

Placing the aluminium grids in the oeuvre

As I have said, with the Grids on Aluminium, for the first time in a long time, the whiteness of the ground is entirely hidden. The colours are spread all over. A step back, it might seem to our hindsight, a step away from the cut-outs.

All but two of the Grids on Aluminium were painted in a period between December 1977 and July 1988 -- the period directly preceding the cut-outs, and directly following upon the all-over patterns of the 'Birds and Beasts on Sand', of October 1977. It might seem that the metal of their ground, and their 'all-overness' is the only thing these 'Grids on Aluminium' share with the 'Birds and Beasts on Sand'. Where, then, do they come from? And where do they go?

At the time of the triangulated 'Lace' series, in a sketch dated 8 June 1975,¹ Killeen can already be seen imagining a triangulated grid in square format. Such a grid appears in actually painted form, in the month after the completion of the Lace series, as one of the samples in *'Painted Over'*, August 1975. [fig. 137] It would seem, then, that the triangulated Grids on Aluminium come as much out of the triangulated spirals of the Laces, as out of the triangulated teeth of the Combs.

The most precise pre-echo of the Grids on Aluminium of 1977 and 78 comes in *'Untitled'*, a grid of triangulated rectangles on aluminium, of September 1975. [fig. 159] This work is one of two such aluminium 'out-takes' from the Grids Various series, whose grounds were otherwise invariably of canvas, paper or board. Hand-painted in yellow and blue, its structure is clearly derived from that of the Combs, though what was once white ground between the teeth of the Combs is here cropped to be an exact mirror image of the figure, so that it constantly flips between being figure and being ground. The derivation from the Combs is perhaps even more evident in the companion-piece, *'Untitled'*, September 1975, a work on aluminium of nearly the same size. [fig. 160]

¹ Killeen, the black notebook, p. 3.



fig. 159. *'Untitled'*, September 1975

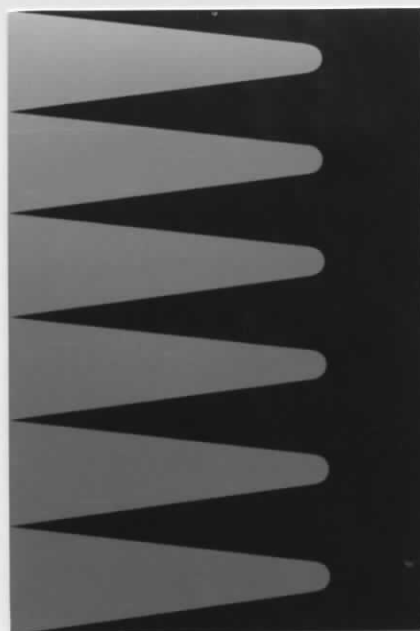


fig. 160. *'Untitled'*, September 1975

The Grids Various, of course, provide the most immediate precursor to the Grids on Aluminium, though the series of Birds and Beasts on Sand interrupts what might otherwise have been a continuous working on grids. The Grids on Aluminium are, in fact, like close-ups of some of the Grids Various -- close-ups

from which all atmospherics, overlays and extraneous images are expunged. In consequence of their 'close-up' structure, their triangles are larger, fewer, and more emphatic than those of the Grids Various, so encouraging a reading of the Grids on Aluminium as abstract paintings 'proper', as arrangements of a few geometric shapes, rather than as all-over patterns.

Proffering as the Grids on Aluminium do say twelve rectangles bisected (*Positive and Polynesian*, February 1978), [fig. 148] instead of say one hundred and forty four (*Pacific plywood*, October 1975), [fig. 120] they are now not so much all-over patterns as emphatically cut out designs. This new emphasis on the parts rather than on the all-over pattern is often also the result of the division of the grid into sections differently coloured, so that the whole painting is cut by colour into halves, quarters or thirds. The division by colour of some of the the Grids on Aluminium into horizontal strata of varying width serves still further to partialise the whole.

The new stress on the parts of these grids is also, in some part, a function of their preparatory protocols. A number of the Grids on Aluminium were composed by shifting cut out triangles of coloured card about inside a cardboard frame until a satisfactory composition was achieved: a jig-saw of separate and movable parts, of which each finalised painting serves, in a sense, merely as a record, a freeze-frame of one arrangement possible among many.

Why should Killeen enlarge, as it were, parts of his Grids Various into close-up? Perhaps with the Grids Various, just as with the with the Birds and Beasts on Sand, the all-over repetition of the diminutive parts had produced such an adulteration of the sign into pattern that it seemed to him to have gone rather too far. (Remember that Killeen said of the Birds and Beasts on Sand series that: 'it didn't work. It ended to look like wallpaper'.)² In the Grids Various series, the titles *Bathroom* and *Hall* and *Tablecloth* might suggest much the same thing. Perhaps Killeen's art, while perfectly happy to allow the world into its grids, found itself now somewhat uncomfortably close to the designer of shower curtains and wallpapers.)

