

Killeen and Walters

*Gordon Walters & Anna stay for his
retrospective April 5th Tuesday to Saturday
April 9th 1983....*

*Show stunning best show they have ever had.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 52)*

In the 'Chronology' written by Killeen for his *Lessons in Lightness* catalogue, 1989, the first entry for the year 1970 reads: 'Travels to Wellington with Ian Scott. Meets Gordon Walters for the first time'.¹ In other words, in this demonstrative occasion of professional self-presentation and self-construction, the 'chronology' or auto-biography, Killeen makes his meeting with Walters of some moment. It was, as it turned out, the beginning of an association which has lasted to this day -- an intimacy at once professional and personal. Professionally, Killeen was to remain in contact with Walters: first, through that embattled group of abstractionists, of whom Walters was one, represented by Petar Vuletic at the Petar/James Gallery, Auckland (Killeen had solo shows there in 1972, 1973 and 1974, and took part with Walters in the gallery's first exhibition, a group show in 1972); through Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington (where Killeen had his first solo show in 1975, and where he continues to show); and through the Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland (where he had his first solo show in 1985, and where also he continues to show). [fig. 134]

Enough of these dutiful details. It is the relation of Walters' and Killeen's *works* which counts, not that crossing, conventionally required though it may be in art historical narration, of biographical trajectories. Really, it need be of no matter at all to the works that their makers have met. I am concerned with how Killeen's and Walters' *works* speak one to the other. I am concerned, here, with Killeen's works in as much as they constitute a 'reading' of Walters.

If once, in Killeen's earliest paintings, we had cause to speak of a reading and critique of McCahon, we come now to the second of the two major New Zealand painters that Killeen, as it were, 'takes on' -- or takes on board. Here, Killeen's work 'deliberately offers itself' to Walters' work, and so 'places itself in

¹ Killeen, 'Chronology', in Richard Killeen and Francis Pound, *Lessons in Lightness*, Ray Hughes Gallery, 1989, and in Killeen and Pound, *Richard Killeen: Sampler 1967-1990*, Workshop Press, Auckland, 1990, p. 15.

its own tradition by throwing a cordon around a corpus of precursive work ... to which it offers itself as a containing vessel or palimpsest.² As with his approach to McCahon, Killeen's approach to Walters is a matter at once of a permanent and positive learning and sharing, and of critique and self-definition in the face of the different other. Here, too, even as Killeen opens himself to Walters, he differentiates himself in the very act of engagement. (Ultimately, the difference between Killeen and Walters will be that of the post-modern from the modern.)

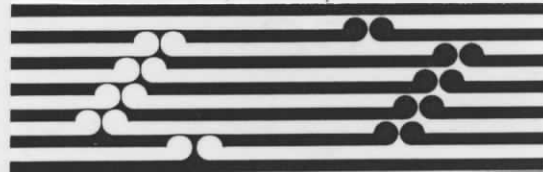


fig. 151. Gordon Walters, *Taraki*, 1982.

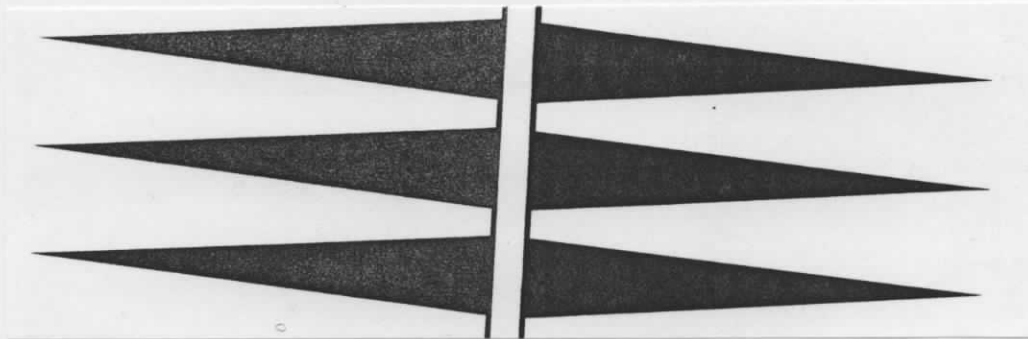


fig. 152. Killeen, *Three red spikes*, May 1974 (detail)

