Killeen's suburbia

Throughout 1968 and 1969, suburbia is Killeen's and Scott's main subject. Suburbia had been for some thirty years a stock object of derogation for New Zealand intellectuals, who were liable to find virtue and truth only in the ruggedly *rural*, in hard men in hard light, in those close to the native soil. So it was still for many of Killeen's and Scott's generation; and so it is yet for those who abide by the old Nationalist antitheses.

Consider, as an early instance of such distaste for suburbia, these remarks in an A.R.D. Fairburn letter home from London, of March 1931:

> *I see myself sitting down somewhere and tilling the soil... I refuse to be a suburbanite, or an office worker, or any of the other by-products of life. I'm going to be a peasant if necessary in order to keep in touch with life.*[1]

Or consider this more recent sample of 1977, from a Fairburn disciple:

> *You are walking at dusk through a maze of streets in a new housing estate of north-west Christchurch. The basic architecture is the same as that of the Northland farmhouse: the suppressed gardens, the fastidious curbing, the bland, sleek automobiles all reinforce one's impression that this is an environment meaning nothing but the most banal aspirations of man. An element of insecurity is present: but there is little of exaltation or beauty. Just comfort. You do not even have to reach the outskirts of the estate to see the Canterbury foothills... The experience they suggest is cosmic, having no reference to the hermetic and vicarious life of the suburbs...*[2]

Unsurprisingly, given such attitudes to suburbia, suburban subjects were relatively rare, both within Nationalist art as a whole, and within the *oeuvre* of any individual Nationalist artist. To *specialise* in suburbia was unthinkable.

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[1] Cited Denys Trussell, *Fairburn*, Auckland University Press, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1984, p. 94.

[2] Denys Trussell, 'Landscape, Civilisation and New Zealanders', *Art New Zealand* 7, 1977, pp. 15-17.

By the 1950s and early 1960s, however, the Nationalist distaste for suburbia had begun occasionally to be seen as a convention, so that a reviewer of Ian Cross' *After Anzac Day* could speak of 'routine sneers at suburbia',[3] and the poet Louis Johnson had in counter-reaction written:

> *I praise Saint Everyman, his house and home*
> *In every paint bright garden suburb shining.*

Significantly, such an interest in suburbia was regarded as 'internationalist', and as opposed, therefore, to the regionalist's rural real.

> *In the 1950s, with the unflagging encouragement of Louis Johnson, a new 'international' focus of interest was found in the suburbs in which most New Zealanders live.* [4]

But, despite its adherence to the truths of New Zealand demography, such a poetry of the urban was perhaps premature. It was not until the late sixties, in a moment of rupture between generations, that the suburb could become, as it did with Richard Killeen and Ian Scott, not merely *a* subject, but *the* subject of an artist's work.

The suburban subject was impossible for the Nationalist painter proper, not only because the landscape genre carried with it a long history irresistible to conservative culture, whereas the depiction of the suburb did not, but also because the suburb was seen as the space of a horrid and hypocritical materialism, and thus as inimical to properly artistic and spiritual values. Accordingly, many an artist might say, with Michael Illingworth, 'I am building a facade for my own world against the established facade of a hypocritical suburbia'.[5]

And worse, suburbia was the site of a cult of the material whose high priestess was *woman*, for, as A.R.D. Fairburn puts it, 'women and money are closely linked in the scheme of values; and only if a man can govern the one can he hope to avoid the corrupting influence of the other'.[6] The suburb was the site of

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[3] Thomas Crawford, 'After Anzac Day', Ian Cross', *Landfall*, v. 16, no. 1, March 1962, p. 75.

[4] James Bertram, *Towards a New Zealand Literature*, Hocken Library, Wellington, 1971.

[5] Michael Illingworth, cited Mark Young, *New Zealand Art: Painting 1950-67*,A. H. & A.W.Reed, Wellington, 1968, p. 29.

[6] A.R.D. Fairburn, 'The Woman Problem', *The Woman Problem and Other Prose*, eds. Dennis Glover & Geoffrey Fairburn, Blackwood & Janet Paul Ltd., Auckland, 1967, p. 22.

insufficiently *rugged* transactions upon the plane of reality; since in the suburb, so it was thought, man was too much in the power of the wife .

