

First fissures — and sharpening, fragmenting & cropping

On (the) edge. Alert to the border itself. Attentive to the edge...
(Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*)

One would not, doubtless, make as much as I will of the first fissures in Killeen's work were they not the first sign of what was in the cut-outs to come: the complete fragmentation of painting's traditional ground. For the vertical fissures Killeen makes in some of his landscapes of 1966 and 1967, the splits caused by separating a painting into two or three panels, are the first signs in Killeen's otherwise immobile and unbroken views of the instability a century of modernist art had already induced in the classic order of space.



fig. 20 'Landscape with road', 1967

Here, though, the ground is barely beginning to stir under our feet. In a number of Killeen's early *plein air* landscapes, such as 'Landscape with Road',¹ 1967, [fig. 20] only the faintest disturbance is registered in the view's surface: the horizon and the whole are continuous, their road, bush, clay and cloud disturbed only by two fine, vertical cracks, the joins of the three panels. Such views have but a partial fracture, their parts still cohere. The view is still conceived of as an unbroken base; and the pictorial structure of panels is merely an addition to the

¹ The titles given here in quotemarks are titles I have added, for convenience of reference, to paintings left untitled by the artist.

view, a structural intersection which does not interrupt its still classic composure.²

'*Bush diptych*', 1966, [fig. 15] with its *painted* rather than actual divisions of the single ground, marks the first clearly intended break in the continuity of the view — a separation of parts, and a slip along the fault line where the two 'panels' join. The single viewpoint, from which the space of the classic picture was constituted by the viewer, and by which the picture posited at once the viewer's presence and position, has had here to endure something of a binary fission.

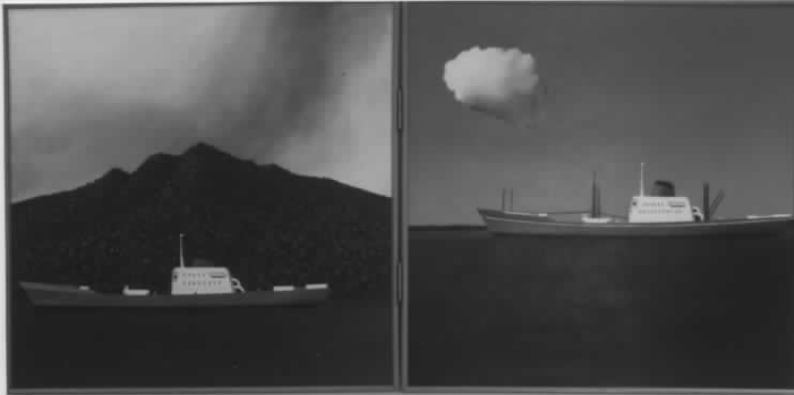


fig. 21 *Freighters diptych*, May 1967

Freighters diptych, May 1967, [fig. 21] suffers a more severe McCahonian disjunction of parts. On the left panel, the sea's horizon falls about three quarters of the way down; on the right, just under half — a brusque juxtaposition of disparate horizons Killeen would have known in McCahon's *Northland panels*. [fig. 16] So the single viewpoint, with its single eye level, from which classic space was established, is split.

But at least in '*Freighters diptych*' if we were all at sea, it was all sea we were at. *Wilson's cement*, 1967, on the other hand, frames four quite different views together. [fig. 22] Reading from the left, the horizon of the first and the third view is continuous, but their represented substance is not — the first is of sea, and the second a grassy plain. The second panel has a Wilson's Cement

² In fact, so the artist informs me, the panel of '*Landscape with Road*' was initially cut into three only for convenience of access to his attic studio space. In Killeen's recollection, the tall, thin, scroll-like landscape panels of 1966 were generally intended to be hung separately; and that they should appear in all his slides in juxtaposed pairs is merely the result of arranging them for the convenience of the camera. Nevertheless, it is at least suggestive that the only single panel which has been framed, is framed at the top and bottom only and not at the sides, as if perhaps it was intended to be affixed as the centre of two further panels. In any case, from an initially 'merely' technical consideration, considerations of 'meaning' may flow.

store (an urban spectacle, drawn from an actual edifice on the Auckland wharfs); while the fourth (back, perhaps, in the country) has a grassy hill. Country/city, urban/rural. Much the same might be said of the disparate views posed by the adjoined tondos of *'Four tondos'*, March/April 1967. Here, too, the division of parts is not a rent or rupture in some single subject or view: the subjects themselves suffer an approach to discontinuity.



fig. 22 Wilson's Cement, 1967

An as yet timid approach...