This much is certain. The tiny and innumerably figured Birds and Beasts on Sand were, after an interruption by the Grids on Aluminium, followed by the

² Killeen as quoted in Andrew Bogle, *Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art: THE GRID*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p. 12.

much larger and fewer birds and beasts of the cut-outs. And, similarly, the grids of tiny and many parts were, after a gap to make room for the influx of birds, beasts and bugs, followed by the grid of large and few parts. In both cases, an array of many and diminutive parts is replaced with an array of parts which are few and large. Both times the oeuvre back-tracks, as it were, to make close-ups of its previous shots. As Killeen comments on a marginal note on the present chapter: 'at the time the power of one image still greater & I was unable to find an alternative'.

The 'Grids on Aluminium' come, as I have said, just before the cut-outs. What is their relation to them? -- the obvious question. Or, more suspiciously -- is there a relation?

The grid was very important to me from the point of taking me from the position of painting within the canvas to painting the canvas as a whole; and then, from there, to actually cutting it out. ('Andrew Bogle Interviews Richard Killeen', February 1982)³

With the grid, the painting was more clearly than ever before in Killeen's art no longer a view (an image in space). It was the lateral spread of a single *thing*, painted 'all-over'. Now that the work had so emphatically turned from a window into a 'thing', there was no inherent necessity for that 'thing' to be rectangular. It might now be any shape at all, and any remainder outside of the image might simply be cut away. And the circumstance that the ground was now aluminium, not canvas, made it technically as well as notionally possible to make a non-rectangular, or even an entirely irregular, non-geometric form. So, in this happy combination of the notional and the technical, the possibility was opened of producing the cut-outs -- a collection of non-rectangular things.

Already, in his preparatory works for some of these these grids, Killeen had been using triangles cut out -- a collection of cut out, movable, non-rectangular parts. Certainly, these parts were still geometric, and they were frozen, in the end, into rectangular forma, so that they hardly look or behave like the pieces of the cut-outs. Yet it is significant, just the same, that triangles should appear in a number of the early cut-outs -- in *Rejuvenation*, for instance, November 1978, in *Rising and setting*, November 1979, or in *Red insects, blue triangles*, November 1980. [plates 6,

³ Quoted in Andrew Bogle, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

of the early cut-outs -- in *Rejuvenation*, for instance, November 1978, in *Rising and setting*, November 1979, or in *Red insects, blue triangles*, November 1980. [plates 6, 33 & 53] It is as if the freeze-frame of the Grids on Aluminium had here been unfrozen, or as if the cut-out triangles used in composing the Grids on Aluminium had now escaped their frame, putting the jig-saw of the preparatory work into a state of perpetual unfinishedness. So early cut-outs grant homage, by means of their triangles, to the very circumstances which had allowed them to come into being.

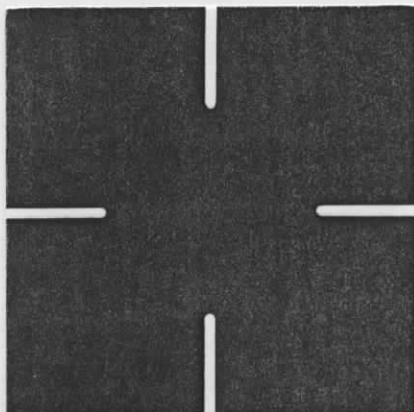


fig. 161. *Blue cross*, June 1978

In fact, at the same time as the rectangular Grids on Aluminium, Killeen *did* produce two works which are not quite rectangular: *Red army* and *Blue cross*. The blue square of *Blue cross*, of June 1978, [fig. 161] has one slot cut in from the midpoint of each of its edges, so that it suggests a square quartered.⁴ The square of *Red army*, May 1978, [fig. 162] similarly, has two slots cut in from the edge of both sides, so that it is split into thirds.

Red army, painted in one flat red, and referred to in a black notebook note as 'cut out', is still in a sense a grid, since the placing of its slots is determined by splitting the square into a notional grid trisecting it. And yet, it looks like a single piece from some cut-out. Which is what, in fact, it turns into, when Killeen has the chance to display the same hindsight as we. Significantly, Killeen is able to reuse the shape of *Red Army*, keeping even its colour, in one of the earliest of the cut-outs, *Rejuvenation*, November 1978... [fig. 162 & 163]

⁴ Killeen's black notebook, in a note dated 8 - '75, p. 12, shows that as early as 1975 he was considering 'shaped' works -- works, that is, variously notched or serrated at the edge. One note on the same page goes so far as to call these works 'aluminium cut-outs painted in one colour'. In notes just before June 1976, such works are sometimes called 'slot paintings', though when considering a more irregular, jagged edge, the notebook consistently speaks of 'cut-outs'.

