

The Laces and the oeuvre as lacy body

The Laces consist of concentric circular or spiral patterns of line, with a zig-zag stitching of line sewing together their circles or coils. They are either floated on a white field, or more expansively fill that field. The series begins in May 1975, and continue through to July 1975.

The first Laces are drawn with a certain geometric precision, their colours are fully saturated, and some parts of their triangulated linear patterns are coloured in, so that they still have a density, weight and presence perhaps not yet quite appropriate to 'lace' -- word of rarefaction, absence, and permeation by absence of matter. Set into the triangulated fields of their circles, particularly at their centres, there are often denser, non-triangular shapes -- hexagons, circles fully coloured in, an organic swastika, or a mandala. Doubtless, this is in accord with 'lace', in that, as the Concise Oxford has it, it is a 'fine open fabric... usu. with applied patterns'. But still, the lace is not yet a pure all-over pattern, since its centre is so emphatically marked by an extraneous element. The composition remains hierarchical, rather than non-relational, in that its centre is privileged.

In the Laces of June and July, however, precise geometry is abandoned, and the all-over, freehand lace is the only figure. Painting and drawing are now one operation, where the artist starts at the centre, turning round and around, weaving a way out and out. There is, consequently, a look of handmade irregularity, a no longer precisely circular pattern.¹ This irregularity brings the Laces close to the irregular triangulated circles of Polynesian tapa cloth [fig. 116]

The same two devices for defusing the power of the frame are used in the Laces as were used in the Combs: there is an empty white ground about the figure, or the figure is cropped.

¹ It was this 'handmade' look which was to provoke Allen Maddox's characteristic freehand X's. In Tony Green's words: 'Maddox takes up ... the non-figurative patterning that is most familiar in Killeen's work'. (Tony Green, 'Exhibitions', *Art New Zealand* 4, February/March 1987, p. 10.) Maddox also took from the Laces what was 'distinct from the geometrical orderliness of hard-edge abstraction', and what 'avoids in fact symmetries and patterned repetitions'. The matter of Killeen's influence on his own generation, and on the next, and even on an older generation than his -- the largest influence of any painter since McCahon -- I will not treat of here, reserving it for a later occasion. See, however, my 'In the Wake of McCahon: a commentary on *after McCahon*', *Art New Zealand* 52, Spring 1989, esp. pp. 81-83, where a counter show -- *after Killeen* -- is envisaged as art historically more accurate than the Auckland City Art Gallery's *after McCahon*.

