

Further fissures and ruptures in the view

... *This is no advancement,
the across the page composition creates a view
idea... but how to leave behind the view picture and keep the
surface breaks?*
(Killeen, 13 January 1968) ¹

The word 'view' here should be understood in two superimposed senses: that of the prospect, the scene, or the picture representing it, and in the sense of a mental attitude, a manner of considering the world, both of which senses are mingled too in 'viewpoint': that projective point from which, in classical perspective, the view is established.

Established: in that smooth and continuous surface, in that unity of the classical view, there is concealed the privileged viewer. The whole view *depends* upon that viewer's sovereign gaze, it hangs from him: the height of the horizon, who and what is high and low, what privileged by centrality, what put off to the side, what diminished by distance, what overlapped: all is established by him, the entire view ordered about his invisible but central presence before it. (*His* — it is no accident that I should constantly speak of the viewer as *he* not *she* — the classical view presupposes a male viewer.)²

That smooth classical mask over things had already been shattered, of course, in those vast tremors of a century in which classical thought is undone. But here, in Killeen's views, the first cracks were faint, I say and repeat. I note them, from the vantage of hindsight, as the merely preliminary warning of what in Killeen is to come...

¹ Killeen, Croxley LI- FLAT SCHOOL SKETCH BLOCK, note dated 13-1-1968.

² 'As recent analyses of the "enunciative apparatus" of visual representation -- its poles of emission and reception -- confirm, the representational systems of the West admit only one vision -- that of the constitutive male subject -- or rather, they posit the subject of representation as absolutely centred, unitary, masculine.' Craig Owens, 'Feminists and Postmodernism', *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1983, p. 58. See also Louis Marin, 'Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's 'The Arcadian Shepherds'', *The Reader in the Text*, ed. S. Suleiman and I. Crosman, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, pp. 293-294; and Christian Metz, 'History/Discourse: A Note on Two Voyeurisms', *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Britton, Williams, Brewster and Guzzetti, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982; and Craig Owens account of these analyses, 'Representation, Appropriation & Power', *Art in America*, May 1982, pp. 9-21.



fig. 45 The green notebook, page 16

Killeen's problem is 'how to leave behind the view picture and keep the surface breaks?' His first move, it seems, is to exacerbate the breaks still further, and to thrust them into new spaces, as if that alone might break up the view. Those preliminary fissures which had appeared first in the landscapes appear now in the suburban living room view — at first in the form of sketches. We might imagine these fissures as lines of censure through realism, whose effect is at once to proffer and to delete it, much as I tried to do when I wrote Killeen's realism like this: *realism*.