In innumerable paintings from the 70s until now, in various geometricising and primitivist moments, and in moments of an ambiguous relation of figure to ground, we may easily see what of Walters' work Killeen takes to himself. We might consider, for instance, the triangulated 'Polynesian' patterns and colours which border such Killeen's paintings of 1971 as *From here to the world*, [fig. 7] and *Battle for the mind*, and compare them to Walters' 'Polynesianism'. We might recall Killeen's Comb series, floating from mid 1973 through 1974, with its figure/ground ambiguities, and its innumerable variants on the same 'primitive' form; and we might recall such of Killeen's Grids on the ground as *Tukutuku*, 1974, whose title clearly points to the geometrics of *tukutuku* -- woven flax panels in the Maori meeting house. In the Combs and the Grids, Walters' Koru series clearly finds an answering hark. [figs. 151 & 152]

² Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire*, p. 35.

In Killeen's Combs and Grids, as in Walters' Koru series, there is a reciprocal contamination of figure and ground, so that the painting is at once made up and undone by 'the space it sets off by setting itself forth'. If one might say of the relation of Walters' black 'figure' to its white 'ground', that it 'gives birth to it and nourishes it in the very act of separating from it',³ the same might be said of Killeen's Grids of 1974.

If colour is material and white is emptiness, what remains of the object (the painting)? An architectural structure that lets itself be penetrated by the space outside it, that is destroyed as an object by the space in which it presents and inscribes itself, by the space it sets off by setting itself forth -- a structure, in short, that loses its autonomy through the differential order that governs its situation. (Marcelin Pleynet, 'Mondrian Twenty Five Years Later')⁴

Fittingly, Pleynet here describes Mondrian, who had offered Walters much, and I use Pleynet to describe both Walters and Killeen.

Yet one must not ignore the differences. Already in the Combs, and in the Grids on the ground, the white *surrounds*, as never in Walters, and the figure, tilted awry, floats free, where Walters would lock it to ground. And Killeen in his cut-outs will carry the destruction of the object (the painting) far further than either Mondrian or Walters, since his painting will be *literally* fissured; it will be so penetrated by the white space in which it presents itself, that it is literally undone as a unitary object.

Killeen will realise materially, one might say, what in Walters' is 'merely' a pictorial *metaphor* of penetration, fissuring and rupture by whiteness; his cut-outs will go so far in refusing pictorial autonomy that they will be *literally* invaded by the real space of the world. So nearly complete a dissolution was hardly possible, of course, for that modernist aesthetic to which Walters subscribes -- an aesthetic, ultimately, of unity, even if that unity is somewhat fissured. Such an extremity of fragmentation is possible only in Killeen's post-modern.

³ Marcelin Pleynet, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁴ Marcelin Pleynet, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

In Killeen's Combs and Grids, just as in Walters' Koru, there is the 'tendency, sequentially to decline (in the grammatical sense) a given visual idea. This diachronic development leads him to confront, within the economy of the series, a constant element, with one or more variations'.⁵ With Killeen's Combs and the Grids, as with Walters' Koru, and as with the circular Laces of Killeen's next series to come, each painting is a discontinuous term in an indefinite series, repeating itself through serial refractions.

You object -- and rightly -- that Killeen could have learned this seriality from many a painter, from say Monet's Cathedral Series on. From McCahon's Waterfalls. From contemporary American practice. From Yet seriality is not so marked with Killeen until the time of his close reading of Walters, whose Koru Series continued for some thirty years, from 1956 until 1986.

