

Nature's revenge: crowding out the ground

If, as Rosalind Krauss has said, the grid is 'the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real', if it is 'what art looks like when it turns its back on nature',¹ then art, it seems, had better look to its back. Nature might be seeking revenge.

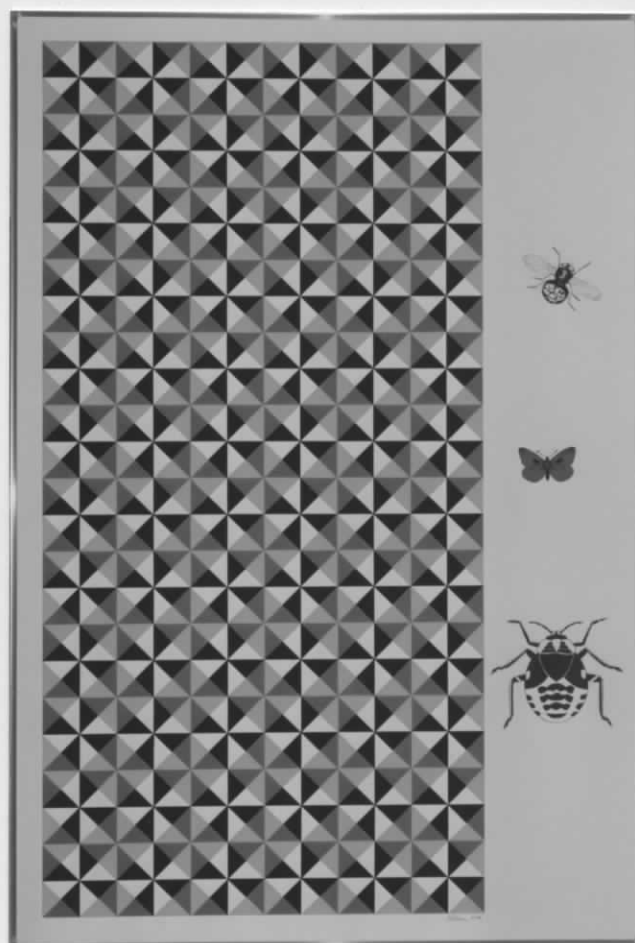


fig. 141. *Pea Beau*, May 1976

Already, in May, 1976, the flyspray of *Pea Beau* [fig. 141] had been insufficient to repel from the margins of the grid the butterfly, the bug and the fly -- they hover there, as if waiting a chance to invade. The same is so of the butterflies and bugs of *Once more with feeling*, June 1976. [fig. 136] Elsewhere, as we have seen, the occasional fish, bird, butterfly and bug had already got through to the heart of the grid. But now, in a series of works in October 1977, it might seem that Nature, so largely excluded from the grids of 1975 and 1976, has

¹ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Grid', *October* no. 9, 1979, p. 51.

been furiously breeding somewhere in secret, and has returned, in plague proportions, in a veritable contagion, entirely to crowd the grid out.



