

Bugs in the grid

We come now to the oddest interference of all: when a frog, or a fish, or a gull gets caught up in Killeen's grill. This we might call 'bugs in the grid', not only in the sense of a hemipterous insect infesting the grid, nor only in the sense of a virus or of a microphone concealed there; but also in the sense of a *defect* in the grid, a botheration of it and an annoyance. I mean something like a bug-eyed grid, fit to be put in the bug house.

Three modestly small examples, first...

An untitled drawing of 31 December 1975, [fig. 128] shows a black and white bug inserted into a black grid of triangulated horizontal rectangles, which is itself laid over a red grid of triangulated vertical rectangles. The black grid tactfully desists to allow the bug the space of its own little square. An untitled drawing of 1 January 1976 [fig. 129] has a fish floating over a red and yellow grid of triangulated horizontal rectangles. Another untitled drawing, of 2 January 1976, [fig. 130] floats a fish and a bug over blue and yellow grid of triangulated horizontal rectangles. In its blue triangles are those white organic shapes I call clouds.

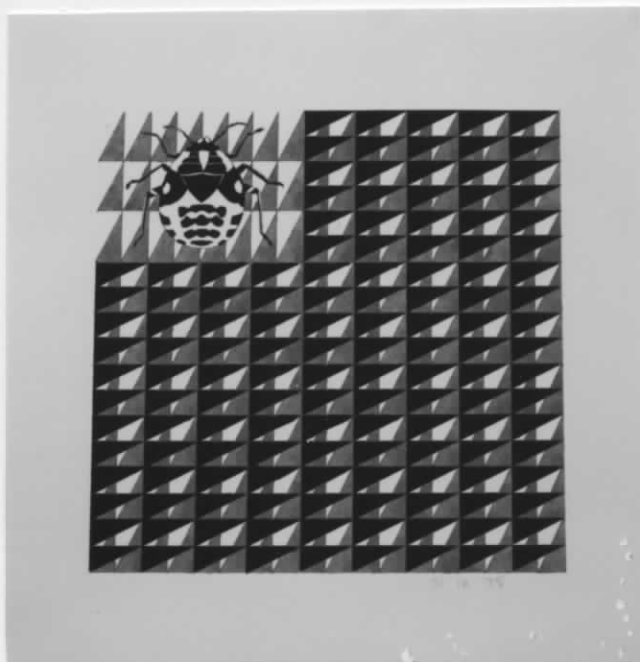


fig. 128. Untitled, 31 December 1975



fig. 129. Untitled drawing, 1 January 1976

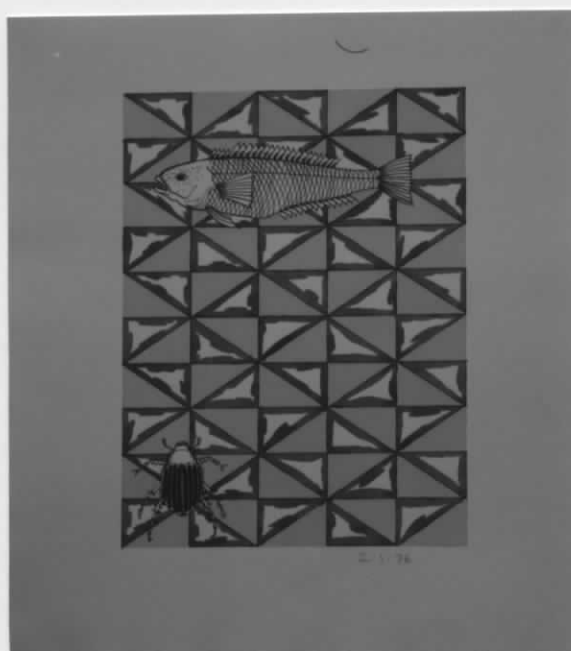


fig. 130. Untitled drawing, 2 January 1976

So much for drawings. *'Bug on a grid'*, of February 1976, [fig. 131] an acrylic on canvas, has a red and white triangulated grid formed by diagonally bisected squares, with a bug on white swathe running diagonally through. *Frogshooter*, March 1976, [fig. 132] the best known example, since it was the winner of the Benson and Hedges Art Award in 1976, and is owned by the Auckland City Art Gallery, has, inserted into its double layered grid, a tiny frog, a gull, a fish, a beetle, a wasp, a zebra, and a plant stem in section. It is as though these things have hopped, swum, drifted or flown into the intermeshed grills of a moving machine. Here, the

'abstract' is interfered with by the 'figurative'; the 'geometric' is interfered with by the 'organic': there is a complete collision of codes.

