

The first cut-outs

The first cut-outs to be exhibited -- *Collection from a Japanese garden, 1937*, August 1978, [plate 3] and *2 Black dogs*, August 1978, [plate 2] at Peter McLeavey Gallery, 26 September -- 13 October, 1978, arrived like a bolt out of the blue. It was 'a notable event', so Neil Rowe, a reviewer with an unusual percipience, remarked. Not only were the cut-outs 'the most startling and innovative development in Killeen's work to date'; they were the final 'proof that Killeen was 'the liveliest and most provocative painter to have emerged in this country'.¹

What could be more highly charged than their dark swarm on the white gallery wall? They were things alighted on the wall, not a view though it. They confronted, stopped and 'intimidated' the gaze -- they did not give to it.² They were unusually large, by New Zealand standards, emphatic in colour -- black and red only -- and dramatic in contrast with the white of the wall. It was as if they had been bred secretly all *Across the Pacific*, and had suddenly arrived full-grown.

Even a year later, Rowe found himself recalling how 'Killeen astonished the local artworld last year with a radical change of direction in his work'.³ Let us not underestimate the astonishment of this arrival. It was 'like', as Rowe says, 'opening Pandora's box'. Only the vantage of hindsight enables one to say that the preconditions of the cut-outs had been developed through all the years of Killeen's oeuvre; that the oeuvre had now provided Killeen with the necessary ground from which he might propel himself. In all truth, there was no necessity that Killeen should so leap from the grids on aluminium. This leap, let me

¹ Neil Rowe, 'A Mature Artist with a Formidable Talent', *Evening Post*, Wellington, 30 September 1978. I have transcribed these remarks to show that the cut-outs did indeed 'surprise'. I have not much troubled these pages with reviewer's pronouncements, since I have chosen not to trace here the process of Killeen's canonisation (that is another story, deserving, no doubt, an essay of its own). But it is worth acknowledging here, perhaps, that Rowe was the most consistent critical supporter of Killeen's cut-outs in their first few years; while Gordon Brown, then the reviewer for the *Auckland Star*, mixes acknowledgement of Killeen's formal inventiveness with what may well be unconsciously pejorative remarks about the suitability of the cut-outs for 'kindergarten walls', and about their 'decorative' nature; while T. E. McNamara of the *N.Z. Herald* pronounced himself baffled by the cut-outs from the beginning, and has continued to announce his bafflement, with annual expressions of surprise, to this day.

² Killeen refers to what he calls the 'intimidating' aspect of the early cut-outs, in a black notebook note dated 5. 7. 78, p. 71. ('As long as the rectangular format is kept one will look "into" a painting not at it. An object is more intimidating.') That many of the early cut-outs show insects, between one and two feet in length or breadth -- notably, *Black crawlers*, December 1978; *Black insects red primitives*, November 1980; *Flyers*, May 1979; and *Don't be afraid of things you don't understand*, July 1979 -- doubtless adds to a sense of intimidation.

³ Neil Rowe, 'Killeen Changes His Medium', *Evening Post*, Wellington, 29 September 1979.

admit, is inexplicable to my analyses. It comes with the suddenness of a mutation.

One might go further, and say, in a Borgesian fashion, that the cut-outs themselves *create* the oeuvre which we tend now to regard as their necessary ground; that they create their own antecedents in Killeen's earlier work.⁴ Their arrival, as Borges would say, radically changes our conception of Killeen's past. Had the cut-outs not come, we would not see the cutting out and fragmentary quality as we do, to a greater or lesser degree, in their precursors: in other words it would not exist.

The first cut-out is *Across the Pacific*, August 1978. [plate 1] It consists of a cluster of 15 pieces of black laquered aluminium, each the silhouetted image of some stone artifact, each hung from the wall by a nail through the hole nearest to its top. (In all the subsequent cut-outs, a small hole is drilled, specifically for hanging purposes, at the top of each piece.) Together the pieces occupy a relatively modest area of approximately 1200mm x 1200mm when hung -- as is perhaps befitting to an experimental first, *Across the Pacific* is considerably smaller than any subsequent cut-out of an equivalent number of parts.