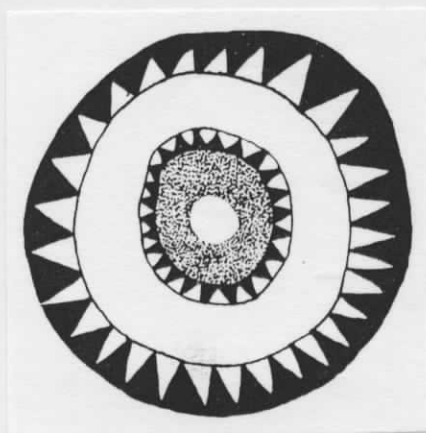


fig. 116. Tapa, Austral Islands,
Peabody Museum, Salem

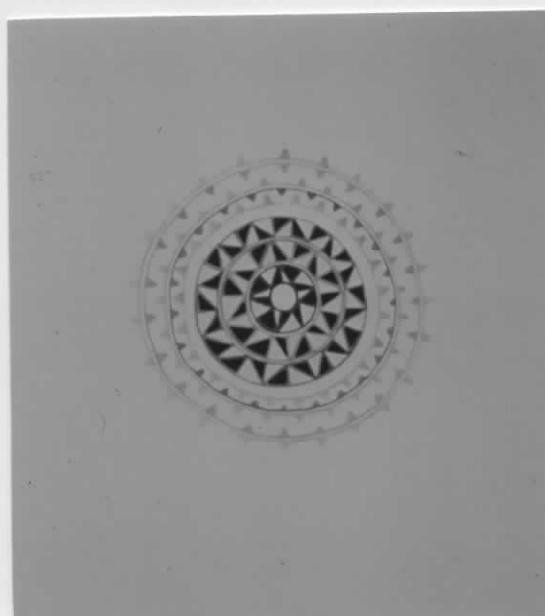


fig. 117. *Jellyfish*, July 1975

By the very largeness of the white ground left around many of the Laces, Killeen continues to refuse the compromising power of the edge. See for instance, *Jellyfish*, July 1975, [fig. 117] whose title wittily remarks our sense of the figure's smallness in that sea of white which surrounds it. Killeen still works in accord with this self-instruction

*Clean shapes on canvas separate
from the ground if not attached
to the edge...*

Each remains what it is

(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 80)

*Floating free**(Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 91)*

Unlike the comb or the grid, the circle cannot, by the very nature of its shape, be parallel with the right angularity of the frame. Inherently, its curvaciousness will refuse to echo the frame's straight edgedness. And yet (and so?) in the Lace series, as opposed to that of the Grid or the Comb, the figure *is* allowed to be composed by the frame, in that it is centralised, as the Combs and the Grids never were, in a centrality which the frame itself defines.

This acknowledgement of the composing power of the frame, after so much effort to refuse it, is the reason, perhaps, that Killeen now has such frequent resort to the crop (whereas it was never used in the Grids on the ground, and seldom used in the Combs). At the very moment when the centralising power of the frame seems to be acknowledged, the frame as container is most clearly refused, by an apparently endless eddying rush beyond it. See, for instance, *Cropped lace*, July 1975. [fig. 118]

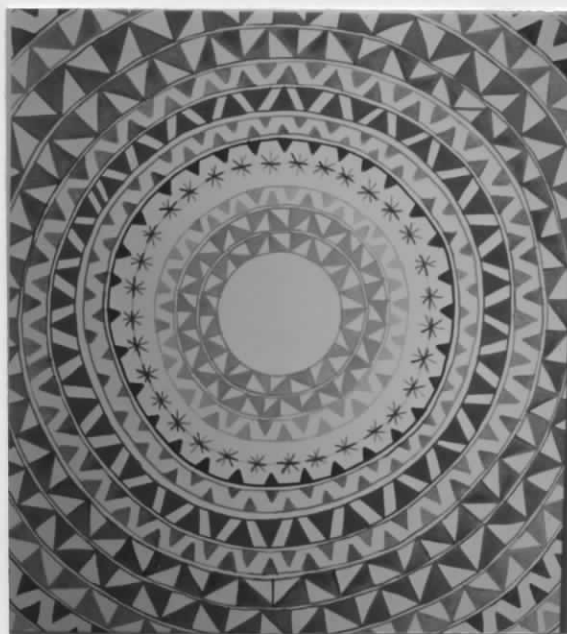


fig. 118. *'Cropped lace'*, June 1975

Here, emphatically, the crop is used as a way of signifying non-closure, of signifying a world continuous beyond. In such a continuance *beyond* the picture-edge, still more emphatically than in placing the lace some large distance *in* from the edge, the edge as container is clearly refused. So then is its implicit integration of the elements of the pictorial world refused -- there is

instead a breaking out of the frame, and a chopping off of what is within -- a double dis-integration.

Whiteness decomposes the Laces in the same two ways as it decomposed the Combs and the Grids. First, it often comes *through* the colours from beneath, through colours washed on so thinly as to be rendered vaporous, tenuous, transparent to the whiteness of ground. [fig. 119] Second, the ground's whiteness comes everywhere *between* the colours. The colours are so inwrought with ground that figure and ground are granted something like a formal equality.