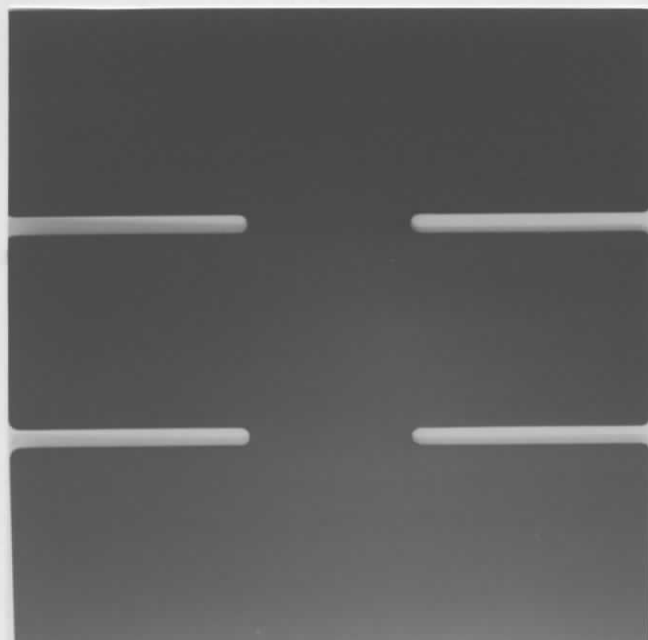


fig. 162. *Red army*, May 1978

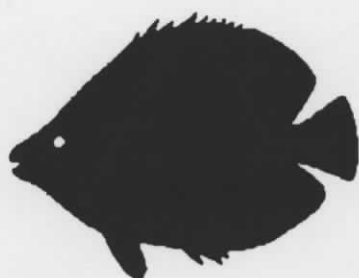


fig. 163. *Rejuvenation*, November 1978

Killeen has said to me that he saw the Grids on Aluminium as like the Combs, with the wall as their white. A Similarly, Michael Dunn remarked in reviewing them that they were 'the next best thing to a mural in proximity to the wall plane.'⁵ Lacking as they did the projecting solidity of a canvas on a backing of two-by-one wood, they were like a thin veneer of colour direct on the wall. (The aluminium ground had been chosen, in part, precisely *because* of the radical flatness it allowed, since it was sufficiently rigid as to require no backing.) Furthermore, the first two Grids on Aluminium had a hole drilled at their top, so that each could be hung from a single nail. So another precondition of the cut-outs was established -- only to be abandoned in the later Grids on Aluminium, as Killeen began instead to bend their tops back on themselves, to make a kind of lip from which each could be hung from the heads of several small tacks.

The black notebook shows that at the time of the Grids on Aluminium Killeen considered making: 'Small paintings hung at different heights and positions' (an adjoining sketch shows small rectangular paintings hung as in a Suprematist hanging), and that he thought, too, of hanging 'aluminium squares' on a 'clothes line along wall'. [fig. 164] These paintings, he realised, need not be rectangular:

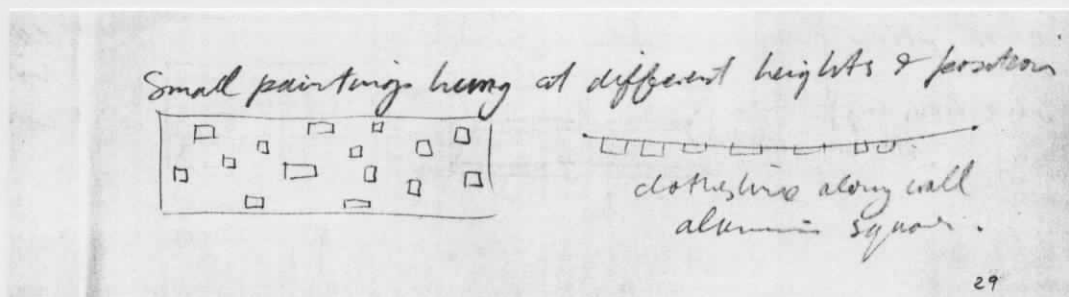


fig. 164. The black notebook, p. 29

*Aluminium track or wire along wall
strips of coloured Al hanging down.*

*Have central notches in panels
folded behind to hang on rail
no need to be rectangles.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 42)*

⁵ Michael Dunn, 'Richard Killeen: New Paintings 1978', *Art New Zealand* no. 10, Winter 1978, p. 18.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 42)

*Hang strips of aluminium 8 x 2
not necessary to make one large surface
gaps between
different widths?
done separately and moved
about later*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 48)

'Small paintings hung at different heights'. It might be a (slightly naive) definition of the cut-outs themselves. 'No need to be rectangles.'⁶ 'Not necessary to make one large surface.' 'Gaps between.' 'Done separately and moved about later.' Already, at the time of the grids, Killeen is considering new ways of hanging, and the possibility has opened of the non-rectangular work, and of a work as a gathering of separate paintings...

⁶ Significantly, the remark 'no need to be rectangles', the black notebook, p. 42, appears next to sketches, on the facing p. 43, of some of the various 'primitive' tool blades that will appear in the first cut-out, *Across the Pacific*, August 1978, and next to a sketch of a triangulated grid.