The hanging instructions, written on the box in which the pieces come, stipulate:

1. *Hang over small nails.*
2. *Mark each nail position by holding object on the wall. Remove object, hammer in nail, then hang.*
3. *Hang in any order.*
4. *Hang in a group.*
5. *First hang one object.*
6. *Hang the next approximately 4 to 5 inches away.*
7. *Space the rest the same distance apart in any direction according to the eye.*

For the later cut-outs, these instructions will be considerably simplified. Instructions 2 and 5, for instance, will be deleted -- perhaps they seemed too much

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Kafka and His Precursors', *Labyrinths*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, esp. p. 236: 'The fact is that every writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past as it will modify our conception of the future.'

aimed at the stupid or the manually inept. Instruction 4, 5, 6 and 7 perhaps include redundancies -- certainly, they will later be summarised by such requests as 'hang pieces in any order 4 to 5 inches apart'. But already, in this first instance, the hanging protocol of the cut-out is established.

Across the Pacific answers well to these black notebook considerations:

5. 7. 78

*Alternative to painting is a
collection of 'things'.
will be considered a composition
if on a board.*

*As long as a rectangular format is kept one
will look 'into' a painting and not at it.*

An object is more intimidating.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 71)

That is, once images are freed from the rectangular canvas or board, they become objects, or 'things'. As an object, the 'thing' confronts and stops the gaze; it does not 'give' to it; it refuses all possibility of the classical 'view', of paintings as windows on strings. At the same time, it refuses composition, since without the frame's determining edge there can be no composition, nor even a 'painting' proper: there can only be a 'collection' of 'things'.

*Each thing needs to be in real space
can have nails through each
like insect collection.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 71)

It seems the insect collection is not only a common *subject* for the early cut-outs -- see, for instance *Black crawlers*, December 1978, *Flyers*, May 1979, *Dont be afraid of things you dont understand*, July 1979, *Rising and falling*, December 1979, *Black insects red primitives*, November 1980, *Red insects blue triangles*, April 1980, *Red Insects blue chevrons*, May 1980 -- it is immediately, in the very first of the cut-outs, a relation of forms, and a mode of hanging. [plates 9, 16, 24, 37, 53, 45, & 46]

Doing anything other than collecting things

*together gets into compositional arranging
again and defeats the purpose of having separate pieces.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 78)*

Killeen has at last discovered a means of escaping the burden he remarked at the time of his Samplers, that of seeming 'forever forced to arrange in some way -- because of the nature of painting'. If there was implicit in this remark the desire to find a painting whose nature precludes composition, to find a painting which is somehow 'an alternative to painting', then the cut-outs have come as its consummate answer. Whatever forms the cut-out may take in the future, there must be no lapse into the compositional mode.

One might well wonder *why* 'compositional arrangement' should be so distasteful to Killeen, why, from at least the chance works on, he has so repeatedly sought to avoid it. Let me dismiss at once any claim that Killeen's distaste is the result of a constitutional *incapacity* to arrange. The non-compositional mode is too strenuously sought, too consciously willed, too constantly struggled towards, for it to be simply that. Rather, it is the product of a constant exertion. And it is the site of a voluble theorisation.

There are a large number of notes where Killeen worries away to conceptualise the cut-out's a-compositional mode. Few seem to be written earlier than 1980: perhaps the intense outburst of such a new kind of painting in 1978 and 1979 left little time to reflect with a pen.

2 . 4 . 80

*A reason for cutting out each shape is
to avoid hierarchical composition.*

*Moves in modernism have been toward
equalising everything.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 94)

Nor is non-hierarchical composition simply a matter of form, a matter of *mere* aesthetics. It is an allegory of the social, of the possibility of a certain democracy in our lives.

Having hierarchical values no longer

*applies -- people who have are fighting
a rearguard action -- eg society for community
standards. One person's values are not
better than another's.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 94)⁵

The non-hierarchical relates also to a scientific vision of the world, in which 'man' is no longer the apex of creation, as in the Christian fiction, and the world is no longer the universe's centre, about which, for our convenience, all else has been made to revolve.