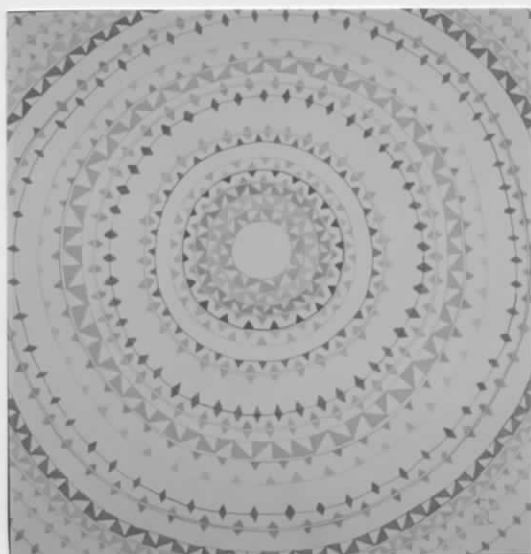


fig. 119. *Space lace*, June 1975

No, it's now more than that. The figure is now all but *dissolved* in ground. Or rather, the fabric of the figure is now so fine in its threads, and so open in its weave, as nearly to lack all presence. *Presence*: that modernist word, *par excellence*, of a powerful inhabitancy of ground; of the phallus as the site of power, as against the (feminine) ground of its absence, its lack. In the Laces, on the contrary, there is an aesthetic (an ethic) of *absence* -- of the non-inhabitancy of ground, of refusal of power, where presence is so dispersed as to be all but a depletion. Here, the figure makes itself so scarce on the ground as almost to vacate it.

The Laces proffer that salutary 'lightness', that ethic of the light, which Killeen will revive especially in the paleness of the cut-outs of 1985 and 1986, and which he will come to praise in his *Lessons in Lightness* series of 1989...

So malic presence and power is somewhat undone in this attenuation. We might remember here too that lace is a material which today connotes the female, that lacemaking is called a female task -- site of no power. Already then, we have something of that tenuity, that rarefaction, that 'lightness' of form, of which Wystan Curnow was to speak when comparing Killeen's cut-outs with Gimblett's 'aesthetic of presence' in the exhibition *7 Painters: the 80s*: 'His [Killeen's] work lacks "presence", looks light, is obviously not into any heavy trips'.²

It is as if Killeen acts already to affirm one of Nietzsche's sayings as reported by Barthes: 'What is good is light': nothing is less heavy, less *Wagnerian*, as Barthes would say, than Killeen's cut-outs.³ Already, in the Laces, there is that undoing of the power-full figure of painting, with the bare, the hollow, the blank between, which the cut-outs will come to; a dismantling of presence with absence, of 'thereness' with 'nowheres', of fullness with emptiness, of the authoritative with the anti-authoritarian.

And already, and again, there is a coming in to the work of the whiteness of the gallery wall, its internalising in paint, in symbolic acknowledgement. Already, as in the cut-outs to come, if here only symbolically, the white gallery wall is let into the painting, in through the spaces allowed by painting's absence.

And in the Laces, as in the Combs and the Grids, each painting takes its place within the institution of seriality. The Laces are interlaced by their very laciness. Fastened and tightened together, as Derrida might say, like the opposite edges of corsets or shoes...

Yes I know that each painting in the series yet remains unique, irreplaceable. That there is a hiatus between each, which definitively separates, and forever, one from another. As Derrida says: each is 'Unique, discrete, sufficient. I can't throw myself into a patient analysis of each article. A unique series of unique objects: each time the *hiatus* maintains and *scores out* [*rature*], in the serial interlacing, the reference to the other (elsewhere I've suggested calling this *seriature*) and to the other's other.'⁴

² Wystan Curnow, 'Seven Painters/The Eighties: the Politics of Abstraction', *Art New Zealand* 28, p. 35.

³ Nietzsche as quoted by Roland Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art', in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History From France*, ed. Norman Bryson, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 167.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, transl. Geoff Bennington & Ian McLeod, University of Chicago press, Chicago and London, 1987, p. 240.