As Roger Horrocks has pointed out, 'There has been a strong tradition in New Zealand culture that depicts men as victims of suburbia, tricked into "settling down" by conventionally minded women.'[7] There is an invariable distaste for what Jane Mander, in her novel *Allen Adair*, called 'the feminine scrambling for things'...

The complaint of Sargeson's 'Up Onto the Roof and Down Again' is typical:

> *After years of suburban boredom, relieved by bowls newspapers films radio and library novels, my uncle died in a house surrounded by a desert of concrete, and crammed to the doors and windows with vast quantities of expensive rubbish. All decided upon and bought by my aunt of course.*[8]

The suburb, in Nationalist discourse, is a female and materialist plot — the thing that keeps a man from his mind or his mates.

> *Acquiring wives of preoccupation instead*
> *of mates and they since then have held us aloof.* [9]

The suburb is that from which the good keen man must escape. To do what? To return to properly masculine values. To lie with the hills like a lover.

But Killeen's and Scott's attitude is not so simply determined. *Their* suburbia *(its* blessed days of endless blue) might as well be claimed as the object of celebration as of derision. Killeen's and Scott's suburbia seems to insert itself precisely into the slash of fissure between urban and rural, and so to disallow the stock opposition of city to country in Nationalist discourse, or, at least, to blunt that sharp dichotomy in which the rural is invariably privileged, and the urban despised. Killeen's and Scott's painting of suburbia marks, in any case, the

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[7] Roger Horrocks, 'Reading and Gender -- Watching Them Change', *Antic*, no. 1, 1986, p. 118.

[8] Frank Sargeson, 'Up Onto the Roof and Down Again', *Landfall*, vol. 4, no. 4, December 1950, p. 284.

[9] Noel Gin, 'The Mates', *Landfall*, vol. 3, no. 2, June 1949, p. 105.

historical change Frederic Jameson points to: 'the replacement of the old tension between city and country, centre and province, by the suburb, and by universal standardisation; and the growth of the great networks of highways, the arrival of automobile culture'.[10]

fig. 30 *Man and window reflection*, 1968

Now that a McCahon-like landscape of dark, bush-clad hill may reflect in one of Killeen's suburban windows, or come through its glass, now that the suburbanite may read his morning paper, and a child may lick his ice cream amidst what were once the undefiled realms of the spirit, the old Nationalist antithesis of country and city is somewhat undone. (See Killeen's *Man and window reflection*, 1968; **[fig. 30]** *Boy eating ice cream*, 1968, **[fig. 31]** and *Man, land, sea and sky*, 1968. **[fig. 32]**) Killeen's paintings of the late 1960s like *Car, cloud and hill* **[fig. 27]** (a 'bland sleek automobile'), or *Man and truck,* and *Bulldozer*, 1968 **[fig. 33]** mark the opening of the way into the country for highway and suburb, and refuse the old Nationalist distaste for the car as that which destroys a properly regionalist rootedness.[11] Killeen's paintings of highway

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[10] Fredrick Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', ed. Hal Foster, *The Anti Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1983, p. 124.

[11] The car, in 20th century culture, has been the symbol of mobility, of the possibility of escape: the very opposite of regionalist rootedness. Hence, no doubt, the car's infrequent appearance in regionalist art. It was for the Nationalist terrible to contemplate the upheavel in transport, which might prove to be a demographic and moral upheaval also. The Nationalist essayist and mystagogue M.H. Holcroft, for instance, wrote that 'When a future generation arrives, with more and more people striving to emulate their neighbours and ride the brief waves of prosperity above four gleaming wheels, it may be found that this kind of ownership is different from the possession

and road signs celebrate the coming of automobile culture; while his and Scott's painted suburbia repeatedly mimes that universal standardisation in which the house of the New Zealand small town, and the 'isolated' farmer's house, have become quite indistinguishable from the house in the city suburb.

fig. 31 *Boy eating ice cream*, 1968

of a house in that it loosens the roots instead of settling them...' M.H. Holcroft, *Discovered Isles*, Caxton Press, 1950, pp. 44 - 45.