*Relates to scientific way of looking at the
world -- everything is made the same way
and controlled by the same natural laws.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 94)

*The nature of our knowledge about the world in this part of
the 20th century is non-hierarchical, everything
plays a part in the whole (and the whole is infinite and
asymmetrical).*

(quote)

*The best art of this century has been influenced
by this.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 128)⁶

Composition, as a thing in itself, as an aesthetic effect, is in a sense a mere *distraction*: it is not, in any case, what most counts.

8. 80

*When looking at painting it is not the formal
compositional balance and relation between parts
that is important anymore but the
association of feeling and ideas between the parts.*

⁵ Note dated 2 . 4 . 80.

⁶ Note dated 2 . 82, and headed '7 Painters Statement draft'. The quote Killeen refers to is unfortunately not recorded. One imagines it must have been from Morris, or Stella or Judd, or a quote from one of their critical supporters.

The idea is not the relationship between the parts but the overall bringing together of the parts to make something which is not necessarily a whole...

The construction of a painting in the old way was the making of a whole where all the parts were hierarchical & ordered -- whatever they were...

Things can no longer be ordered by the conventions of art as before.

Composition has no intrinsic meaning apart from order.

Things must be brought together for reasons other than composition.

It is a matter of degree as bringing things together is a form of composing... (Killeen, the black notebook, pp. 104-105)⁷

It is often stressed in these notes that the most important effect of the cut-outs is not so much to reduce compositional order, or even to reduce hierarchy, as it is simply to place the emphasis *somewhere else*. The key issue for Killeen is not form, but the spectator's *reading*. What counts, so the notes would suggest, is not so much that the spectator may *literally* move the pieces, as that the very possibility of such movement will cause the viewer to 'distrust' composition, and so to look in 'other directions'.

2. 82

7 *Painters Statement Draft*

...

The fact that the organisation is out of the control of the artist focuses the viewer to look at the work with a different attitude. Once the viewer knows that the pieces can

⁷ Note dated 8. 80.

*be rearranged they cannot trust the
composition of the work &
must therefore look for understanding in other directions.*

*The ordering of the pieces does not interest me
as I no longer think that it is an artist's
job to order his view of the world.*

why?

*It is important to me that they look in
other directions because that is where my concerns lie.*

*Association & control between meanings is more important
to me than the physical relationship (as shapes)? within
the confines of a painting composition or format.
(Killeen, the black notebook, pp. 104-105)⁸*

So 'meaning' is of more interest to Killeen than composition. Yet the non-hierarchical arrangement is important, in as much as it is in *itself* a bearer of meaning. It finds its meaning in its very difference from traditional composition. Traditional

*composition tends to be hierarchical
the canvas centre is more important
says that one thing is more important than another.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 105)*

Killeen, of course, is hardly alone in his refusal of pictorial hierarchy. He notes two American precursors for his a-compositional mode: Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly.

*The reason artists have gone toward single
shaped canvases -- to get away from formal
relationships. -- eg Kelly.*

*Stella's pieces relate internally in a strange
way -- each shape seems to belong to a*

⁸ Note dated 2 . 82.

*different work. Trying to relate
the pieces in less of a formal way.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 106)*

