretic', *Auckland Metro*, August 1981, pp. 47-48.

*necessary to that person's singular  
view.*

*It is no longer possible to put up one  
view of the world.*

*(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 103.)*