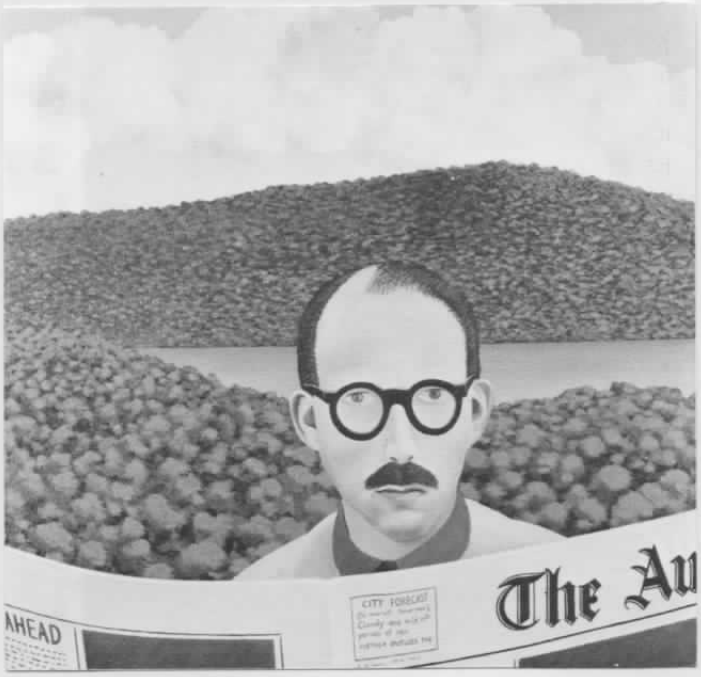

fig. 32 *Man , land, sea and sky,* 1968

fig. 33 *Bulldozer*, 1968

Now that, as in Trussell's distressed realisation, 'The basic architecture of the Christchurch suburb is the same as that of the Northland farmhouse', now that the corruption has spread countrywide, how to return suburbia to shepherd and farmer, who have already become suburban themselves? Now that, as in Scott's perverse fantasies, the suburban weatherboard may intrude even on a bushwalk in the beech forest, or upon Mitre Peak, Mt. Cook and Mt. Sefton, now that suburbia smiles in its possession even of Nature's most cosmic spectacles, how can the Nationalist distinctions survive? **[fig. 34]**

fig. 34 Ian Scott, *Mitre Peak next door*, 1967

In the late 1960s, at the same moment that Nationalism finally loses its power as the main motive force of New Zealand art, art's flight to the country is largely abandoned by a new generation of painters. We can see this happening, with particular clarity, in the art of Richard Killeen and Ian Scott, whose suburbia paintings might be called the crucial occasion of this turning away. In Killeen's and Scott's works, painted over the two brief years of 1968 and 1969, the subject changes from the regionalist's requisite rural to a new kind of regionalism of suburbia, which is at once the assertion still of regionalist concerns, though applied now to a new site, and, increasingly, a submitting of those concerns to question — to an interrogation in which they will be, in the end, forever undone.

Killeen may be said to turn now from a 'man with a landscape in his head', **[fig. 35]** to a 'man with an armchair in his head'. **[fig. 36]** The armchair looms large in Killeen's paintings of 1969, outnumbering the figures by far. Armchairs are become beings, companions say of Killeen's *House lady*, as she exercises or reclines. Killeen's female suburbanite is inside the house, cut off from the world of event: she dances alone with chairs as audience and partners. If she is in active pose — traditional attribute of the male — it is an inutile action, one which is less act than reflection, since the only body the act may affect is her own. And that body too, perhaps, is but an object, a possession which she must 'husband', to keep it, like all the furniture of her life, in perfect condition. As for the male of the species — see him again with his head full of chair (*'Man with*

chair in head'): the male mind, too, it seems, is constituted by the objects at once of its desire and its consumption.

