

Grids over the ground

The principles, techniques and materials of the Comb series are now carried through to that series I shall call -- in order to distinguish it from several later series of grids -- the 'Grids over the ground'. This, Killeen's first grid series, consists of triangulated grids, one per painting, off-centredly placed and tilted, on a white acrylic on canvas ground. These grids appear first in January 1974, and float through the whole of that year.

As with the Combs, the Grids on the ground start small in relation to their ground, and are then considerably enlarged as the series goes on. (The title *Transister*, March 1974, may serve as the self-deprecatory mark of this initial smallness.) [fig. 113]

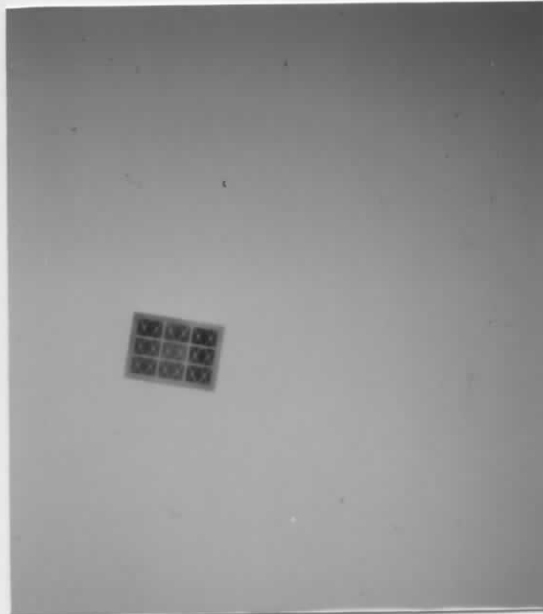


fig. 113. *Transister*, March 1974

Every grid in the series is displaced from the perpendicular, every one is asymmetrically placed: the figure thus remains uncompromised by the composing power of the edge. With the grid figure, just as with the figure of the comb, Killeen is

*... managing to
place it on the canvas in such a way
as not to look composed
in relation to the edge or to other*

things, to look free and open
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 104)

Parallelism of the grid with the painting's edge is refused. Yet right angularity -- that internal echoing of the imprisoning frame -- is at once accepted and refused. Killeen's grid, as a mesh of right angles, accepts, by echoing it, the right angularity of the frame. Yet, since the grid is tilted, so that no parallelism is permitted with the painting's edge, the frame as composing container is at the same time refused.

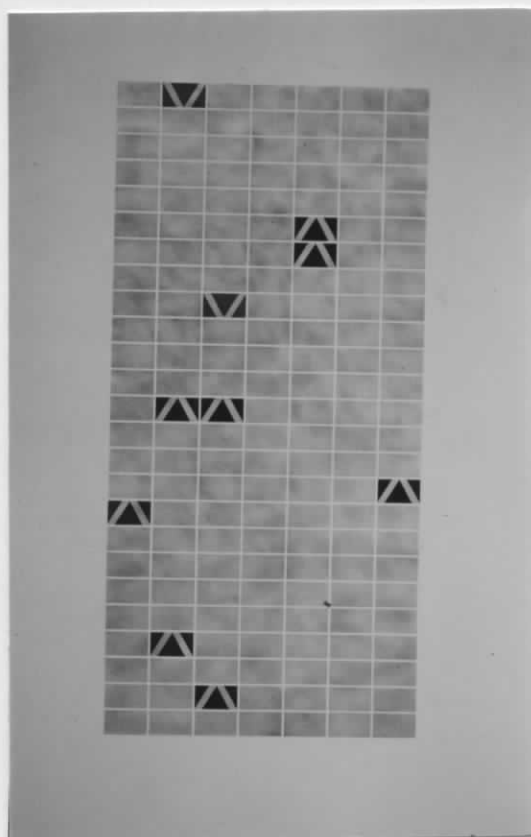


fig. 114. *Constructivist grid no. 3*, March 1974

What is proposed by Killeen is not the modernist grid (which, entirely coincident with its ground and the painting's edge, purports to be an *object*), but rather, the modernist grid turned into a *figure*, a *sign*, a *subject*. Not a grid painting, then, so much as a painting of a grid -- and perhaps a naturalistic painting at that. Not a grid meshed with ground, but a grid floated as an object or sign over the ground. Thus the frame's implicit integration of the pictorial elements inside itself (which is also the modernist grid's purported integration) is refused: what is posited is a *dis*-integration, at once of figure and ground, and figure and frame.