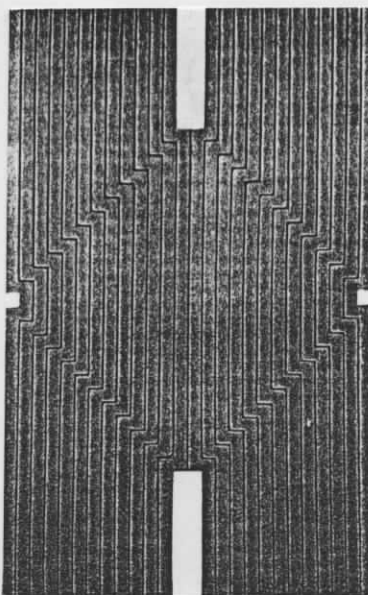


fig. 165. Frank Stella, *Newstead Abbey*, 1960

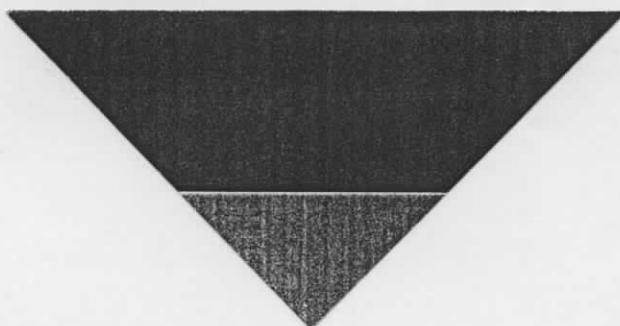


fig. 165. Ellsworth Kelly, *Green white*, 1968

It may seem odd that the abstractionists Stella and Kelly should be of such interest to Killeen, given that he has abandoned abstraction, and given that their works could, on the face of it, hardly look more different from his. But Kelly's and Stella's importance to the cut-outs lies in the fact that their works are 'shaped', not rectangular, and in that they are 'all-over' in composition, and thus refuse the hierarchical. Killeen even considers for a moment -- and then quickly rejects -- making a 'single-shaped' work like theirs:

16. 11. 80

Instead of collections do one shape very large

...

Makes one shape 'significant' as art.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 107)

It seems that, for Killeen, Stella and Kelly do not go far enough in rejecting hierarchy. Despite his sympathy for them, he rejects their single-shaped work as itself intrinsically still hierarchical, in that it makes one thing, of all the things in the world, 'significant', as if it alone deserved art's deification. Yet, Killeen's momentary thought of making a single 'shape' was not entirely in vain -- it led him to further thoughts as to the nature of the relations between his pieces. His a-compositional, multi-piece mode, he now affirms, brings his art closer to the relation of things in the world.

*Relationships between pieces in a collection is
a real world one & less of an art (space) relationship.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 108)

Killeen will later publicly comment:

I construct my paintings from cut out metal shapes so that the painting is more democratic and less hierarchical in its organisation than the conventional framed painting. This is because each image is a movable object that is out of the compositional control of the artist.

(Killeen, in Seven Painters/The Eighties, 1982)⁹

It seems, from this the most polished and public of Killeen's statements on his a-compositional mode, that his work's 'democracy' consists at once in the handing over of the arrangement of the pieces to the viewer, and in the abandonment of hierarchy in the cut-out's internal organisation. It is a matter, one might say, of both his work's internal affairs *and* its foreign policy.

Let us look again at the cut-outs themselves.

The parts of the painting are separate and uncomposed. They come to their buyer in a box. What composition can be made of these parts (of which none

⁹ Killeen, artist's statement, *Seven Painters/The Eighties*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, 1982, p. 26.

is more important than another) is left to the person who hangs them. So a certain democracy opens. A certain democracy within: no image is fixed above or below any other, none is honoured by centrality, none relegated to the side: no hierarchy, no transcendence, no privilege within the work. (Or, more precisely, 'centre' and 'periphery', 'high' and 'low' are marked as always provisional and temporary.) And a certain democracy without: the viewer enters freely from without to arrange the work: no hierarchy, no transcendence, no privilege of artist over *mere* spectator.

There is a physical enactment of the truth that we viewers always paint as we view -- an enactment of the viewer's contribution to every aesthetic act. An allegory whose meaning is that the *viewer* makes meaning. That the viewer *makes* meaning. And an allegory too of the the contrary truth: that meaning is also -- and at the same time -- always already given in the work, in the forms and colours provided by the artist. For artistic 'controls' *do* remain, in which the spectator can have no say.

*Some things I use in controlling the work are
shape, scale, colour, density, activity, meaning.
subject, secondary sources and associations.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 128)*

The power of the spectator in arranging the pieces might even be called in a sense illusory, and the hanging instructions peremptory. Obviously, the artist chooses and makes the cut-out's constituent parts. And, in any case, there is no power allowed the viewer to 'compose' in any traditional sense, since all the pieces are of approximately equal pictorial 'weight', and since the instructions preclude a hierarchical ordering.

*Anyone hanging one of these cut-outs in
their own way can not alter my intention
for the work, my emphasis is on the
bringing together not the composition.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 105)¹⁰*

¹⁰ Note dated 8 . 80.

Through all the years of variation in the cut-outs, these principles introduced by *Across the Pacific* will remain invariable. The cut-out is composed of separate parts, which may be hung in any order,¹¹ through a nail hole provided in each piece. That nail hole, in complicity with gravity, determines which way up the elements hang. The pieces should not overlap: they may not, for instance, be all hung on one nail.