There is too in all these Killeens, and right through to Killeen's early cut-outs of 1978, 1979 and 1980, the same refusal as we may see throughout Walters - - the refusal of any too vivid agitation of paint. No *harassment*, no *distressing*, no *mortification* of surface. No fake dirtying of the ground, as Killeen says. There is a denial of the self-constituting mark of the artist's hand, a refusal of the brushmark, that stock sign of expressivity, a refusal to proffer, and to dramatise, the conventional signs of an impassioned artistic self. There is an assertion, rather, of a certain impersonality. That refusal of an asserted and dramatised self, that very estrangement of mark from self, must have been for Killeen one of Walters' finest amenities.

In Killeen's grids on aluminium, for instance, and in the early cut-outs, the high precision, the hard edgedness, the refusal of all marks of the hand, will recall, for the New Zealand viewer, the same in Walters, even if for the American viewer it would be say Ellsworth Kelly they brought to mind.

There *are*, of course, significant differences between Walters and Killeen, even within the similarities. That complete symmetry, for example, which Killeen introduces in the grids on aluminium, an 'American' symmetry, is in contrast to Walters' persistently 'European' asymmetry. This is the symmetry introduced to Western high art by such Americans as Stella and Judd, following

⁵ Jean Clay, 'Ointments, Makeup, Pollen', *October* 27, Winter 1983, p. 7.

after Pollock's non relational composition -- that 'all-over' effect which radically refuses relational composition, considered by Stella and Judd to be Old World.

Also, Killeen's colours are of a poppish and 'commercial' brightness seldom allowed by Walters, but perfectly allowable to the generation of Stella and Judd, and to the Pop generation which coincided with them and followed after. And, whereas Walters denies the hand only by *using* the hand, in an assiduous, painstaking and self-abnegatory labour of the brush, in obedience to what I can only call an *ethic* of labour and self denial, Killeen happily accepts the labour-saving devices of spray gun and tape -- an industrialising art technology which also has its precedents in Americans like Stella and Judd.

Apart from the grids on aluminium, the cut-outs of 1978, 1979, and 1980 are where Killeen will come visually closest to Walters -- and this despite their manifest and crucial differences. In both Walters and the early cut-outs, there is a certain asceticism of colour -- a restriction of the number of colours in any given work, a sumptuous austerity,⁶ even if Killeen's colour is consistently brighter. And with Walters, as with Killeen at this stage, each colour is presented as an absolute flatness -- as silhouette, and as sign. With both, there is an absolute clarity -- the precision, and unmitigated sharpness, of an unremitting and unflinching gaze.

The differences, perhaps, are so evident as hardly to need pointing out. Most obviously, all of Killeen's cut-outs include the 'figurative', whereas Walters' paintings are 'abstract', and have been from the 1950s on. For Killeen, in a post-modernist time, the modernist search for purity, for pictorial autonomy, for an art of 'pure relations',⁷ is no longer plausible. For Killeen, abstraction, like figuration, is 'simply' an element in an available language of signs -- both are a convention, both part of the play of pictorial speech, both carry meaning. There seems to Killeen, in the last resort, to be no intrinsic difference between the 'abstract' and the 'figurative' -- Walters' 'cross' is the sign of a cross, as his 'square' is the sign of the square: Killeen's 'bat' is but the sign of a bat, quite as abstract as frontal and flat, in fact, as that 'square'.

⁶ I take the phrase 'sumptuous austerity', improving it perhaps in memory, from Richard Wollheim's description of himself as a child in the back of his parents' car, feasting inwardly on the 'sumptuously austere canvases of Poussin', which he has just seen for the first time. Richard Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1974, Preface, unpaginated.

⁷ C.f. Gordon Walters: 'My work is an investigation of positive/negative relationships within a deliberately limited range of forms. The forms I use have no descriptive value in themselves and are used solely to demonstrate relations.' Quoted by Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p. 124.