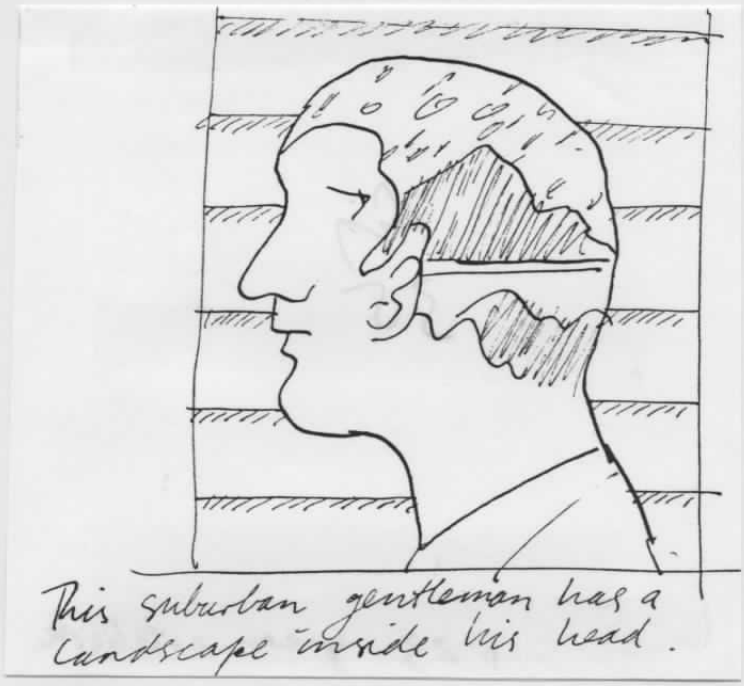

fig. 35 Page 23, green notebook

fig. 36 *'Man with chair in head'*, 1969

fig. 37 *Woman dancing in blue*, 1969

fig. 38 *House lady*, 1969

Emotions are rarely displayed in Killeen' suburbia — if they are displayed they are not shared. An exercising woman is caught in the pose of an ecstatic maenad, but it is an ecstasy only of a body's exertion, and one which finds no echo in her surrounds. **[fig. 37]** A woman leans against a living room wall and smokes, in a space of countable objects; gazes blankly over what Ruskin would call the fatal newness of the furniture, over things which have no patina of memory or use. **[fig. 38]** But we are given no reason to think that Killeen regards them as fatal, nor even — as yet — the lot of the woman: here things might seem simply to be, so permissive of our opinion that we may bring to them what we will.

But we should not forget, perhaps, that it was in these years that the term 'suburban neurosis' was popular. Nor should we forget, perhaps, the contrary case of suburbia as an Arcadia. Ian Scott, Killeen's art's closest companion in

But we should not forget, perhaps, that it was in these years that the term 'suburban neurosis' was popular. Nor should we forget, perhaps the contrary case of suburbia as an Arcadia. Ian Scott, Killeen's art's closet companion in these years, was later to say, in words which would well describe many a suburban picture by himself or by Killeen:

> *I happen to like the suburban landscape, with its neatness, bright colours, clean edges — an area of white weatherboards, a touch of bright red curtain to one side, green hedge in front, a blue sky above: it's what I see from my studio window — a very arbitrary, scattered, yet very even sort of colour-order — that is suburbia'.* [12]

And so too, it may be, did Killeen like such things, or, at least, their patterns of which he made patterns.

The props of Killeen's theatre of suburban life, however often repeated, are limited in number. One could easily make a list of them — their very repetition and interchangeability from one painting to another encourages it. Curtain, armchair, lamp, lampstand, picture, carpet, mat, table, telephone, wall, picture, window, holland blind, venetian blind, roadsign, hedge, tree, lawn, corrugated iron, white weatherboard, a sky patch of invariable blue. That, I think, is the lot. They are become interchangeable signs, moved from one painting to another, and interchangeable forms which Killeen may arrange as he will.

In fact, during the preparatory stage of Killeen's suburbia paintings, their forms were sometimes literally interchangeable. For some of the later suburbia paintings, Killeen used to have large forms cut out of paper, a 'man' form, say, which might be stood up in an interior, and then in a suburban street; lain horizontally, it might, purely by virtue of its position, become 'dead man'. These paper cut-outs could be shifted at will from one painting to another, and could be stuck down on any painting. They were 'stuck' by the simple device of arranging them on the studio wall until a satisfactory composition was arrived at, tracing the arrangement onto a large sheet of tracing paper, and transferring that tracing to the board.

Killeen's art, then, is no longer a realist art, in the topographic sense of

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[12] Ian Scott, quoted in 'Ian Scott Talks About his Lattice Series', *Art New Zealand* 13, 1979, p. 34.

realist — the portrait of some specific and specified location — it is (already, as in the cut-outs it will be) an art of made and moveable signs; it consists of cut-outs stuck down, frozen and fixed.

Nor (except for several portraits of the painter — pictures in pictures, where Killeen arrives like a visitor to his own suburbia, as if to say, 'Even in Arcadia am I'), **[fig. 37]** are there portraits of persons any more than there are of places. Killeen's suburban woman, say, is but a *type*. Though necessarily she has some individual features (no one painted figure can be quite like another), she is, nevertheless, a normative individual, chosen for her canonic generality. And the same is so of Killeen's suburban man. He is nothing but a generic term.