In all but six of the one hundred and thirty three cut-outs before *Born alive in New Zealand No 2*, October 1985, the pieces are meant to be hung a few inches apart from each other.¹² All but twelve of the forty one cut-outs from *Born alive in New Zealand No. 2*, on, until those of February 1990, are to be hung with the pieces touching.¹³ But, whether the pieces are hung touching or apart, because of the irregular nature of their shapes, they will always remain clearly as *pieces*, with the white wall visible between.

If there is invariably a cutting out round the margins of each image, there is also sometimes, as in *Across the Pacific*, a cutting out *within*. Killeen calls this an 'interior cutting'. As with the whole cut-out, then, so with the part: in the part too there is a partialising or disintegration of surface, a literal cutting out which reveals the wall behind.

*Interior cutting is the same as painting a shape
on the board
the negative part is the saying part.
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 55)*

The above note comes from the time of the notched grids of 1978, whose notches were also a form of 'interior cutting'. 'Interior cutting' is a device whereby the ground is made to speak as figure, as drawing, when negative becomes positive, as the white wall is let through the cut-out piece. This 'negative

¹¹ The only exceptions are cut-outs with an unusually small number of pieces: both the four piece *Regeneration* (November 1978) and the three piece *Rejuvenation* (November 1978), for instance, come with the unusually peremptory instruction: 'hang as shown on box lid'.

¹² For a group of six works -- *North star*, *Don't be afraid of things you don't understand*, *Seven dogs*, *From here to there*, of July 1979, and *Interpenetration* and *Strontium 90*, of August 1979 -- Killeen's instruction requires that they 'Hang Touching'.

¹³ In this group of twelve cut-outs there is a return to the demand that the pieces should be apart. For these works, all completed between 26 November 1987 and 18 July 1989, the instruction reads 'Hang pieces in a group approximately 75 mm. apart in any order'. (*Building something important*, 26 November 1988; *Inversion layer*, 19 February 1989; *Unnamed lakes*, 28 February 1989; *Inversion layer*, 14 March 1989; *Building something important*, 29 March 1989; *Unnamed lakes*, 7 April 1989; *Unnamed lakes*, 19 April 1989; *Italo's fish painting*, 30 May 1989; *Italo's fish painting*, 30 June 1989; *Italo's fish painting*, 29 June 1989; *Joacquin's fish*, 18 July.)

saying' speaks in most of the cut-outs of 1978: in the internal circlets and bands cut into the tools of *Across the Pacific*, for instance; [plate 1 & fig. 167] in the fish eyes of both versions of *Regeneration*, [plates 5 & 8] and in those of the first version of *Rejuvenation*; [plate 6] in the fish eyes and horizontal striations in *Fish and sticks*; [plate 7] in a stone knife and in the circular markings on the wings of the aeroplane of *Collection from a Japanese garden, 1937*; [plate 3] and in the internal comb shapes of one of the red rectangles of *Retribution*, March 1979, and in the koru like notches cut into another. [plate 12 & fig. 168] It is a device which Killeen will never quite forget, even when, years later, he does come again to allow drawing 'proper' inside his silhouettes -- see, for instance, the eyes of the double headed snake in *Living Memory*, November 1982 [plate 92 & fig. 168]

