

1969: more crops: the frame refused?

Composition is largely determined by the frame's imprisoning grasp. It is as though the frame is a kind of 'square mouth' whose cry remains trapped within, as an endless echo of its own shape. The frame imposes an invisible grid of horizontals and verticals on the painting. It is as though painting's only task were to make it visible. Forms tend to be placed parallel to that grid's horizontals and verticals: so those of the frame are affirmed. Sides and centre too are determined by the frame; while what is centred by the frame becomes the most important — everything at the sides faces in to it.

Hierarchical composition is liable to result: some things important, some things less so; and hierarchical composition is what Killeen's painting everywhere seeks to avoid. As Killeen says:

With the rectangle you always have this difficulty that the centre is more important than the other parts of the painting; and when you say something like that, you're not thinking in a twentieth century way.¹

Composition is largely determined by the frame: but the artist may contrive that it not seem so. One such contrivance is cropping, where depicted objects are sliced by the frame.

Throughout 1968 and 1969 — his 'realist' period — Killeen's frames perform some rather startling crops. In the suburbia paintings, the crops are at first simply those allowed by classic convention, quite classic mutilations. That of the portrait bust, for instance, wherein it is considered normal to chop off the personage's head above the breast, amputating also the arms; or the kind required by the 'half-length', where only the upper part of the body is kept. There are also figures sliced off at the knee, another classically permitted performance, and others sliced at various intermediate places between these favourite classical cuts.

But all these cuts are so conventional that we hardly notice them at all. They are still, that is, entirely within the bounds of classic art. Nor is there

¹ Killeen interviewed by Martin Rumsby, 'Blue Triangles', *Craccum*, no. 17, 5 May 1981.

anything about the expression of the figures to suggest they are disturbed at being so cut, for they bear it stolidly enough. Only one figure (cropped at the knees) is seen to scream (or is it to laugh?).



fig. 40 *People passing*, September 1969



fig. 41 *Street steps*, December 1969

There are more severe crops, and more startling. In *People passing*, the most foreground figure is longitudinally split by the frame, as well as chopped off by it at the knees. [fig. 40] *Street steps* has its central figure's head chopped off just below the shoulders. [fig. 41] A number of paintings — *Three coloured*

blocks and *Lamp lady*, for instance — show looming, close-up profiles severely sliced by the verticals of the frame, their heads longitudinally fissured, and giving, with a brusque juxtaposition of near and far, onto a mid-distance scene. [figs. 42, 43] In a series of little paintings on glass, the woman suffers (much as she had in Lichtenstein's paintings) being chopped into even smaller pieces: in some frames we see only a lip, or an ankle or two [fig. 44] (a pre-echo, one might say, of the still more violent croppings in some cut-outs of 1985, where there are heaps of cropped fingers, or fish heads). [fig. 2]



fig. 42 *Three coloured blocks*, 1969



fig. 43 *Lamp lady*, 1969



fig. 44 *Lips*, 1969

Cropping is usually celebrated as though it were an invention of the Impressionists (though it was used in the Renaissance and earlier), and it is regarded as an influence from photography, or of Japanese prints, which also use it. The Impressionist version of the crop is commonly called 'a slice of life', and it is said to imply an advance in naturalism, a greater spontaneity of vision.

But we do not see life sliced at its edges. The eye dances, sees neither edge nor end. Cropping is no more than a pictorial convention, serving to represent an unordered (that is, *unrepresented*) world beyond another pictorial convention, that of the frame. Or (and this is a rarer usage, and one never, so far as I know, previously remarked), cropping may serve to suggest, as in its most severe elisions in Renaissance art, a severance in the normal order of things — in a martyrdom, a miracle, or a battle — a disruption of the world's usual physical orders.