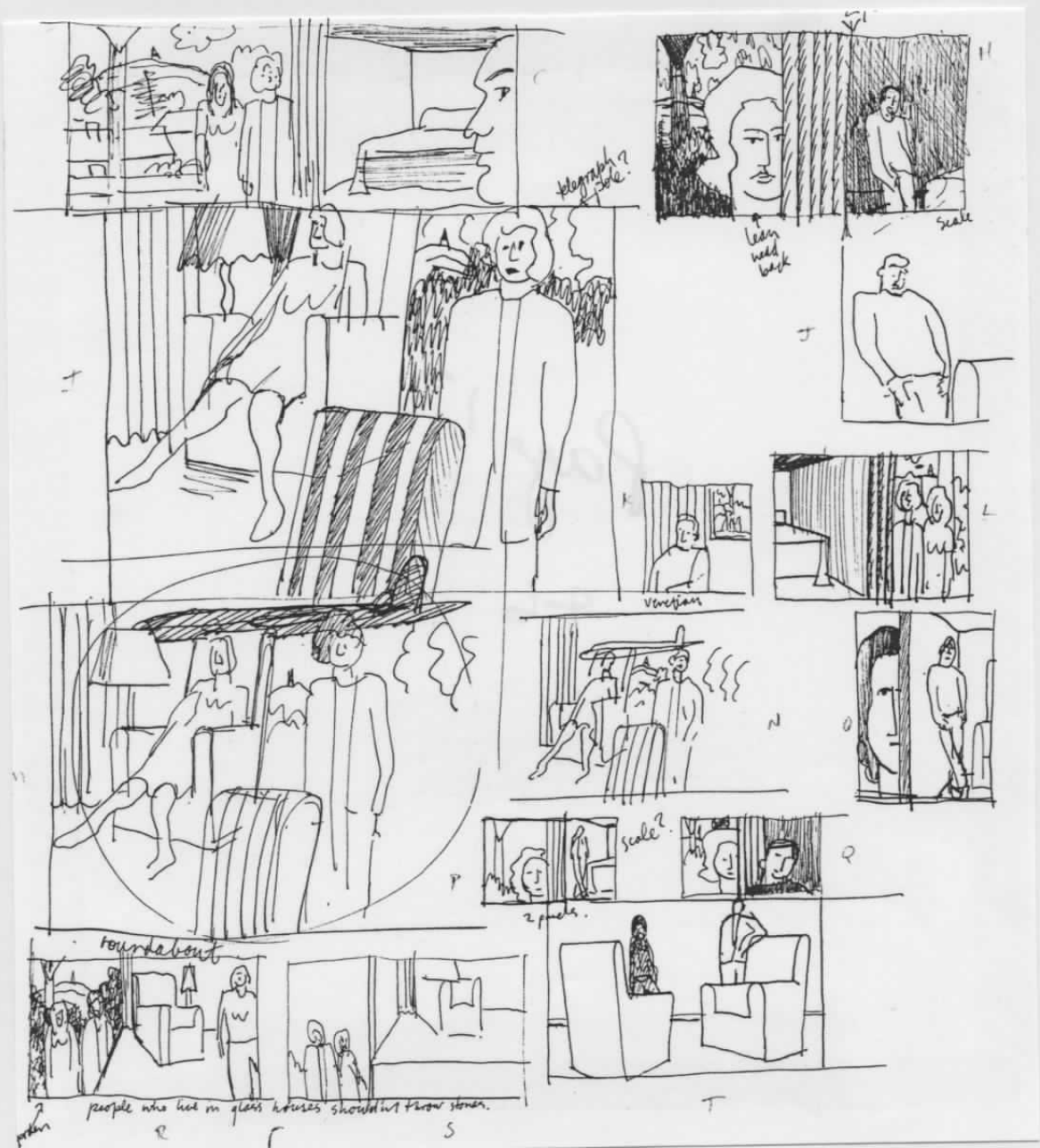


fig. 46 The green notebook, page 17

On pages 16 and 17 of Killeen's green notebook are fifteen little pen sketches of suburban living room views, some no larger than a postage stamp. They are experiments with varying degrees of discontinuity, some of them wholly or partially fissured by one kind or another of vertical, and one wholly split by a horizontal. [figs. 45 & 46]

Seven of these sketches are partially (timidly) split by a landscape come through the wall of an interior scene, which interior remains, nevertheless, continuous, and presented as if it were on a single panel. (That is, it has but one

rectangular frame.) In such sketches the classical unitary view is maintained, since an inside scene may well open, via window, to an outside — a device invented by the Boucicaut master, in the first decades of the 15th century, to signify, even in an interior, the existence of a continuous and potentially infinite space.³

However, in a somewhat unclassic fashion, Killeen masks off the window frame in five of these sketches, so that, by the refusal of sufficient explanation for it, the jump from inside to out is made a discomfort: it jars. A lamp, for instance, or an armchair, conceals the point at which inside and outside are in classic pictures reassuringly marked off one from the other, that, by the very irreducibility of this division, their antithesis might be maintained.

So here a landscape comes through a wall. By this removal of the rectangular certitude of the window frame, by this deliberate muddle of outside and in, whereby even an aeroplane may be permitted to fly through the placidity of a sitting room view, a classic antithesis is transgressed.

In one sketch, the ambiguities are such that — as if he himself were troubled by uncertainty as to what is outside and what in — Killeen has found it necessary to clarify which might be which by resort to an inscription. Above left of a lamp which conceals the inside/outside division, is the identifying inscription, 'wall', and above right of the lamp, the identifying inscription, 'sky'. And to the left of the sketch is the inscription: 'surface breakup'.

Surface breakup. Precisely what all these fissures are about, that break up of which the cut-outs will be the consummation.

Below the sketch we have been discussing is another, with three half-length frontal figures in an interior, which, bounded by a curtain, gives on to an exterior scene. Attached below is a long, horizontal panel, bearing another interior scene, whose seated woman is only one twelfth the scale of the figures in the panel above. Such a sharp horizontal cleavage, which cuts the picture plane right through, must irresistibly recall, to those who know of it, the Renaissance predella: the long, horizontal panel at the base of an altarpiece — literally, its *stool* — that on which the altarpiece sits. For in the predella, too, though there the

³ For an account of this invention, see Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: its Origins and Character*, Harper and Row, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, 1971, pp. 59-60

shock of the division between panels is cushioned by an elaborate frame, the figures and props are much smaller in scale than in the panel(s) above.