Emotions, as I have said, are rarely displayed in Killeen's suburban pictures: in their signs of 'person', whether of 'man' or 'woman', neither facial expression or pose much exhorts us to feel. Nor does facial feature much touch as a phrenological sign. There are no very clear signs of cruelty of kindness, of intelligence or stupidity, such as we find in classic painting; and these faces are seldom assigned the signs either of beauty or ugliness. If, as Proust has said, the features of the face are gestures, the very lack in Killeen's suburban pictures of much specificity of face outside the generality of 'man's face' or 'woman's face', is a refusal to grant them any too precise an emotive significance.

In classic painting, in Roland Barthes' words, 'gestures are deflected from their corporeal fields, immediately assigned (by a haste that resembles fear of the body) to an ideal signification', and *movement* is 'a word all of classical civilisation has continually shifted from the body to the soul.'[13] The classic painter's aim, as Alberti has it, is to 'reveal, by the movements of the body, the almost infinite movements of the heart.'[14] So we are moved by classic painting. In Killeen's suburban paintings, however, on the rare occasions where movement is present, it is a movement only of the body. A man walks. A woman exercises. But there does not seem to be 'what Baudelaire calls the emphatic truth of gesture that we find in demonstrative painting'.[15] Killeen's figures are *un*demonstrative, indeterminate: they seem to be only what they are in their

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[13] Roland Barthes. I have been unable to trace the source of these remembered words.

[14] Leon Battista Alberti, in *Leon Battista Alberti on Painting and Sculpture: the Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, ed. & transl. Cecil Grayson, Phaidon, London, 1972, p. 81.

[15] Roland Barthes, 'The Plates of the Encyclopaedia', *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, Hill & Wang, New York, 1982, p. 232.

corporeal field — or what they do: there is no emphatic deflection to meaning.

To the 'suspended, over signifying gesture' of classic painting, says Barthes, 'we must give the name *numen*, for it is indeed the gesture of a god who silently creates fate, i.e., meaning'.[16] Killeen's figures, considered in this classic sense, approach the meaningless: they have no — or very little — demonstrative solicitude for us. We are unhectored by gesture, we are left to make what meaning we will.

Nor even are Killeen's humans made much superior in status to objects: the people in the pictures are no more expressive, mostly, than the things. A man is made as immobile as a mat; and in paintings like *Two women and a chair*, the title too grants humanity no more or less importance than an item of furniture. And yet this, I would suggest, is less to impugn the suburbanite, or to accuse the suburbanite of a complacent materialism, than it is to remove 'man' from the central position in which a discredited humanism had placed 'him', and to begin to offer a world in which no thing is privileged above any other. It is to begin already to open the door to that Killeenian democracy of which the cut-outs will be the most resounding expression.

That interiority is denied which humanism (the bourgeois, capitalist ethic) had granted to 'man'. The human is shown by Killeen not as an individual interiority, but as an object of objects, a creature defined and constituted by the objects with which it surrounds itself, and which are inscribed by capitalism as a need within it. (See again the painting *Chair in head*.) If in the cut-outs, humans will seldom be represented, but only human signs and artifacts, here, already, the status of humans is no higher than that of the objects with which they are surrounded

In the words of a note Killeen made in 1969, what is suggested is that' in the eyes of the universe everything is the same — equal':[17] an effect connoted too by the compositional methods of the suburbia paintings (as it will be from now on throughout the oeuvre), where there is a tendency to refuse to grant anything the too privileging place of centrality. In the words of another Killeen note of 1969:

No single person prominent

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[16] Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 232.

[17] Killeen, the green notebook, p. 44.

...
all overness
...
non classic composition
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 39)

We return now, at the last, to that first of our questions. Might Killeen's suburbia be the object of celebration or derision?

Somewhere behind Killeen's suburbia painting, and perhaps still more in its modes of content than in its form, is American Pop art, with its (ironic? affectionate?) celebrations of the urban banal, for which Killeen's suburbia might be said to be an American equivalent. And by Killeen's works too the question is raised that Baudrillard has asked of Pop paintings: if they smile, is it the cool smile of critical distance, or is it the smile of collusion?[18]

fig. 39 *Housetrap*, 1987

Or might there be here a social critique? Might we say of Killeen's woman as she leans and smokes against a living room wall, 'the jobless housewife is bored sick'?[19] The lamp, the coffee table, the venetian blind: are these the accoutrements of a modern Melancholia? Might we say: 'It is easy to surround

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[18] Jean Baudrillard, 'Is Pop an Art of Consumption?', *Tension* 2, September/October 1983.