Perhaps the most significant thing Killeen learns from Walters is how to combine high modernism with ethnology -- high modernism with a subject matter. One might further consider, then -- while borrowing some Killeen titles -- the *Positive and Polynesian* or *My tribe* aspects of Killeen's triangulated grids of 1978. Killeen's *Tribal colours*, February, 1978, and *Polynesian green* might also be brought into play; while *Integration*, March 1978, and *Assimilation*, April 1978, might be regarded as an ironic remark of the worst possible reading of Killeenian race relations, and this despite the perpetual and restless struggle between the darks and the lights, and between 'figure' and 'ground' -- a struggle in which neither gains superiority, and neither cancels the other, and in which unassimilated difference is always preserved.⁸

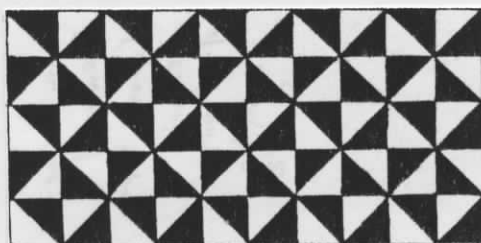


fig. 153. Ruth Greiner, drawing after Samoan tapa design

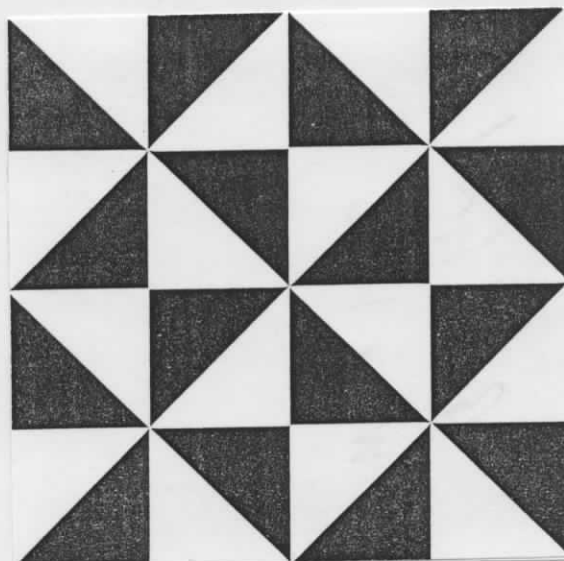


fig. 154. *Black grid*, March 1978

It says a lot of Killeen's relation to Walters that a *Drawing of a Samoan tapa design*, [fig. 153] which Michael Dunn reproduces as a source for *Gordon*

⁸ For an interesting and suggestive reading of Walters' black and white as an allegory of race, see Tony Green, 'A Door Ajar: Walters' Recent Paintings', *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition*, eds. James Ross & Laurence Simmons, 1989, pp. 109-110.

Walters,⁹ looks closer, in fact, to Killeen's triangulated grids on aluminium, [fig. 154] than to the paintings of Walters himself. And, it is telling, too, that a connection with Walters' use of Polynesian motifs was remarked by reviewers in the very year the grids on aluminium were painted. 'Like Gordon Walters' "Koru", so Neil Rowe wrote in 1978 of those grids, 'they are firmly rooted in Polynesia'.¹⁰

In fact, Rowe proffers a rich regionalist reading of *all* of Killeen's triangulations -- those of the Combs, of the Laces, and of the Grids -- and puts them all in the context of Walters' name:

Like Gordon Walter's Koru this device is firmly rooted in Polynesian art and in its various expressions retains an indigenous local quality. It can be read as a fern-leaf, as Maori or Melanesian artifact, as a garden rake, the blade of a shearer's handpiece, a lace doily, or, in its most recent, and according to the artist ultimate form, in a flag-like emblem of place. Any one of these immaculate geometric arrangements of triangles ... could happily serve as a surrogate New Zealand flag or as an emblem for any newly emerged Pacific nation. ¹¹

Suggestively enough, Walters' *koru*, like Killeen's triangulation, has been suggested as suitable for a national flag, and it is often used as a New Zealand emblem.¹² Both Walters and Killeen proffer a 'Polynesian' iconography which is readable not only as a form of modernist primitivism, but as a flag-like sign of place.