Significantly, in this regard, the American abstractionist Kenneth Noland, with whom Killeen shared the floating of an image on a white, untouched field, [fig. 115] and with whom he had earlier corresponded, and whom he had met in company with the other painters of the Petar James gallery stable during Noland's visit to New Zealand in October 1975, criticised the tilting of Killeen's Combs and Grids, saying it made them too 'naturalistic'; and this though he was otherwise enthusiastic about them. Of Noland's reaction to Ian Scott's painting, on the other hand, Killeen recorded that he 'likes attachment to the edge'.¹



fig. 115. Kenneth Noland, *Golden Day*, 1964.

It was in 1974, the same year as painting his Grids on the ground, that Killeen bought Michael Fried's *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland: Jules Olitski: Frank Stella*, where, in a then famous analysis, the edge-derived composition of Newman, Noland and Stella is elaborately seen as a 'deductive structure' -- 'deductive', that is, in 'relation to the framing edge'.² Noland's 'concentric or radiating motifs at the precise centre of the canvas', for instance, are seen as 'thereby relating his images deductively to the shape of the picture support'.³ Likewise, according to Fried, Noland's chevron paintings 'organise the entire surface

¹ Killeen, the black notebook, note dated 17 . 9 . 75, p. 17. (Later Scott, in response to Killeen's tiltings, was himself to tilt his vertical stripes, so that they too were no longer perpendicular to the painting's edge.)

² Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland: Jules Olitski: Frank Stella*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1965, p. 23.

³ Fried, op. cit., p. 28.

of the canvas into zones of colour related to the shape of the picture support... by an explicitly deductive structural logic.⁴

So, in his refusal of attachment to edge, Killeen knew precisely what he was about. It was a deliberate effect -- a refusal of the Americans' deductive structure, and an act of critique from without.

Jan 1974

...

*If what is on the board need not relate
to the board, then the interest must lie
in the thing itself*

...

*A relationship between the two things [figure & ground] must be
found which is not the old compositional relationship
(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 111)*

If the grid as a figure on the ground does not relate to the ground, and if the figure in the frame does not relate to the frame, then the interest must lie in the figure itself. Yet -- since Killeen still paints on a ground -- a relationship must still be found between figure and ground: but one which is not the old compositional relation.

This relationship *is* found: a reciprocal contamination of figure and ground, whereby the grid figure is at once formed and fissured by the whiteness of ground, in a double and simultaneous fissuring where the figure is fissured by, as it reciprocally fissures back into, the whiteness of non-signification. Once again, at the same time as Killeen disputes with the enclosing effects of the frame, he makes a figure which permits itself to be -- which *requires to be* -- penetrated by the space outside it. So, once again, the painting (that which *is* painted, that which is not virgin white ground) is undone as a unitary object; so the painting is undone, 'by the space it sets off in setting itself forth'.

The painting is at once made and unmade, in so allowing into itself the grating thrust of an exterior blankness (*grate*, noun -- a grid of metal

⁴ Fried, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

bars; **grate**, *verb* -- reduce to small particles). Already, as in the cut-out it will be, the signifying colour is invaded by whiteness, that space accepting of signification, but where signification is absent.

Or, at least, signification might *seem* in the white to be absent. For, might it not be said that this invasion of whiteness *depicts*, *signifies*, or at least acknowledges, the actual whiteness of the modernist gallery wall? Might it not be said that Killeen's Grids, like his Combs, and like the cut-outs to come, are predicated upon -- and so require -- that very institution of whiteness?

Much the same as Rosalind Krauss has claimed of modernist painting's *flatness* may be said of Killeen's letting the gallery whiteness in:

Krauss demonstrated that the flatness celebrated by formalism as a sign of painting's autonomy is actually a sign of its institutional dependency, the product of a historical development in which works of art 'began to internalise the space of exhibition -- the [gallery] wall -- and to represent it'.