The close proximity of a framed, fictional space whose depicted objects are large in scale, to another framed, fictional space whose depicted objects are small in scale, tended in the Renaissance altarpiece, just as it tends in this Killeen sketch, to destroy any possibility of illusion. What we might be said to see in the Renaissance altarpiece is a number of disparate views presented as one cumbrous and elaborate *thing*. But Killeen, by presenting the two views (predella and main panel) without any separating frame, by so making the reality-destroying effect of the juxtaposition still more extreme, slices the classic view, as if with the blade of a penknife, a little 20th century slice of censure.

Not, of course, that we should make too much of this little cut — we can hardly forget what cubism had already done, and some good time ago, to the classic view: a total slicing up. Nor should we forget that Rosenquist, and other 'New Realist' painters had been for several years, as Killeen well knew, engaged in some startling slices and juxtapositions. Yet, it must also be remembered that in New Zealand the artist could not (and still cannot) gain direct access to European or American modernist painting. Killeen had never once seen a major modernist work, but had approached the originals only through the intermediaries of reproduction, or through the translations and reconstructions of McCahon, Mrkusich and Walters. The New Zealand artist has, as McCahon did with cubism in the 1950s, constantly to reinvent the wheel for him or herself, to see if it works.

But, just the same, a crack is now sketched by Killeen — if only sketched — in the calm surface of the Renaissance mirror, a break in the surface of the classic picture, which, in endless repetition, had called itself mirror of the world.

Realism cracked, one might say.

Killeen was not unaware of Quattrocento forbears of his framing devices — early Renaissance painting was the beloved ancestor of New Zealand's and America's regional realists, and it was the period most favoured by the students of his day.⁴ The frames of his sketches are predicated upon those of the 15th

⁴ It is significant that all of Killeen's student drawings from 'old masters' are from those of the Italian Renaissance; and that in the suburban sketches there are a number of Renaissance references, as where a Bellini type *sacra conversazione* is parodied, in a secular, suburban version, and inscribed 'tonal atmosphere (Bellini)'; or as where a figure leaning on the lower horizontal of the frame is inscribed: 'Venetian'.

century Italian altarpiece. He was trying to use such surface fissures as the Renaissance altarpiece allowed to break up the classic view, using its own devices against it, as it were, so that he might begin to cut his realism to bits...

Nor, it seems, was Killeen unaware that his rapid and unexplained conjunctions of interior/exterior constitute a disturbance of the calm certainties of the classic view, of its claims to a continuously measurable space. Besides two sketches, both of which have an exterior scene in the left panel in which a woman's head occupies half the surface, and both of which have an interior scene on the right panel, in which a standing man surprises us by being but half the size of that adjoining woman's head, Killeen writes the word 'scale?', once with, and once without, a query mark. [fig. 46] It seems he is conscious that to make such disjunctive scales and spaces so closely proximate is to disturb the classic view. He was conscious, at least, of a certain discomfort, of which his query remains as the mark.



fig. 47 The green notebook, page 18

Enough of these maniacal particulars. But we should see too the monoprints Killeen made of suburban subjects in 1969, for further inside/outside discomforts, where cloud-patterned wallpapers, for instance, are indistinguishable from cloud-patterned skies, [fig. 47] and we should remember the man with a landscape inside his head, and that other with an armchair inside, to which our observations of Killeen's mix up of outside and in will equally apply. [figs. 35 & 36]

Significantly, at the same time as Killeen tries to refuse, or at least somewhat to upset with his crops, the inside/outside, interior/exterior effects of the *frame*, he does the same with the interior/exterior closures of the *view*. In both refusals there is that 'edge emphasis' he speaks of in the green notebook, that same attention to boundaries, that same alertness to the border itself, which establishes an essential precondition for the invention of the cut-outs.

*Two directions — the breaking up of the picture plane
as a means of added realism, to replace 'view'
idea eventually — unstable. and
The stability of this subject matter and the desire
to make stable worlds out of it.
(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 16)*

Two directions, products of two (contradictory) desires. (Or so Killeen, as their first viewer and critic, rationalises these works.) First, the desire to destabilise the classic 'view', to undo the forms of a no longer tenable (no longer sufficiently *realistic*) reality: a desire evidenced in the fissured landscapes, in the first sentence of the above note, and in those few paintings of suburban subjects, which we will see in a minute, where the view is positively ruptured. Second, the apparent stability of the suburban subject, and the desire to make stable worlds out of it, in order to remain faithful to its placidity: a desire evidenced in the second sentence of the above note, and in nearly all of the suburbia paintings.