Reviews of Killeen's Comb series, too, commonly remarked a Walters connection.

Killeen's comb has now acquired the same authority as a singular image as the koru motif explored since the mid-'60s by Gordon Walters. Killeen has obviously learned from the older painter, and

⁹ Michael Dunn, *Gordon Walters*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Neil Rowe, 'A Mature Artist with a Formidable Talent', *Evening Post*, Wellington, 30 September 1978.

¹¹ Neil Rowe, 'Exhibitions', *Art New Zealand* 11, Spring, 1978, p. 60.

¹² For the koru flag and various corporate uses of the koru motif, see Robert Leonard, 'Appropriations', *AGMANZ*, Autumn 1987, pp. 9-11.

their works have much more in common than a single motif. Both share a Polynesian flavour to the image they use, though Killeen's is less obviously a regional device than Walters' koru. Both painters play on the ambiguities of space -- at one moment the ground becomes image and at the next the impact is reversed. In Killeen's case the effect is much like that of some rich early tapa designs.

(Hamish Keith, 'Combs to Make You Gasp', 1974)¹³

Similarly, James Ross, writing of the 'shift' between figure and ground in the Combs, once remarked: 'It is this involvement with figure-ground relationships which points the way to Killeen's interest in the pioneer abstractionist Gordon Walters. But the influence is totally assimilated.'¹⁴

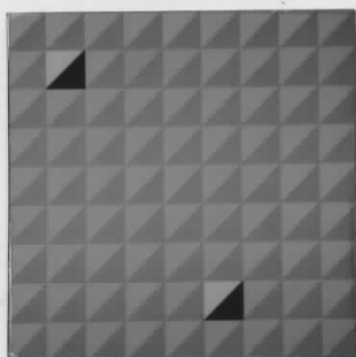


fig. 155. Gordon Walters, *Taniko*, 1977

The Walters' work which is closest in *look* to Killeen's grids is the somewhat atypical *Taniko*, 1977, [fig. 155] a straightforward triangulated grid, with two asymmetrical 'interruptions', one of a small number of Walters grid works painted between 1969 and 1977 -- works which Walters has referred to as 'studies', and which, with the exception of one small ink drawing, were not publicly shown until the Auckland City Art Gallery exhibition, *The Grid*, in 1983.

One might consider, too, all the primitivist and prehistoricist bits of iconography which will be scattered throughout Killeen's cut-outs between 1978 and 1990 -- the rock paintings, say, which are photocopied in the recent cut-outs,

¹³ Hamish Keith, 'Combs to Make You Gasp', News and Reviews', *Weekender*, 11 August 1974.

¹⁴ James Ross, *Sunday Herald*, 18 August 1974.

recalling, as they must, Walters' early use of Maori and aboriginal paintings on rock.¹⁵ [fig. 156] Four of Killeen's most splendid cut-outs of 1980, *Insects and primitives*, [plate 53] and the three versions of *Dreamtime*, [plates 48, 49, 50] spring immediately to mind.