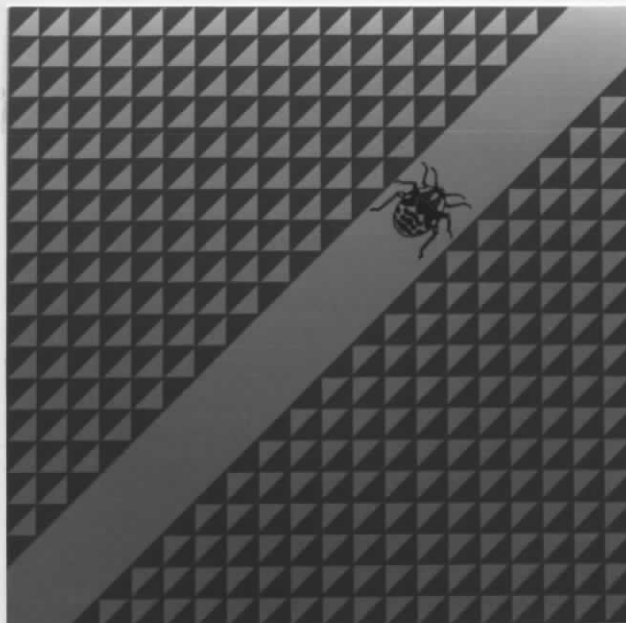


fig. 131. 'Bug on a grid', February 1976

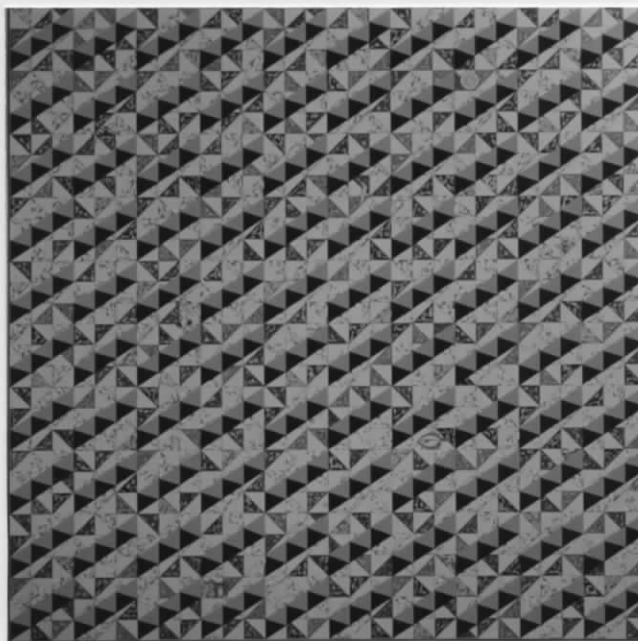


fig. 132. 'Frogshooter', March 1976

Such an impropriety, such a misbehaviour with the grid, such a mixing in of the figurative with the abstract, is perhaps in part a matter of geographic location. Modernism, it might be said, comes to Killeen very largely as something from *without*, from 'overseas' -- and so, perhaps, it is something that may be *used* -- played with, *differently*. So Killeen may treat the incoming grid *irresponsibly*, as it

were, improperly, or in an eccentric manner. 'The word Frogshooter', so the artist has commented, 'was used by my grandfather for a person who was a bit dodgy or a bit of a character'.¹ Certainly, Killeen's is a treatment of the grid which is careless of the grid's proprieties.

It is interesting in this regard that Killeen will later publish a statement which relates a geographic peripherality to an 'impure' modernism. He will speak of the Uruguayan painter, Joaquin Torres-Garcia (1874-1949) as an artist who began 'far from the centre' -- and this in the context of his own series *Joaquin's fish*, named after Joaquin Torres-Garcia, in which images overlay the geometry of a 'purist, essentialist... modernism'. [fig. 133]



fig. 133. Joaquin Torres-Garcia, *Fish*, 1932

Joaquin Torres-Garcia was a very image orientated artist who began life a long way from the centre of what was then a modernist attitude to art, and who found a way of dealing with his situation in a way that parallels the difficulties of living and working in the Pacific. He was an 'impure' modernist, in that he did not adhere strictly to the code. I see these paintings as overlaying the purist, essentialist, male ideas of modernism with other imagery.

(Richard Killeen, August 1989)²

¹ Killeen, comment written on a draft m.s. for the present chapter.

² Killeen, 'Notes about some of the issues in the paintings', in Richard Killeen and Francis Pound, *Richard Killeen: Lessons in Lightness*, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, 1989, p. 5. In 1974 Killeen bought Daniel Robbins' *Joaquin Torres-Garcia*, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1970, plates 26 and 81 of which provided him with the fish of his homage to Torres-Garcia, in a group of works entitled *Joaquin's fish*, 1989.

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Not, of course, that working in a geographic 'periphery' *necessarily* makes for 'impurity'. There were a number of New Zealand painters working in a much 'purer' fashion with the grid than Killeen in the years just before he first took it up -- Gordon Walters, Milan Mrkusich, Don Peebles, Ray Thorburn and Geoff Thornley, for instance, and, in the years just after Killeen began with it, Robert McLeod, Ian Scott, John Hurrell, Allen Maddox and Mervyn Williams. (Thornley had been involved with the grid from as early as 1967, and stayed faithful to it until 1973.) So, even here, at the the furthest provincial periphery to modernism, Killeen's molestation of the grid might lead to a certain alienation, in shocking his peers who were adherents of the modernist grid.

the auckland diary 9/4/74
by michael brett



TALK TIME (from left): GORDON WALTERS, RICHARD KILLEEN, GEOFF THORNLEY, MILAN MRKUSICH, IAN SCOTT and PETAR VULETIC (on floor).