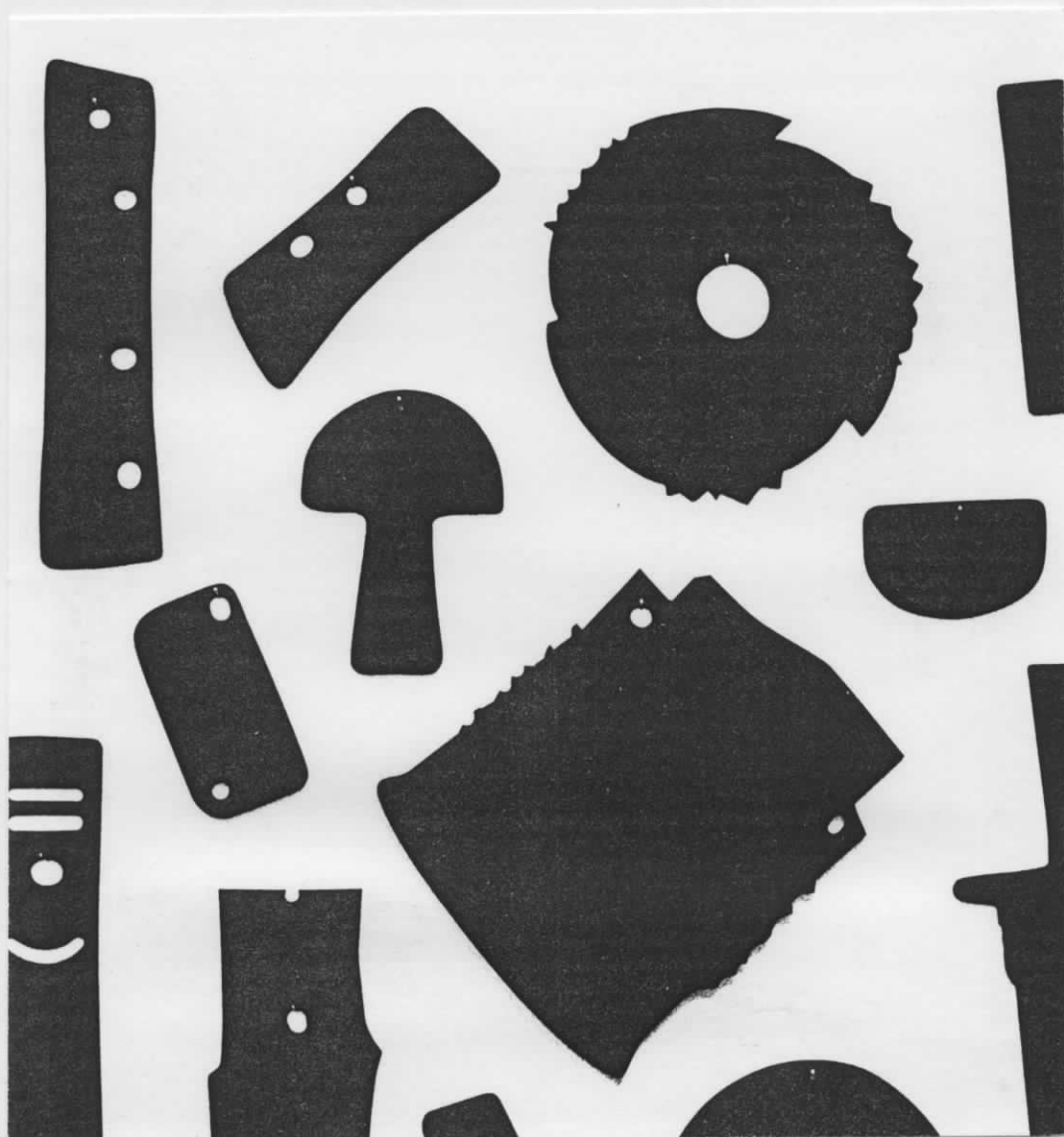


fig. 167. *Across the Pacific*, August 1978 (detail)



fig. 168. *Retribution*, March 1979 (detail)



fig. 169. *Living Memory*, November 1982 (detail)

We have here, in both the 'interior cutting' of pieces, and in the cutting away of all surround to each piece, what Peter Leech, in reference to Mrkusich, has nicely called a 'challenge to surface form': 'the disintegrating or partialising of surface'.¹⁴ The 'challenge' is, in the very face of disintegration, to maintain an integration sufficient for the work still to be sensed as a 'whole'.

Just how far can one go -- how far *should* one go -- with disintegration, before the artwork ceases to *be* art or a work? The cut-outs might be called a long and constantly changing answer to this question, an answer which risks an ever increasing dis-integration.

problem remains that the whole must hang together otherwise does not work.

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 114)

In *Across the Pacific*, the challenge is met in a number of ways.

¹⁴ Peter Leech, 'Painting, Object, Relation: a decade of Mrkusich painting', in *Milan Mrkusich: a decade further on: 1974-1983*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1985, p. 27. With the high modernist Mrkusich, of course, disintegration is not carried so far as with the post-modern Killeen. Mrkusich's pieces are rectangles, closely pressed against each other within a larger rectangle, leaving no spaces between: they never do *actually* come apart.