Not that one can come free of the frame, ever. It is quite inescapable. The Impressionists, if they thought to come free of its imprisoning grasp, relocated it, merely. And the same is so for Killeen, from the realist works right through. Killeen's work, which, after a long struggle, might seem in the cut-outs at last to have escaped the frame's golden grasp, will find, as if to its chagrin, that the wall itself has become frame. Not to speak of 'frames of mind' — of the art frame of mind, say, the frame in which an object is seen to be art, and so made to be art; not to speak of all the mind's ways of framing, of limiting, of creating, of clasping, the thing which they frame.

In Killeen's compositions of 1968 and 1969, the painted forms, while seeming in some part to refuse the ordering imposed by the frame, more numerous accept it. For instance: all of the heads cropped by the left vertical of the frame have their backs to the left, and most of those cropped by the right

vertical have their backs to the right: the frame determines that they face in to the centre, place of privilege, itself only central by virtue of the frame. And the compositions are in the main horizontal and vertical, affirming the horizontals and verticals furnished by the frame — diagonals, where there are diagonals, telling merely as rents in a largely horizontal and vertical weave.

I have already compared cropping to a synecdoche, the rhetorical substitution of a part for a whole. Synecdoche, according to an analysis by the linguist Roman Jakobson,² was fundamental to the literary images of 19th century Realist writers; and, according to a more recent account by Linda Nochlin, it 'constituted an important strategy of pictorial invention as well, a way of avoiding the closure imposed by traditional narrative compositional devices'.³

Since when a frame is present, the frame's closure may not in fact be avoided — *there can be no non-closure* — cropping, it might now better be said, is a way of *signifying* non closure, of signifying the continuous world beyond. Everywhere representation is, there are frames. Since the world is not framed, nor the things in it, the frame is that which marks the picture off from the world, *the sign of its difference, the sign of depictivity* — that level on which the painting asserts itself as depiction, utters its representationality. For the frame announces representation, speaking it through its own square mouth: it is the required opening to the classical scene of representation.

The frame, as a requisite of the view, has come to *mean* the view: the frame is the window frame, window to the world, as in Alberti's classic Renaissance definition of the picture.⁴ To abandon the frame is thus to abandon classic representation; and no realism, including the Renaissance kind, the 19th century kind, or even — as yet — Killeen's, is ready or able to do that...

A nice Mallarmé metaphor speaks of what the 19th century saw as 'a new way of cutting down pictures': a way which has served all realisms since as a reality sign, and yet which has, as Mallarme says, 'all the charm of a merely

² Roman Jakobson, 'The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles', *Fundamentals of Language*, the Hague, 1956, pp. 76-82.

³ Linda Nochlin, 'Manet's Masked Ball at the Opera', in Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, Harper and Row, New York, 1989, p. 4.

⁴ Leone Battista Alberti *On Painting and On Sculpture: the Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, ed. & transl. Cecil Grayson, Phaidon, London, 1972, p. 55.

fanciful boundary, such as that which is embraced by one's glance at a scene framed by one's hands'.⁵

Though 19th century Realist cropping was not quite as novel as Mallarme and subsequent writers have claimed, what *was* somewhat original about 19th century cropping was the compositional asymmetry it sought to impose on the *main* figures of its painting. For though the Renaissance painting might crop its *subsidiary* figures, it sought everywhere else for a symmetry which, disposed to the left and right of a central vertical axis, was the picture's most flagrant artifice. Asymmetry, then, might be used to connote the *absence* of artifice. And so it was, according to 19th century theorists of the crop; and so it is commonly still said to do today. Duranty, for a 19th century instance, suggests an asymmetrical placing of figures (such as we find in Manet or Degas, or in the realist Killeen), to suggest the unpredictability and constant changefulness of life. To achieve that asymmetry, Duranty suggests cropping the figure in the same places as we have seen Killeen crop it: 'Sometimes it may appear cut off at mid leg, half length, or longitudinally'⁶

Ian Scott's Honours thesis, 'New Realism', presented just two years before Killeen's suburban crops, subscribes to what is essentially still Mallarme's idea of the glance, when it describes 'the way a photo slices out a fragment of reality, cropping a figure short, so that the composition has the unbalanced look of life taken unawares'.⁷ Scott, a painter at that time very close to Killeen, and soon to exhibit in a two-person show with him, proclaims the 'slice of life' in much the same way as the Realist writers proclaimed it.