It is perhaps in part the second desire (that for order) which renders any actualisation of the first desire (that for a disordering of the traditional view) exceptional in Killeen's work at this stage. The sketches treated above *are* exceptional, as are those few suburban paintings in which the view is similarly split, for Killeen has yet to discover a means by which the old orders might be at once broken up and a new order achieved.

We come now to those few paintings of suburban subjects where the view is positively ruptured. *For what?*, 1969, [fig. 48] is a more radical version of that vertical split with which Killeen had fissured his landscapes, and which he had imposed on some of his suburban prints and sketches. It institutes a structural scandal, a self-contradiction of its own systems of spatial representation.

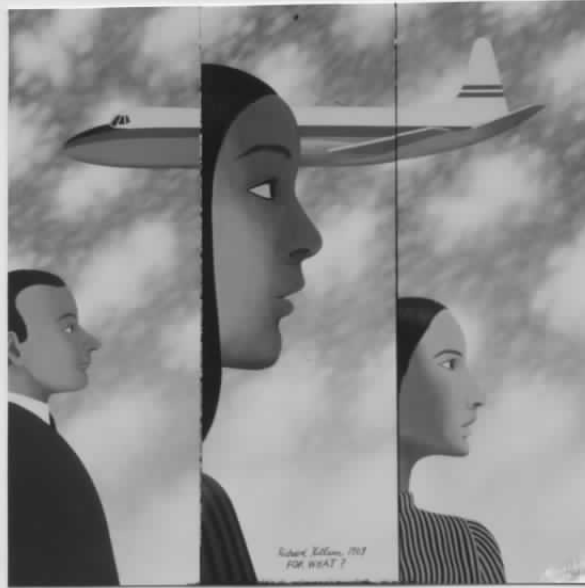


fig. 48 *For what?*, 1969

The three profiles of *For what?*, one per panel, are of three different scales, and each is severely cropped by the left edge of its panel. Three different spaces are thus signified, three different views, taken in the same vicinity or day (their sky and cloud type is the same), but, as signified by the code of diminution by distance, different in their distance from the viewer (close-up in the centre panel, medium long shots to the sides). And yet, the aeroplane in the sky, signified as behind the three profiles (overlapped as it is by all three), is continuous through all three panels, and so at the same distance from the viewer: no panel edge interrupts *its* continuity, no shift in distance from the viewer changes *its* scale from one panel to the next.

The aeroplane constitutes the represented space of the three panels as one (unified, continuous, potentially infinite): the profiles constitute it as tripartite (disunified, discontinuous, finite). The two spaces so asserted are irreconcilable (each refutes the other): there is only one site where they might meet in reconciliation, and that site cannot be the real world of space, nor the illusory world of its traditional representations. It can only be in the purely pictorial space of the picture surface.

With *Three coloured blocks* (c. 1969) this spatial scandal is moved indoors, where the proprieties of classical space are again somewhat outraged. [fig. 42] Across a single panel, divided by two vertical 'frames' (on which Killeen had intended to attach two wooden beadings), once again, the depicted space both *is* and *is not* continuous. Through three interior spaces otherwise

marked as discontinuous, since their depicted objects do not continue from one panel to the next, but are cropped off at each panel edge, there are, contradictorily, two continuous forms: the self-portrait which continues from the left to the central panel, and the chair or couch which continues from the centre panel to the right.

Three coloured blocks, three coloured panels, but no 'view'. No fixed viewpoint possible, no fixed distance. The ground of classic space begins to be cut from under our feet.

What is impossible, of course, is not the propinquity of the things represented in the three parts of the painting (all plausible enough in a suburban interior), but the very space in which a propinquity at once continuous and discontinuous might be possible. The classic kind of viewer, that unitary and centred creature, is necessarily somewhat baffled; and any attempt to construct a classic space is thwarted.

There is no ground on which such spaces, at once continuous and discontinuous, might meet, except the non spatial, purely mental ground of painting, or that physical ground, that board on which they are depicted. Where else could they be so juxtaposed except in the non-space of paint? For, though paint can spread them out before us, it can only do so in an unthinkable space, a space in which the harmonious relations of the classic view are undone.

In two paintings of January 1970, *Man walking in park*, [fig. 49] and *Three men and a dog*, [fig. 50] such spatial weirdness's are taken a step further, to a point where it must seem Killeen is on the edge of stepping completely outside the bounds of realism, or that he has already left them behind.