Abstracts come in from the cold

fig. 134

The grid, it should be remembered, told in New Zealand as a heresy against the Nationalist movement, for which landscape was all. Painters of the Petar Vuletic stable, of which Killeen was one, saw themselves -- and with good reason -- as an embattled minority, as put out in the cold by the Nationalists' ruling power.

[fig. 134] For public gallery directors, for officials of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, and for most curators and critics -- that is, for nearly all art institutional powers -- the grid was 'cold' and 'intellectual'. And -- this was the most pejorative and damaging term of all -- it was 'internationalist'. To paint a pure modernist grid in New Zealand was, therefore, as if to refuse an oath of allegiance, to refuse the Nationalist hegemony: it was liable to be read as a kind of betrayal of one's country.

In these somewhat embattled circumstances, what Killeen did with the grid seemed to his friend Ian Scott, and perhaps to those other adherents of the grid, something of a perversion of the modern, and even kind of betrayal of allegiance. Thus, by his gestures of 'irresponsibility', Killeen might now find himself almost as alienated from the New Zealand modernist proper as he was from the New Zealand regionalist, that central figure of New Zealand art, that anti-modernist figure, with whom he had long severed all ties.

Nor can it have helped Killeen's relations with his peers when a reviewer enthusiastically saw Killeen's introduction of figurative elements to grids as an attack on the 'dogmatic conventions' of formal abstraction.

... in a witty and snook-cocking fashion Killeen broke all the rules and shibboleths governing what was allowable within a formal abstract painting. Within an immaculate geometric grid structure, he did the unheard of and introduced figurative elements into the picture plane.³

Killeen's alienation was, in a sense, to be permanent. Significantly, works like his *Frogshooter* were excluded from *The Grid*, a major Auckland City Art Gallery show of 1983, which dealt with grids as they appeared in New Zealand in the 1970s and early 1980s, and which happily included such Killeen's grids as *had* kept their purity. ("In accordance with the non-figurative theme of this exhibition", so the curator wrote, "it has been decided to exclude Killeen's 'Frogshooter' type paintings".)⁴ One can easily understand the curator's difficulty. *Frogshooter* is an extraordinary oddity, coming as it does a whole decade before the notorious

³ Neil Rowe, *Evening Post*, 2 October 1980.

⁴ Andrew Bogle, *THE GRID: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p. 12.

insertion of a bird and rosette into the abstractions of the American post-modernist, Bleckman. Killeen's odd mixes were never quite to fit.

It would perhaps be amusing to imagine that, with the current success of American 'Neo-Geo', had Killeen been a New York painter, he might have made an international reputation and career out of paintings like '*Bug on a grid*', and *Bug on a grid* might now be known to the world as prophetic, as antecedent to painters like Bleckman. But such fantasy would be a pointless over-reaching, if indeed the condition of Killeen's eccentricity in mixing the figurative into his grids is in some part, as I have suggested, a *geographic* ec-centricity, a peripherality in relation to such modernist centres as New York. Such a perversion of the modernist grid as Killeen's was hardly possible in the centres themselves until the modernist time was more clearly over: until a whole *period* -- the post-modern -- found itself in a condition of ec-centricity in relation to modernism.

Killeen's geographic position perhaps means that his commitment to high modernism was never as absolute as the commitment at the modernist centres themselves. Often, such modernism as came to New Zealand was a kind of modernism in translation, a modernism somewhat estranged, as it was in McCahon's work, for instance, where Rothko and Newman are, as it were, put to work on the land, translated into the Nationalists' traditional landscape genre. It was perhaps this condition of estrangement from modernism which allowed Killeen to make works so radically novel, works which, while using the form of the grid, represent a kind of critique, or posed disbelief, in the grid, that Late Modernist form *par excellence*. It is a disbelief, or mockery which is perhaps as much ex-centric as eccentric, as much *ex-modernist* as *post-modernist* -- a critique from without.

You suggest that Killeen's rejection of the pure grid, and pure abstraction, might better be explained as a continued clinging to a pre-minimalist or pre-abstract position, as a refusal to abandon a realist sense of the sign. Yet, even if we were to prefer to see Killeen's rejection as made from a pre-minimalist and pre-abstract position, rather than from the position of a post-modernism which looks back or across to abstraction as an exhausted or insufficient practice, still: such a pre-High Modern position is *itself* typical of regionalist New Zealand, and of all painting practice far from the American or European modernist 'centre'. Killeen's rejection, even if this reading should be preferred, will remain as much ex-centric as eccentric -- a critique or refusal from without...