[19] Gunther Grass, *From the Diary of a Snail*, transl. Ralph Manheim, Penguin, London, p. 260.

her with the products of a sterile perfection... In a moment she will open her little box of Librium or inject herself with something or other'.[20] Is she caught in a *Housetrap*? **[fig. 39]** Could it be said of the suburbanite of *Man and window reflection* that he is bowed down as if by the weight of an existential nullity? **[fig. 30]**

Killeen once wrote next to a sketch in the green notebook:

As ill at ease as a shareholder
Bulky and impressive in a blue suit
Immensely sincere and deeply implicated
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 25)

and reworked it on another occasion:

As ill at ease as a shareholder
Bulky and impressive in a blue suit
He seems oddly confused
Wearing a black roll sweater
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 138)

These are not formalist descriptions, since they speak of clothes as of a vestimentary language, and not as a mere pattern of colours and shapes. Yet they are the only notes which suggest any satiric intent towards the suburbanite, apart from a question Killeen asks himself in his green notebook: 'some vindictive titles?',[21] and answers, perhaps, some pages later:

dead uninsured insurance agent
dead car salesman
squashed car salesman
car salesman run over by a car
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 138)

There may be, then, in the calm lawns of Killeen's suburbia, some occasional snakes in the grass. Yet there are no such titles to the suburbia paintings, and

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[20] Gunther Grass, op. cit., p. 260.

[21] Killeen, the green notebook, p. 113.

mostly Killeen's subjects are those of an achieved order, not news items, they are entirely uncatastrophic.

Below a series of suburban sketches in the green notebook, Killeen writes: 'On the one hand I have banality of subject — on the other pattern making'.[22] We have here, in such seeming separation of 'subject' and 'pattern' the source of a certain critical difficulty for those who have tried to determine which is Killeen's prime interest, subject or pattern, and who have tended to assume that his attitude to his subject must be satiric:

Certainly, Killeen as 'social commentator', as Docking has it, is a plausible reading.[23] But Killeen's subject is the banal, less perhaps in the sense of the trite or the vulgar, the trivial or the petty, to which he might feel an amused superiority, than it is the banal in the sense of the commonplace. It is, just as it is with Scott, his view through the studio window. It is, Killeen says to me today, 'just what was about me' — it was, and is, *where he lives*. It is no accident, then, that Killeen, by means of a self-portrait, should show himself within the suburban walls. **[fig. 37]** The self-portrait is a graffito on the suburban wall which announces: *Killeen was here.*

A number of Killeen's own slides of his work are unintentionally instructive in this respect: they show his paintings of suburban lawn, white weatherboard, and so on, standing on a real suburban lawn, or leaning against real white weatherboards — no doubt for the purpose of getting more light for the camera. He might still say in 1969, as he said in 1966, 'a painter should begin in his own surroundings'. The banality of Killeen's suburbia, in its substantive, non-pejorative sense of ordinariness, is the point. The condition it may be said to reveal is the lot or the aspiration of the urban bourgeoisie, in so many New Zealand cities and towns, and now even of country dwellers: it might seem ordinariness itself.

What satire there is in Killeen's and Scott's paintings of these years is perhaps, therefore, directed less against their fellow suburbanites, than against Nature as the realm of pure spirit, Nature as it is found in a Nationalist art, where it is the site of the Cosmic, and of the inscribed speech of the Christian God.

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[22] Killeen, op. cit., p. 10.

[23] Gil Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting*, A. H. & A. W. Reed, Wellington, 1971, p. 201.

Instead of biblical episodes set in the New Zealand landscape, as with McCahon, instead of Christ bleeding into the New Zealand hills, or the artist as bleeding Christ, we now have a military exercise, the soldier practising for Vietnam, or a weekend trip and family snapshot, or a bulldozer at work — a Nature of the military, of the tourist and of the worker, a Nature of material and human use. An acerbic and politicised materialism answers here to a patriarchal transcendentalism. Where God's words have been habitually inscribed in New Zealand skies and hills, the aeroplane crash and the daily newspaper must, in their very banality, jar: they come as a spectacle at once amusing, corrective, and abrasive.