Fig. 142. Untitled, 1977

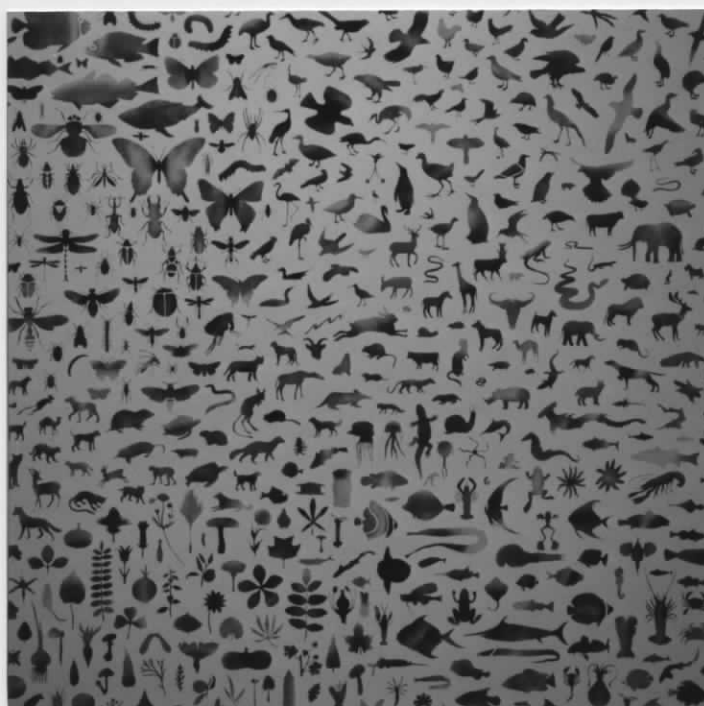


Fig. 143. Untitled, 1977

In this series made between August and December 1977, hundreds of insects, plants, animals, birds, fish, are stencilled over the sand strewn

aluminium or paper ground.² These paintings and drawings are like a sandpit, then, filled to the brim with hobnobbing beetles, butterflies, animals, leaves and fish -- here, the sinuous twist of a lizard's tail meets the taut wing of a soaring bird, and there it meets the serrated tail of the lobster.

Or to put it more fittingly, this series is like a series of botanical or zoological charts, in which each 'thing' has been deprived of its space, its size and its world. There is no space -- or there is only *the space of the object*, rather than the object in space. What I call 'the space of the object' is formed by posing things *as if* they occupied three dimensions -- by posing a flying bird, for example, in three quarter profile view. Such things may *displace* space, but they are not *surrounded* by it.

Nor is there any consistency in the occupancy of space. Insects, butterflies and leaves are presented front on, each flattened demonstratively out, as if pinned in a zoologist's collection case; while birds and fish tend to be in pure profile, the least space-creating and most diagrammatic of poses. Things are presented in their most diagrammatically revealing, in their most conceptualised and least 'natural' aspect, and are thus preserved from the changes and diversities of space, light and time. They are redolent of the setting board, or of the zoological illustration, rather than of any natural habitat.

Nor are any of the images modelled in a way which might convincingly suggest volume. They are either presented in pure, flat silhouette, or they are modulated rather than modelled -- banded with iridescent, rainbow-like colour, rather than circled with light and shade, so that they somewhat remain planar even when presented in three quarter view. What results is little pockets of space, intermittently pitting the flat and sandy ground.

Also symptomatic of the complete loss of a continuous space as the medium of things is that here the butterfly may be as large as the elephant. There is no ambient medium in which the relative sizes of things might survive; nor, therefore, can quantities abide here by the rule of diminution in inverse ratio to their distance from the observing eye.

² The sand is added to the white paint of the ground to help the stencils adhere. There are a number of exceptions: one work of the series has a ground of unpainted ply; two are on muslin over board; two are on naked aluminium.



Fig. 144. Untitled, August 1977



Fig. 145. Untitled, August 1977

A number of ways are tried of relating the images. Most commonly -- and most successfully, perhaps, and certainly most like to the cut-outs -- they are each placed a little apart, and set on a pure white sand or pure aluminium ground. [figs. 142 & 143] Or, the stencilled images, each thinly painted, are laid densely one over the other, producing a barely legible mesh of transparencies overlapped, like wet leaves pasted one over another in a mush of images, which

layering results in a nocturnal, bluish violet tonality.³ (Krauss's nice formula might be amended: here, it is *images of the real* which 'crowd out the dimensions of the real'.) [figs. 144 & 145] Though most of the images are so all-over as to be cropped at the painting's edge, occasionally they are instead clustered at the centre, leaving white ground all around. In one case, densely overlaid images stop just short of the edge, creating a sort of square white frame. Occasionally the ground consists of hazy irregular sprays, and hazy triangles and ovals.