(Craig Owens, 'Analysis Logical and Ideological', 1985) ⁵

So the gallery wall grides (**gride** -- cut, scrape, along, through, etc., with strident grating sound) through the Combs and the grids.

Killeen's use of the given white of the gallery wall came at a time when in New Zealand, as in America, much art was predicated upon an exploration -- and sometimes a critique -- of art's institutional spaces.⁶ It was in this context that Killeen accepted and used -- rather than criticised -- the relationship of his Combs and grids to the gallery wall as a ground for figures.

⁵ Craig Owens, 'Analysis Logical and Ideological', *Art in America*, May 1985, p. 25.

⁶ Billy Apple's various works which censured unwanted items of public and dealer gallery spaces, and his works which focus on the actual buying and selling of art, are the most notorious New Zealand instance. Of course, Apple's critique's of gallery spaces are still dependent on -- and occasionally profit from -- those institutions of art commerce he might seem to critique. In fact Apple's critiques have always tended to *improve* the effectiveness of those institutions. His works should properly be seen as a critique of that transcendentalising attitude to art, common to both spiritualists and salaried intellectuals, which would deny or deplore art's actual material conditions of use.

The combs were done on canvas unstretched. I thought of the canvas as the wall. I even thought of stencilling some directly on the wall, but I didn't, because it wasn't practical.
(Richard Killeen, statement to the writer) ⁷

Yet there was at least the perceived *possibility* of directly imprinting the Grids on the wall, a possibility allowed by the procedural fact that, as with the Combs before them, the Grids were made by dry-brushing through cardboard stencils.

By dry-brushing, a soft haze is achieved on these most rigid of forms, so that they, like the Combs, are 'washed out' with 'the look they have of distance and second handedness'. And, as with the Combs, their pale, irregularly dappled dry-brushing is sometimes hardened, in some selected parts, by paint of a greater liquidity and density, so permitting those parts a greater palpability.

Here too we may see Killeen 'lean towards a painting in which some form of decision is made before the painting is done'. Here too the pre-forming and pre-deciding procedure of the stencil allows the possibility not only of an arbitrary placing, but the possibility too of an endlessly repeated placing. And here too, such repetition may come either in the repeated and displaced overlay of the same stencil in the same work, or in the repeated use of the same stencil through different works.

And, like the stamp, or the imprint as a mode of production, the stencil connotes an estrangement at once from ground and from all marks expressive of self. Once more, as in the Combs, there is extended by Killeen's protocol of the stencil, 'a tendency, temporally, sequentially, to decline (in the grammatical sense) a given visual idea. This diachronic development leads him to confront, within the economy of a series, a constant element with one or more variations'.⁸

So the Grid persists through all its numerous variations, of colour, of shape, of brushwork, of symmetry and asymmetry within; and through

⁷ Killeen to the writer, cited 'Escape from the Frame: Richard Killeen's Cut-outs', *Art New Zealand* no. 20, Winter 1981, p. 36.

⁸ Jean Clay, 'Ointments, Makeup, Pollen', *October* 27, Winter 1983, p. 7.

variations of relation (non-relation) with the painting's edge, and variation of relation (non-relation) of figure to ground. One needs to see some sixty Killeen Grids, truly to see the differences within their similarity.

Within the Grids and the Combs, as with the Laces in the next series to come, each painting is a discontinuous term in an indefinite series, repeating itself through serial diffractions. Each painting seems an instance of reflection in a potentially endless mirroring, a mirroring which might stretch through innumerable instances of time and space, a mirroring which is not so much of the world, as of the painting's own image.

Such a serialising constitutes, it might be said, yet another way of breaking the power of the frame. If the individual painting is a 'weak unity', in that its figure refuses unity with ground, and refuses the unifying embrace of the frame, so too does the series refuse it, in that the same figure escapes the singular painting's frame to appear in another, and escapes that, to appear in another, and so on, ad infinitum. The figure, the sign repeated throughout the series, has no permanent place, no conclusive ground or frame.

And yet each series -- the Comb, the Grid, the Lace -- potentially endless though it may be, *does* end, in this oeuvre which so persistently crops itself off. Killeen's oeuvre, in its very impersistence, persistently works like this, like the crop: in the effect as of an *aposiopesis* -- a sudden breaking off in speech.