

## Meanings of the grid

What is connoted by the grid's form? If Killeen's colours may be called an assertion of artifice against Nature, so too may the very form of the grid.

In the best analysis I know of the modernist grid, that of Rosalind Krauss,<sup>1</sup> the grid is the form in which painting speaks exclusively -- in the very act of exclusion -- only of itself. It is the time when painting declares itself -- in this very exclusivity -- modern.

*There are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal. In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricised, ordered, it is anti-natural, unreal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its organisation, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree.*

*In the temporal dimension, the grid is an emblem of modernity by being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one... By 'discovering' the grid, Cubism, de Stijl, Mondrian, Malevich... landed in a place that was out of reach of everything that went before. Which is to say, they landed in the present, and everything else was declared to be the past.*

*(Rosalind Krauss, 'The Grid')<sup>2</sup>*

Killeen's grids accede, no doubt, to something of the prestige and power of the grid as modernity's sign, a sign which refuses at once Nature and the past. Yet, at the same time, they are far from resolute in their refusal of the world outside their frame; and nor do they accede to the the alleged universality, the

<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'The Grid', *October* no. 9, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

placelessness, of the modernist grid. Killeen's grids happily accept that they may remind us of things in the world -- they *encourage* us to be so reminded; and they sometimes assert themselves as connoting a specificity at once of place and of race.

For instance: *Ensign; Blue Peter; Crest; Standard; Blue cross*: flags, pennants, and signs. *Rising sun; Banana split; Rising sun; Land and sea*: foods, Nature, and Landscape. *At Last a happy, normal painting*: psychology and a mental state by which the requisite suffering at once of the New Zealand Nationalist and of the expressionist is refused.<sup>3</sup> And: *Positive and Polynesian; Pacific ply; My tribe; Polynesian green; Tukutuku*: the grid as it appears in a culture other than that of the modernist culture of the West, a culture in a sense closer to home. Such titles, in so speaking of things outside of the painting itself, offer something different from the silent spread of the modernist grid, and something other than the silence of the modernist title.

*The grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech.*

(Rosalind Krauss, 'The Grid')<sup>4</sup>

Killeen's grids seem rather to *welcome* the intrusion of speech. This is made clear in their titles -- they are hardly the speech-silencing titles of a pure high modernist art. It is at once a nice irony, and a sign of the strange *noisiness* of Killeen's grids, that they should so precisely contradict the silence of the grid in Krauss's analysis.

*This silence is not due simply to the extreme effectiveness of the grid as a barricade against speech, but to the protectiveness of its mesh against all intrusion from outside. No echo of footsteps in empty rooms, no scream of birds across open skies, no rush of*

<sup>3</sup> For the suffering required of Nationalist art and letters, see my 'Solitude, Suffering, Silence, and the Invention of New Zealand', *Interstices*, 1991, pp. 61-83; and the chapter of that title in my forthcoming *The Invention of New Zealand: a Nationalist Mythology of Landscape*.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Krauss, op. cit., p. 51.

*distant water -- for the grid has collapsed the spatiality of nature onto the bounded surface of a purely cultural object.*<sup>5</sup>

How curious that it should be precisely the scream of the bird that we *do* hear in Killeen's grid (*Frogshooter*); that what we should see is a fish -- or a frog -- out of water as it were, a bug caught in Killeen's grill...

Perhaps such 'impurities' are in some part a function, as I have suggested, of Killeen's geographic location -- in New Zealand, a place far from the centres of modernist art. Certainly, there is typically an 'impurity' in New Zealand's versions of the modernist -- if 'impurity' can be taken in a substantive and unpejorative sense. One might think again of McCahon, with his constant fear that his paintings were becoming 'too abstract', his constant return to landscape and to biblical texts.

The pure high modernist title is careful to act only as a label, to refer to nothing outside of the painting itself, or outside of the series to which the painting belongs -- it is resolute to refuse the intrusion of speech, and the world to which speech might refer. No illustration of text is allowed. So, the pure modernist title is typically a number, or the name of one of the colours of the painting -- *Painting Blue*, say, or *Painting 222*. Or, the modernist title speaks only of its refusal to speak, as in that most modernist of titles, *Untitled*.

Killeen's titles, however, have never been assertively formalist. No titles like *Painting Blue*, or *Painting 222*, no proclamation of painting's autonomy such as we might see, say, in the paintings of Milan Mrkusich. There is everywhere asserted, rather, the flight of the mind to regions outside the material facts of colour and form, to the endless realms of connotation. If the mind is carried away by colour, by paint, it is carried away, in the end, from paint. Paint is asserted not as a signified (as in the pure modernist title) but as a signifier.

What the pure modernist title had attempted, much as the modernist grid had attempted, was closure of painting to verbal meaning, a repression, a castration of meaning; and an ascension, consequently, to the (impossible) realms of pure visuality. What Killeen's titles assert, on the contrary, is a

---

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986, p. 158.

constant slippage of the visual into the verbal, their constant collision, and constant interruption of each other, their mutual meddling and molestation. What could be weirder than a frog hopping over the modernist grid, or a gull flying through it? Killeen's titles act much like the notorious frog of *Frogshooter*: they overlay the essentialist ideals of modernism with *other* imagery.

And yet, there *is* in the modernist grid much which might answer to Killeen's long-standing concerns. For instance (in Krauss's words): 'its lack of hierarchy, of centre, of inflection', which emphasise 'not only its anti-referential character, but -- more importantly -- its hostility to narrative'.<sup>6</sup> It was doubtless these conveniences, especially, which propelled Killeen towards the grid. Hierarchy, centre, narrative -- they represented all that Killeen's painting had for so long, and in such a diversity of ways, tried to refuse. It was -- as ever -- a 'democratic' and non-narrative composition Killeen's painting was after.

There is also connoted by Killeen's grids something not allowed for in Krauss's analysis, which proffers only a grid of high seriousness -- a *heavy* grid, in the 60s and 70s vernacular meaning of 'heavy'. There is also the grid of pattern, as used by the American pattern painters of the 1970s, especially those associated with the Holly Solomon Gallery, New York: an assertion of the decorative, of patterns in fabrics, of the value of the light.

Killeen's titles like *Blue Peter*, *Ensign*, and *Crest*, might well connote the use of triangulated grids in cloths. Such titles as *Bathroom*, *Hall*, and *Tablecloth* connote the grid's use in daily, domestic life. American pattern painting, like Killeen's, was noisy with pattern in its popular usage: such pattern painting as Robert Kushner's or Miriam Schapiro's, with its bright collage of patterned fabrics, proffered a repetition with rather different connotations from the purported silence of the high modernist grid. It is no accident that Killeen, in the 'Chronology' he provides for his exhibition catalogues, should twice refer to his grids as 'pattern painting',<sup>7</sup> and that earlier, in an interview for the catalogue to the Auckland city Art Gallery's show, *The Grid*, he expressed doubts as to whether his grids were properly grids at all -- grids suited, that is, to the high modernist sense the show defined.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Killeen, 'Chronology', first published in Francis Pound and Richard Killeen, *Richard Killeen: Lessons in Lightness*, (catalogue), Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, 1989, p. 6.

*I think what I was doing was more pattern painting perhaps than grid painting. Sometimes the paintings are only grids because they have got a repeating motif.<sup>8</sup>*

If we see Killeen from the angle of pattern painting, so called, the intrusion of the figurative into his grids might seem not quite so bizarre.

---

<sup>8</sup> Killeen, in Andrew Bogle, *The Grid, Lattice and Network*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p. 12.