For, as yet, the superimposition of a structure of panels is still, in Barthes' words, 'a way of cutting, of perforating discourse, without rendering it meaningless',³ as if to a series of classic views there was appended the as yet unbeyed instruction, *tear along the dotted line*. And these landscapes still subscribe to the classic rhetoric of painting, for, again in Barthes' words, 'of course, rhetoric recognises discontinuities in construction (anacoluthons) and in subordination (asyndetons)'; but they are still 'set in the base matter of common utterance.'⁴

anacoluthon: a sentence or construction lacking in grammatical sequence. (From the Greek *anakolouthon* — following.)

Asyndeton: the omission of a conjunction. (From the Greek *sundetos* — bound together.)

Killeen's fissuring, at this stage, still starts from a sure site of sense, from landscape's base of common utterance. It is no more than an occasionally violent decoration of the picture surface. It is as if Killeen's landscapes are

³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. Richard Miller, Hill & Wang, New York, 1975, p. 8.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

patterned by a rhetorical form which permits a construction lacking in some items of a grammatical sequence, which form is called, in the case of classic painting, diptych, triptych, or polyptych — multi-panelled forms in which the view need not be continuous. Whereas later, in the cut-outs, as memorably, if less successfully, in some works on the way, 'a generalised asyndeton seizes the entire utterance': there are no conjunctions at all: not one of the parts conjoined: no view left: none possible.⁵

If, in these otherwise perfectly conventional little New Zealand landscapes, some of them even painted *plein air*, we may sense the first faint faults in the classical view, that base, foundation, motive and reason to which Killeen's painting yet subscribes, it will be, in the end, the whole ground of painting (canvas metal, board) — and not only that — it will be the whole ground of classical thought which is fissured...

In Killeen's landscapes of 1966, despite the superimposition of a structure of panels which tended to fissure the view, *within* each panel, the view was made to cohere. It was held together, not only by a unity of viewpoint, but also by a unity of tone, of colour and of brushwork, all fusing each depicted thing to the next. And within each panel, the clearest subdivisions tended to be large: a McCahonian duality of light sky and dark hill.

In the landscapes of 1967, however, where brushwork begins to be tightly reined or altogether suppressed, the depicted things start to come all apart from each other, or rather, each thing to come into its own, regardless of the clamouring rest. Edges, in a labour that will extend through into 1969, are sharpened, to the point where they might seem almost to cut or to pierce the picture's unitary plane; and each object is so sharply defined, and so tightly painted and so individually coloured within, as to be impermeable to the rest.

Killeen doubtless learns from Rita Angus, Don Binney and Michael Smither in this hard edgedness and separability of parts, exacerbate it though he may, as well as responding to the distant retort of American Pop. And all this is in accord with a note Killeen addressed to himself:

individual

⁵ Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

separate
edge and line emphasis
each object person clear
 (Killeen, *the green notebook*, p. 39)

In these landscapes, and increasingly in Killeen's painting, there is no effect of what today is called 'atmospheric perspective', or what Leonardo used, more poetically (more precisely) to call 'the perspective of disappearances' and the 'perspective of colour' — that blueing, blurring and fading of things with distance, in inverse ratio to their distance from the observing eye. Nor does one colour affect the next, by reflection or refraction, in a softening mutuality. Each colour and form is stretched so tight within as to leave no slack for the rest.



fig. 23 'Landscape with two clouds', 1966

There had been, in the landscapes of 1966, some premonitory hints of this new pungency of parts. In 'Landscape with two clouds', 1966, [fig. 23] for example, two oddly discrete little clouds are added to the broad McCahonian structure of water/hill/sky. Already these clouds might seem as detachable as those *actually* detached clouds which will float through the cut-outs entitled *The*

politics of geometry in 1991. [fig. 24] There had been some premonitory note of such detachability, too, when McCahon, as Killeen's teacher at the Elam School of Fine arts, used to remark how *separate* each piece of his compositions tended to stay, so that they remained a collection of parts, rather than a subsuming of parts into unity.⁶



fig. 24

In the tondo '*Man, cloud, land, sea, sky*', September 1967, [fig. 25] there are those things in the abrupt list of the title: red jerseyed man, green-blue sea, dark green bushed land, blue sky, white cumulus. Each is sharply cut off from the rest by a precision of edge, each differentiated from within by colour and texture. They are like cut-outs, stuck one over the other. Each seems a detachable sign.