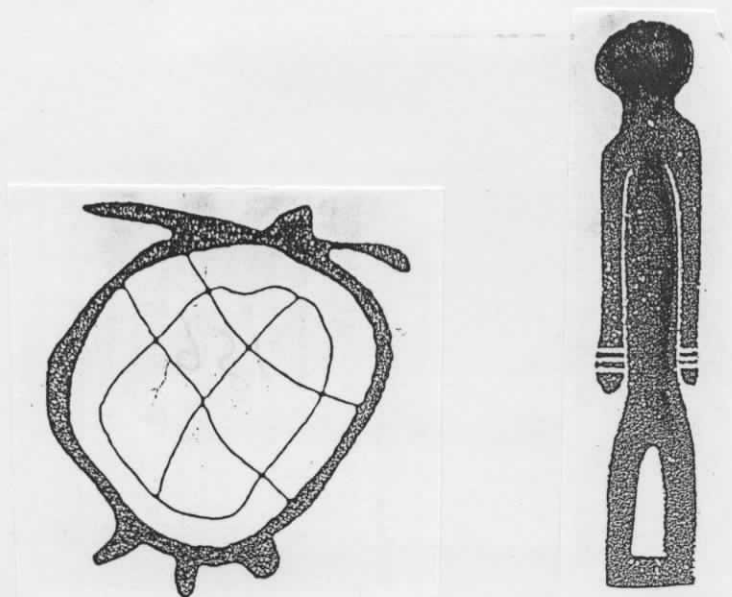


fig. 156. Images from *Domestic* (black and white), March 1987

The largest point is this. It is not just that Walter's *works* affect Killeen's: Killeen re-examines -- and uses -- some of Walters' attitudes, methods, and sources. Killeen *gets behind* Walters' works, as it were, so that he might learn not merely from their *appearance*, but from what we might call their *rationale* and their *method*.

What, it must be asked, do these various similarities to Walters, or 'recollections' of Walters, mean?

It is not that Killeen has come -- as if he were the victim of some spell -- *involuntarily* into the sway of Walters. It is not that he is *fascinated* by Walters. (Fascination, it might be remembered, is a word used especially of the serpent -- as of the serpents which entwine in Medusa's hair. Fascination is that which, by its look, or even by its very presence, deprives its victim of all power of escape, or of resistance: it is that which, one might say, petrifies its victim, turning him to stone. Its etymology, it might be recalled, refers us to spell -- *fascinum* spell.)

¹⁵ For Walters' use of Maori and Aboriginal paintings on rock, see Michael Dunn, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-12.

Nor is it simply that Killeen *reflects* a painter who precedes him, and who remains splendidly active -- as if Killeen were as reflectively passive here as a mirror, which just happened to be carried past Walters, as if by history's moving men, and which had no option then but to reflect him. (The discipline of art history tends to regard 'influence' as too passive a matter.)

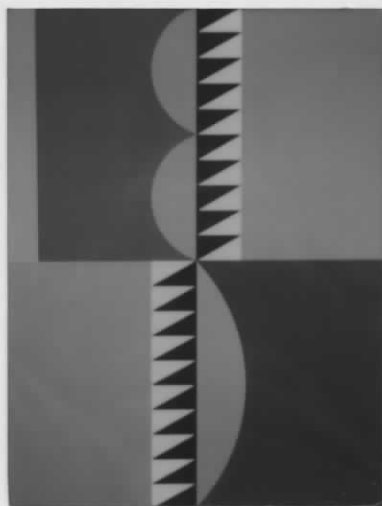


fig. 157. Gordon Walters, *Untitled*, 1976.



fig. 158. Gordon Walters, *Signs in black*, 1986.

Rather, perhaps, Killeen deliberately places himself for a moment in Walters' vicinity, or better, he takes what interests him from Walters even *without* placing himself in his vicinity. Certainly, he tends positively to favour and to seek out in Walters his own concerns -- and this despite or perhaps because of his own still more radical differences from him. (Symptomatically, several of the Walters drawings hanging in Killeen's house [fig. 157] have triangulated comb motifs whose forms clearly respond to Killeen's own combs and triangulated grids -- if it is 'influence' we are speaking of here, it seems it is an 'influence' which goes two ways. Likewise, those post-Koru works where Walters gathers together into one painting various signs from his own past are a response, perhaps, to Killeen's Samplers, or to the sampling effects in Killeen's

cut-outs.) [fig. 158] Nor, I hasten to add, is saying that Killeen seeks out in Walters his own concerns to say that Killeen's perceptions of Walters are simply wrong: it is not possible, or even desirable perhaps, to escape one's own interests, or the interests of one's own time, in looking at (and so creating with contemporary eyes, and for oneself) a past and a present.