A sketch in the green notebook for *Man walking in park* is aptly characterised there by Killeen as 'man walking in park with surrounding area impinging on him'.⁵ Aptly, since a tree which is partly behind the man (so the code of overlapping suggests), comes also partly in front of him, uncomfortably squeezing between his legs; and another tree, which grows implausibly out of the first, grows in front of the man's upper torso. It is as if the background had somehow come unstuck, and got itself pasted on top of the foreground image.

⁵ Killeen, the green notebook, p. 54.



fig. 49 Man walking in park, January 1970

Foreground and background have begun to intermingle, as Killeen begins to work out what he will later call the 'means of the two systems interconnecting to provide areas in which the background areas come to the fore'.⁶ Which means is here a curious, hardly thinkable effect of what Killeen calls 'twisting in space — not of the whole object, but of its frontal plane only'.⁷ It is as if the figure and the objects were but paper cut-outs, flat, two-dimensional strips — only then could they be so woven together. It is, as in Killeen's later words, 'the beginning of not having a background at all' — the cut-outs' condition.⁸

A principle implicit in all the realist works is thus made flagrant: that they have tended, as Panofsky would say, to be 'stratified into a series of planes deliberately frontalised yet interconnected in depth.'⁹ The realist pictures had always inclined to the flat, to forms presented in strict frontality or in strict profile, presented, that is, parallel to the picture plane, and in their least space-creating aspect, so that the overall effect is of a series of flattened shapes, pasted one over the other.

This is particularly clear, perhaps, in those disembodied silhouettes of faces, minimally modelled, with which Killeen liked to startle his foregrounds

⁶ Killeen, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁷ Killeen, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁸ Killeen, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

— but see also *Man, land, sea and sky* 1968, [fig. 32] for a more typical instance, with its six parallel planes — newspaper, man, bush, water, bush, sky — stuck one over the other. The effect is so completely 'not of the whole object, but of its frontal plane only', that it is hard to imagine that there can be any continuous mass at all behind Killeen's sharply cut out figures — they 'give the impression of discarnate silhouettes rather than solid, space-displacing bodies'.¹⁰

Perhaps, then we should rephrase that nice Panofskian formula of a 'stratified relief space' to call this a 'stratified collage space', since the effect is so much of paper silhouettes glued one upon the other, and since, in fact, Killeen did use paper cut-outs as an aid in composing some of the later realist works.

Those effects we have seen, furthermore, where landscape is made to come through the wall of an interior scene, those rapid and unexplained interminglings of background/foreground by means of a window whose edges are masked, were already a 'means of the two systems interconnecting to provide areas in which the background areas come to the fore'.¹¹

Three men and a dog has a still more elaborately ambiguous intermingling of background and fore, a veritable weaving in and out, a kind of lattice of man, cloud, foliage and dog. [fig. 50] All three figures, and the foliage and cloud, are so variously intertwined as to be in part in front and in part behind each other, and there is also the dog which... Look at the picture. Spatially, it is an impossible situation — impossible, that is, in the real world, which realism claims to depict.

'Don't want depth room — constructed real space', a contemporaneous note in Killeen's green notebook says.¹² Here, Killeen is beginning to seek what he calls 'the general feeling of painting rather than the feeling given by reproduction of real space situation'.¹³ If the 'reproduction of real space situation' is here undone, if 'real space' is crossed out by the way the surrounding signs intermingle with the figure, and the way the background

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

¹¹ Killeen, the green notebook, p. 98.

¹² Killeen, *ibid.* p. 53.

¹³ Killeen, *ibid.* p. 53.

impingement on the figure carried out entirely by non-figurative patches of paint, a paint in which figuration is either absent or lost.



fig. 50 *Three men and a dog*, January 1970

*To achieve what I want at
present, objects and people
must not be placed together
as in reality but in a
painting relation, related to
the idea.*

(Killeen, the green notebook, p. 55)

And that, in the works of February, March and April 1970, is what is about to happen: paint will come into its own. And soon, Killeen will be allowing a far more implausible, that is, a non-realistic, propinquity of things — such conjunctions as armchair, snail, snake, elephant, and triangle. But here already, right in the middle of a placid realism of suburbia, we have the first brief ruptures in Killeen's work, the first signs of a break from from the old classic orders of space, that classic space from which, in the early months of 1970, Killeen will still more assertively try to part, and from which he will finally part, and sever all connection.

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