fig. 25 *Man, cloud, land, sea, sky*, September 1967

In *Freighters (diptych)*, May 1967, [fig. 21] there are freighters, sea, sky, a little puffball of cloud; in '*Chimney and cloud*', June 1967, [fig. 26] there is chimney, sky, and that same cloud puff. In '*Car, hill, cloud*', c. June 1967, [fig. 27] the car is *literally* cut out, a magazine photo over a painted hill, and above

⁶ The source for McCahon's remark is Killeen, as reported in my 'The Escape from the Frame: Richard Killeen's Cut-outs', *Art New Zealand* no. 20, Winter 1981, p. 36.

them sits that same little cloud. That cloud appears again, now in abrupt conjunction with tree and tank, in *'Petroleum tank'*, July 1967; and with a freighter, hill, and sea, and with funnel and cloud in *'Funnel and cloud'*, July 1967; [fig. 28] and with man, road, truck in *'Man and truck'*, Summer, 1967-68 (destroyed).



fig. 26 *'Chimney and cloud'*, June 1967



fig. 27 *Car, hill, cloud'*, c. June 1967



fig. 28 *'Funnel and cloud'*, July 1967

By such migrations as these we may see that Killeen's signs are indeed detachable. And, increasingly each form is a sign prefabricated in a decision which precedes the painting, and which is chosen for its canonic generality: a

kind of normative cloud, say, or tree, or hill, devoid of much specificity of occasion or place. (Here, Killeen departs from Angus and Binney, whose paintings were still topographical, in the sense of being a portrait of some given spot, and comes closer to McCahon's generality, which, with such signs as black hill/white sky hoped to sign a painting with the general signature 'New Zealand' rather than to capture a view.)

Clouds, which up to 1968 might sometimes be altocumulus, now all become cumulus, and are always white, and somewhat brushmarky, and shadowed with grey. The sky is of an invariable blue, smoothly graduated from the bright pallor of its base to the saturated azure of its zenith. Hills are stippled, with the same dark green of an invariable bush, a 'bush' wherein all of the native forest's diversity of species, all of its rich irregularity, is reduced to the dense, evenly textured mass of some uniform substance. Grass is turned into a green, patterned striation. Each material substance is granted its own kind and colour of mark. Killeen has a consistent system of signs for things, as if in a key to a map.

And each sign is a fragment...

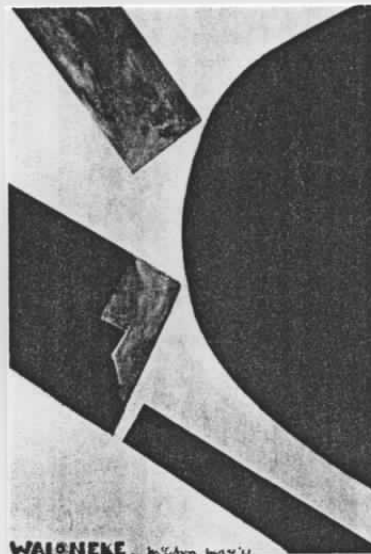
I have so far spoken of a fragmentation in which whole depicted objects are so broken off from each other as to seem detachable from each other and from the picture plane. There is also begun in these works another effect of fragmentation: that of *cropping* — the slicing off of some part of a depicted object by means of the painting's edge. It is a device, we will see, to which Killeen will have increasing resort through 1968-69.