First -- and this will be true of three of the ten cut-outs of 1978, and of two of the twenty four cut-outs of 1979 -- all the parts are of a single colour: black.¹⁵ In the cut-outs of 1978, there will only twice be more than two colours -- black and red, most commonly, and occasionally red and blue, or black and blue. In the cut-outs of 1979, there will seldom be more than two colours, and these most commonly black and red. So the 'colour identity' of the work to some degree 'overcomes', as Leech would say, the 'marked separation of parts',¹⁶ while in the works which are of one colour alone, 'there is an absolute collusion of colour and surface form'.¹⁷

Secondly, the cut-out's surface is in all of the separate parts the same in its texture, density, thickness and sheen -- sprayed lacquer on aluminium. (Such sameness of surface will hold true of all the cut-outs until 1981.)

Thirdly, the 'subject' of each separate part is usually in some generic sense the same as that of the whole. (In the case of *Across the Pacific*, for instance, each piece represents a stone and presumably Pacific artifact,¹⁸ while *Collection from a Japanese garden, 1937* is based, in its title at least, on a collection held in the Auckland War Memorial Museum, gathered from a single Japanese site, and even its Japanese fighter plane, in a wittily disruptive aside, relates to the fact the collection was made shortly before Japan entered the Second World War.) As a Killeen note of this period remarks:

*Collecting like things together gives the collection
a reason for being together.*

(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 78)

¹⁵ *Across the Pacific*, August 1978; *Regeneration*, November 1978; *Black Crawlers*, December 1978; *Flyers*, May 1979; and *Primordial*, December 1979.

¹⁶ Peter Leech, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁷ Peter Leech, op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁸ In fact, most of the collection is Japanese jade. If one of the shapes of *Across the Pacific*, the notched circle, should come from a Chinese jade astronomical disk of the Chou dynasty such as we may still see displayed in the Auckland War Memorial Museum today, that is perhaps in accord with the migratory theory displayed in the following note, datable 8 . 80, black notebook, p. 102:

*Late Chou (Chinese) influence according
to 'Primitive Art' D. Fraser Thames and Hudson
survives best in the art of the Maori
Illustration from Taiwan
T'aitung Prefecture library Taiwan
panel resembling Maori carving*

...
*'Most of the important Maori art forms
pay implicit homage to Chinese forerunners.'*

So, in the first cut-out, we have a collection of 'like things' -- even if the likeness is sometimes somewhat bizarre. It is a unity of subject to which, for several years, most of the cut-outs will clearly adhere. *Flying high and away*, October 1978, for instance, [plate 4] has four soaring birds, a leaping frog, two upward pointing triangles, and a tall ziggurat-like shape, with serrated edge, so that each thing might be described as an instance of vertical striving. *Regeneration*, November 1978, [plate 5] has a bug, a butterfly, a leaf and a fish -- all living things, which might well be subject to degeneration or regeneration. *Black crawlers*, December 1978, is again all of one colour and kind. [plate 9]

Regeneration No. 2, November 1978, however, [plate 8] adds a red triangle to its four living things, differentiated from it by their black. *Rejuvenation*, November 1978, [plate 6] has a black triangle and a black fish with a red geometrical sign. *Fish and sticks*, November 1978, [plate 7] has black fish and red sticks -- one colour per kind, as has *Fish and twigs*, March 1979. [plate 11]

In the early cut-outs there is at most a *doubling* of subject, according to the ancient code of the antithesis or the simile, both of which figures, despite their apparently opposite intent, serve to establish relations between the dissimilar. *Black Insects, red primitives*, November 1980, [plate 53] is a classic example, seeming to partake equally of simile and antithesis (something like the 'compare and contrast' of the university art history essay question); while the title of *Two worlds*, March 1980, [plate 43] and of *Dualism*, April 1980, [plate 44] serves to declare their antithetical structure. In these cases, the 'subject' suffers at most a single fissuring.

However, such unities of subject and form as Killeen achieves or permits in the cut-outs of 1978 and 1979 will not last for long. Very soon, we will see, the cut-out will be submitted to such a fissuring that it might well seem -- and does to some critics seem -- as if there is no unity left at all.