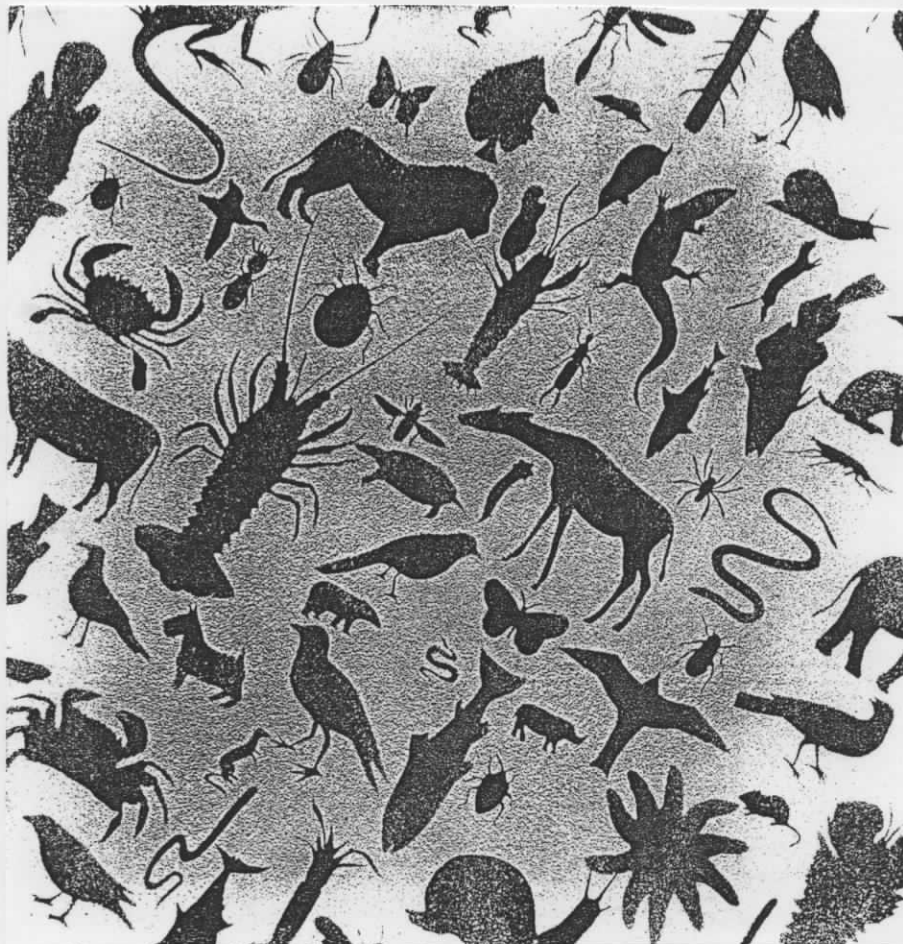


Fig. 146. Untitled, 21 October 1977

The 'backgrounds' -- or second planes -- of the works on paper are much more various than in the works on aluminium or ply, where they tend to remain as untouched ground: a fern and Maori fish hook pattern, for instance; a fish hook and tear drop pattern; a multi-coloured haze; a mossy toned pattern of various leaves; a maple leaf pattern; a hazy spiral; hazy swirls of the brush; a

³ Michael Dunn, in a review published in 1978, rightly compared these transparent overlays to those in 'recent Rauschenberg collages'. (Michael Dunn, 'Richard Killeen: New Paintings 1978', *Art New Zealand* no. 10, Winter 1978, p. 18.)

central glow of orange, with a softer yellow surround. There are various attempts, too, in the drawings, to order the play of images into types -- sea creatures in black, for instance, and land creatures in red; or butterflies and insects only; and various attempts at imposing a pattern on the diversity of things -- a collection of birds, animals and insects may, for instance, all be placed on the diagonal.

The works come in three sizes. The largest are 1180 mm x 1180 mm. aluminium; there is an intermediate size of 580 mm x 580 mm. aluminium; and there are small drawings on sand over paper, whose painted surface is 500 x 500 mm.. In the largest works, [fig. 143] the effect is of a huge multiplicity of small shapes over a sandy ground, a diversity barely readable from any distance, in which each stencilled part reads as merely a mark in an all-over pattern. Only at close hand may one easily discover the lobster or fly. The compositional principle here is that of a democracy of parts, in which all parts are equal -- it might well be compared, in all but its figuration, to the all-over mesh of a Stella or Pollock, which doubtless is its ultimate 'source'.