Where the painter gazes into the mirror of the past, and sees at least some part of his own face reflected, as well as his own more marked difference, it gives him a firmer sense of his own substantiality. In order to be truly present, and not merely the self-invention, or self-delusion of a moment, one needs the certainty of a past, a substantiality proven in time. Existing now with a past as well as a present, the painter is more confidently able to assert that present, and to feel its palpability, and to assume a future. And, once a such past has been created, it becomes possible for paintings, past and present, to speak, as it were, among themselves. To converse, as Walters' and Killeen's paintings sometimes do, in paint. The canon, that is, is a perpetually invented or created past and present; and, in the perpetual act of its re-invention, it may be for paintings and painters a kind of mutual benefit society...

It is possible of course, simply by picking it out for attention, to exaggerate what the discipline of art history would call Walters' 'influence on' Killeen. To pick out one painter for remark from painting's whole vast and irrecoverable intertextuality necessarily denies, at least for the moment, the very inextricability and vastness of the intertext. The refusal of any too vivid agitation of paint, for instance, may be seen quite as much in Stella, Noland, Kelly and Judd in America as in Walters here -- and these are artists whose works Killeen's notebooks discuss more often than they discuss Walters, though Walters is mentioned more. Ellsworth Kelly, to focus for a moment on him, shares not only a flat, monocolour, non-distressed surface with Killeen, but also -- and vitally, for the cut-outs -- that shapedness, that non-rectangularity, which Walters does not possess. In the matter of what is conventionally called 'influence', Stella and Kelly are no doubt more important than Walters for Killeen.

Yet Walters is in several senses more important for Killeen than any American. Walters assumes his major importance for Killeen not only as a role model -- a model of how the painter might be, of how he might best work and comport himself so as to survive while lacking the approbation and help a larger

culture would provide,¹⁶ but also as the local representative of the 'international' modernism from which Killeen wants to learn even as he refuses it in favour of his own post-modernity. If Killeen's difference from Walters is ultimately, as I have suggested, that of the post-modern from the modern, still, he needs a close-at-hand modern to be 'post' of.¹⁷

'Here', as Killeen says about Walters and Mrkusich, 'so much depends on one or two people'.¹⁸ Killeen 'depends' on Walters as a local exemplar of high modernism, and of the possibility of achieving it in New Zealand -- even though, or rather perhaps *because*, it is a modernism he wants to differentiate himself from. Walters provides a necessary *local* past and present, a local substantiality *against* which Killeen can invent, define and measure his own substantiality. And Walters presents, too, a consoling, necessary, and rare and admirable proof that high quality *can* be attained here, despite all the difficulties of achievement and recognition in a provincial culture, even if he represents, in the end, a kind of art Killeen will as much refuse as accept.

¹⁶ In this respect, Walters offered a more suitable role model than McCahon, who was psychologically and, in the end, physically destroyed by his provincial situation, by all the years of public abuse.

¹⁷ I am aware of the possibility of an alternative (modernist) reading, which would see Killeen as a kind of insufficient, tentative, or failed modernist, rather than as a post-modernist -- a reading which would have him as a converted regional realist *tentatively* approaching the modern. But such a reading seems to me somewhat denigratory, or inaccurately diminishing. Putting a butterfly on a modernist grid is hardly a 'tentative' act. Killeen's pluralism, his quotationalism, his image scavenging, his fragmentationalism, his breaking through the genre boundaries, his feminism, etc, are also -- as is well-known -- key characteristics of post-modern art. In any case, that regionalism which resists a now canonically established 'internationalist' modernism is *itself* commonly regarded as post-modern. This, for what it is worth, is precisely how Killeen 'himself', as they say, regards his mistreatment of the grid. 'To do an abstract grid was too easy', he said to me today, 'It was internationally so well-established a form'.

¹⁸ Killeen, the blue notebook, p. 98.