I know that the 'air of family resemblance' between the works of a series 'removes none of them from itself, from the absolute secret, from this definitive detachment which isolates it and ab-solves it outside the series. For they are all, and each, irreplaceable.'⁵ And this will mean that in describing the series, in speaking generically of it, its individual works will be of necessity be missed, works which, to describe their difference from each other, would take up a book. So that even to 'describe' a series is to create a generality, a unity not quite true to its individual works, whose truth lies, at least in some part, in their singularity; it is, therefore, in the very act of description, to *make* a series. As Killeen does, we will see, in those 'Samplers' where he shows a number of his Grids, proffering 'something like an index of this seriality',⁶ showing in a single picture a number of variants in one frame.

Yet, at the same time, and irreparably, the series itself weakens the unity of the individual work, undoing its singularity, threading it together with other works, tying it together in a hardly extricable tangle. Each of the works in a series is the citation, in a sense, of the others, a sense which 'makes of each picture a latent, lateral, and differential reference to the others'. *Series* -- from the Greek, *seira*, as Derrida tells us, 'cord, chain, lasso, knotted cord', 'that which interlaces',⁷ a lineage.

The hyphen which separates each work of a series is also that which joins -- such is the nature, that is, the definition, of the hyphen...

So the series is itself oeuvre creating, in its weaving together a body -- or bodies -- of works. The series makes a body of out individual works, the oeuvre makes a body of those series. Once the series has done its work, that is all there is left for the oeuvre to do, it has half its work done and its work cut out for it. The oeuvre is the series of series -- the ultimate interlace. We will see in a moment this principle at work in *Some of his parts*, April 1976, and in *Painted over*, August 1976, where a Lace appears amidst the forms of various of Killeen's series. Of these parts formed by the series, the oeuvre is constituted as a body, and is here shown so to constitute itself.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, op. cit., p. 186.

⁶ Derrida, op. cit., p. 183 .

⁷ Derrida, op. cit., p.183.

Already, then, in this interlacing of works which constitutes the Laces as a series, and in those interlacings which constitute as two series the Combs and the Grids on the ground, and in those further interlacings which link these three series -- the Combs, the Grids and the Laces -- together as a web in the white, the oeuvre is on the way to presenting itself as oeuvre. It is laying itself out, as it were, in suitably sized chunks for monographic digestion, on the monographer's plate.

Also, the individual work, however discrete, requires the oeuvre, if it is to be taken seriously as art. If it is to be called art at all. Never mind its 'quality' as a work.

But the objects here are 1) not art, because they do not refer to an oeuvre, but 2) they are art because they look like art, they're presented as art and, potentially, could be sold.⁷

This (hilarious) statement comes from the review of a show curated by Rosemary Trockel which solicited works of art for an exhibition of works of art by critics -- those who do not usually make art. What interests me in it is the notion that the individual work is only justified -- authorised -- as art in its relation to an oeuvre: without an oeuvre behind it, the individual work, however fine, *cannot* be art. If the presentation of a large number of individual artworks *en masse*, provided they be the works of a solo artist, creates the oeuvre, so too it seems, according to a fundamental reciprocity, does the oeuvre create -- or at least authorise -- the individual artwork..

The 'definitive detachment', the much-vaunted discreteness of the artwork, is in this sense an illusion. The work is not art, and may not be art, unless it be part of an oeuvre. So to the Duchampian realisation that art is (a) what the artist declares to be art, and (b) what is in art galleries, and called art by a spectator, we may now add (c) -- art is that which partakes of an oeuvre. Such rare cases as those where but one work of master survives are no exception: in such cases the oeuvre must at all costs be *imagined* as existing, and futher items from it are desparately sought. The work *must* have a body laced about it. Such is the art historian's task, to discover -- or, in the archaic sense of the word 'discover', to *invent* -- this lacy body...

⁷ Manfred Hermes, 'Headbirths in Cologne', *Artscribe*, May 1990, p. 15.