But another, non-realist, interpretation is possible. Nochlin makes the novel — and I think entirely convincing — suggestion that cropping has another, *non* realist significance, and one — as it happens — entirely in accord with the claims I have made of the frame as a sign of otherness from the world: 'it also functions as a signifier of artifice which points to the painter's deliberate and wilful choice'.⁸

⁵ Mallarmé, cited by Jean C. Harris, 'A Little-known essay on Manet by Stephane Mallarme', *Art Bulletin*, December 1964, p. 561; cited Nochlin, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁶ Duranty, 'La Nouvelle Peintre: a propos du groupe d'artistes qui expose dans les galeries Durant-Ruel', 1876, ed. M Guerin, Paris, 1946 pp.46-47, cited Nochlin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁷ Ian Scott, 'New Realism', Diploma of Fine Arts with Honours thesis, University of Auckland.

⁸ Linda Nochlin, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

This is the function, I want to suggest, that cropping has in Killeen's realist works: it serves to mark that such excitation as there is in his bland suburban world is formal only: a matter of the painter's sudden moves, of form, not content — in as much as they may be separated — of the signifier, not the signified. It draws attention to the artist's act: to cropping in its sense of 'cropping up' — turning up unexpectedly — as does the frame with such suddenness here, at the artist's will or whim. It is not so much reality, then, which is signified by the crop, as it is, in Mallarmé's words, 'the charm of the merely fanciful'.

Cropping, then, is another device by which realism is at once asserted and erased. *Realism*. It is at once an assertion of reality (its unpredictability, its continuousness), and a submitting of that assertion to artifice. By so submitting realism to artifice, the crop submits it to question, for realism is the style which pretends to be no style at all, to have no 'ism' to its real — no artifice. Realism pretends to nothing but truth (of the eye, the heart, etc.), and wants to pretend there is no artist present, and no frame by which the real is viewed. Cropping, on the contrary, by so asserting the frame, by so drawing our attention to it, suggests that the frame is not only that through which reality is viewed, but that it is that by which reality is *made*: that the frame, as in Barthes' famous words, *creates the scene*.⁹

We have here, then, in Killeen's croppings, a sort of exacerbation of the frame or edge, and an exacerbated consciousness of it. Killeen's fissuring the surface of his works by means of the framing edges of number of panels in 1966, 1967, 1968, and 1969, and his cropping by means of the frame, are the first moments in his work of such an exacerbation. Later, in the paintings of 1972, having come to realise the consubstantiality of the frame and view, he will attack the frame, cutting it, burning it, heaping it with extraneous objects, so further exciting our sense of it, and further affirming its materiality. He will even place frames *inside* pictures, so that if there *is* still a view, it is that of the framed frame. He will try to deny such view as remains by making the frame excessively material and visible. All such aggravations of the frame, all such an insistence on bringing it to consciousness, are the precondition of his later abandoning it: only by so working away at the frame, can Killeen's art come to point where it may do away with it for good.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. Richard Miller, Preface by Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, New York, 1974, p. 54.

By affirming the materiality of the frame, by flaunting it instead of denying or concealing it, Killeen came to understand the frame as part and parcel of the 'view', as consubstantial with it, and not its mere adjunct or border. From now on, the frame was wedded to the view in Killeen's mind, so that when he wished to have done with the view, he must come, in the end, to have done with the frame, its corresponding and necessary complement. The crops and fissures, then, in the 'realist' paintings of 1969, are of the highest importance for the oeuvre to come: their very assertion of the frame prepares the ground for a later framelessness.