But this is a democracy, it may be, in which each part is so reduced as to be equally powerless as an image. Killeen has said of the 'Birds and Beasts on Sand' series that: 'it didn't work. It tended to look like wallpaper'.⁴ Perhaps he underestimates the bright charm, the sheer happiness, of its diverse arrays. In any case, of the whole series, Killeen chose to make public only a few drawings.⁵ In the drawings, [fig. 146] since the same stencils are used as in the paintings, the proportion of images is relatively large in relation to the whole, and the number of images is relatively reduced, so that their individuality is not drowned, as it is in the larger paintings, in all-over pattern. The proportion of the part to the whole established here is much as in the cut-outs to come. In fact, some of the stencil images *were* used in the first cut-outs, where they are enlarged onto the aluminium, and their surrounding ground cut away.

This series of birds and beasts establishes much of the imagery of the first cut-outs. Yet Killeen immediately abandons it, for some further and final work

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

⁵ These drawings, which certainly included *Those who can fly and those who can't*, October 1977; *Flying insects and animals*, October 1977; *Untitled (with animals)*, October 1977; and *Birds and fish*, October 1977, were available for sale at the Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, in 1979. It is unclear whether they were actually exhibited with Killeen's Bosshard exhibition of cut-outs, 30 April - 12 May 1979, or whether they were merely works held in stock.

with the grid. According to the 'logic' of development, if there was such a logic to the abrupt abutments of Killeen's various series, the cut-outs should certainly come next. Symptomatically, before I began this study, I had *remembered* the cut-outs as coming next -- the mind had ordered them, during an intervening decade, according to the dictates of the standard concept of 'development' and 'maturation', forgetting, under the pressure of that convention, that Killeen's oeuvre does not so much develop as operate by abrupt and catastrophic displacements, by sudden abandonments and returns...

There are several paintings which seem to come half way, in type if not in date, between the birds and beasts on sand on aluminium, and the following series -- that of the grids on aluminium. These works, too, do not come where they 'ought'. An untitled work of December 1977, for instance, has black silhouettes of fish, animals and insects scattered over the naked aluminium ground. [fig. 147] The aluminium has received a high polish, so that it appears, at least in some lights and in some angles of view, to be no more than a dazzling sheen against which the birds and beasts are cut out by their matte black: at such moments the ground attains to a nearly complete immateriality, and we seem extraordinarily close to the first cut-outs themselves.

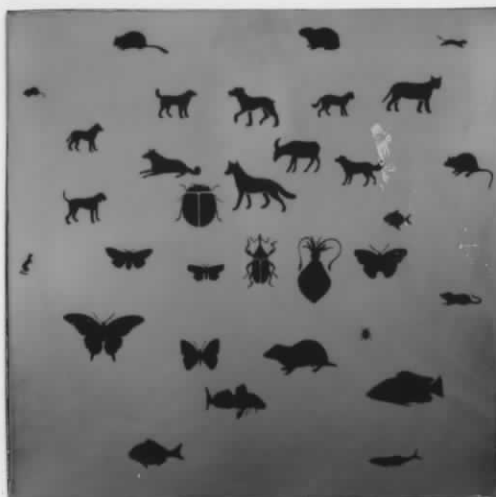


Fig. 147. Untitled, December 1977

It is characteristic of Killeenian wit that one of the three Birds and Beasts on Sand works he chose to make public should be entitled *Those who can fly and those who can't*, and that its flightless creatures should include the New Zealand national emblem, the Kiwi, a flightless and nocturnal bird, shown, head down, pecking away where there there can never be any grub to be found. Yet, if these images of Nature are about to be crowded out again by the grid, we might

well imagine them as all flying away, even those who on the face of it can't, since they or their offspring will, within nine months, re-emerge in the cut-outs themselves.