The functioning of the crop may best be explained by resort to a term borrowed from classical rhetoric. Cropping's effect is that of a *synecdoche*, a figure of speech in which the part is named, but in which the whole is understood. Just by chance (but what is chance in such matters?), a common example given of the synecdoche (in dictionaries, in grammars, in handbooks of rhetoric) is that of sail for ship, and one of Killeen's most vivid crops in 1967-8 comes in his '*Funnel and Cloud*', where he gives, as if in a modernised version of that exemplar, a funnel to signify ship, a funnel as the part by which the whole will be easily understood. [fig. 28]

Crops were common, as Killeen would have known, in American Pop painting of the 1960s. They play a large part in 'New Realism', 1967, a Diploma

of Fine Art with Honours thesis by Killeen's friend and fellow student at the Auckland University School of Fine Art, Ian Scott. In Scott's characterisation of Diebenkorn's paintings, for instance, 'all the forms seem to continue beyond the edge of the canvas, giving the impression of being part of a larger whole. The effect is gained by... showing forms which complete themselves outside of the canvas edge....'⁷ Scott says much the same of Hopper, that 'his paintings are open, in that they continue themselves outside the picture's edge, giving the impression of being part of a larger whole'.⁸

I have thought of Scott's words here because Killeen, who was soon to exhibit with Scott in a two person show at Barry Lett Galleries, and who was, like Scott, regarded as a sort of New Realist, shares with him also an alertness to the edge, an attentiveness to the way the edge may make a bar, a scission, a mentally fillable blank.



WAIONEKE
fig. 29 Colin McCahon, *Gate*,
Waioneke, 1961

Behind this sensitivity to the edge, and behind Killeen's and Scott's use of the crop to suggest a world continuous beyond the frame, stands their teacher, McCahon. In both his abstracts (*Gate, Waioneke*, 1961) [fig. 29] and his landscapes (*Landscape Theme and Variations Series A*, 1963), McCahon makes much use of the crop. In the *Gates*, for example, forms seem to fly free of the frame, their diagonal twist denying that horizontal and vertical grid imposed by the frame's square mouth, while, by effects of cropping, it is further implied that

⁷ Ian Scott, Ian Scott, 'New Realism', Honours thesis for Diploma of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, 1967, p. 132.

⁸ Ian Scott, *ibid*, p. 35.

the depicted forms continue in a world beyond that arbitrarily sliced by the frame. It seems likely, too, that Killeen and Scott learned not only from McCahon's paintings, but also from McCahon's teachings on the frame and edge. Consider what McCahon has to say about his first sight of Mondrian's works.

What really impressed me was that, though they were often very small, they had an openness and scale that extended beyond the actual edges of the painting...⁹

Killeen may have learned from such McCahonian analyses at the very least a certain attentiveness to the frame, and perhaps too a desire to escape its confines...

The blanks made by Killeen's crops of 1968 and 1969 *are*, as I say, mentally fillable. Crops, in as much as that part of the object which is cropped is easily restored by the mind, are perhaps no more than a mere apocope. **Apocope**: the removal of a letter or syllable at the end of a word, as in 'curio' for 'curiosity' (from the Greek *kopte* or cut). Likewise, though *inside* the picture's cutting edge, too, there is an increased and increasing sense of fragments, each somewhat impervious to the next, fragments whose 'flat, clean-cut areas, bounded or organised by firm, clean-cut lines',¹⁰ serve to establish an early precondition of the literal cutting out of the cut-outs, the mode of composing them is still syndetic. **Syndetic**: of or using conjunctions (from the Greek *desis*, or binding together). See the signs 'chimney' and 'cloud', for instance, of '*Chimney and Cloud*', which are still conjoined by the sign 'sky'. [fig. 26]

Not until the cut-outs, when there will be no conjoining ground or sense, or framing edge provided, nor even any finally real world signified behind, may we speak of Killeen's works as truly *asyndetic*, as so devoid of conjunctions as hardly to be bound together at all. In the cut-outs, finally, each thing will be but a floating raft of meanings, in a flotilla dispersed, open to a perpetual drift.

⁹ Colin McCahon, 'All the Paintings, Drawings and Prints by Colin McCahon in the Gallery's collection', *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, no. 44, 1969, p. 14.

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: its Origins and Character*, Harper and Row, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, 1971, p. 14.

Yet even there, we will see, where there is no frame by which a crop might be performed, Killeen will occasionally refer to the convention of cropping. In *Potter Wasp*, April 1979, [plate 14] for instance, one of seven otherwise 'complete' elements of the cut-out is a lobster, half cropped with what Killeen has called 'an invisible stopping - like a frame'.¹¹ Having escaped from the picture frame, it will amuse Killeen occasionally to look back to it, and to those traditional tricks he had once used in trying to deny its restrictions...

¹¹Killeen to the author, cited in my 'The Escape from the Frame', op. cit., p. 35.