

Born alive in New Zealand: Killeen and the regionalist tradition

Of some two hundred and five cut-outs painted by Killeen, three have titles which spell out the name of a place -- one of which is not in New Zealand: *Murdering Beach, Dunedin* (February 1980), *Rainbow's Reach* (August 1980), and *From the Cairo Museum* (June 1985). Seven titles name two countries -- six titles for New Zealand: and one for Iran: *Born In New Zealand -- for Martin* (September 1985), *Born In New Zealand -- for Samuel* (October 1985) -- both celebrating the birth of a child; *Born Alive in New Zealand* in its four versions, two of October 1985, one of December 1985, and one of April 1986; and *Clay tokens from Iran*, September 1980. Ten titles, then, out of two hundred and five, clearly attend to locale. If the notion of region is stretched to its limit, the first cut-out, *Across the Pacific* (August 1978), might also be counted, and two called *Welcome to the South Seas* (October 1979 and March 1980), and another called *Welcome to the South Pacific* (November 1979). Fourteen titles, then, at most, out of some two hundred and five, pronounce a country, region or place.

It is necessary to hear Killeen's titles, with their relative paucity of local signature, in the context of the regionalism of painters like Rita Angus or M.T. Woollaston, nearly all of whose titles pronounce the name of a New Zealand person or place. Killeen's 'New Zealand' titles occur in the context of a powerful New Zealand Nationalist tradition, a regime whose loudspeakers endlessly announce the local, and endlessly denounce as un-New Zealand all art not locally coloured.¹ Such -- to borrow the words of a cut-out title -- is the New Zealand *Island mentality*.² Such is the context or framing discourse against which these Killeen titles react, in which they are read, and in which they find their richest resonance.

¹ From the 1930s through to today, 'internationalist' is the most frequent term of abuse for non-regionalist art.

² *Island Mentality no 1*, June 1981, *Island Mentality no 2*, July 1981. A note for a title, the black notebook, p. 224, specifically links the 'island mentality' with New Zealandness: 'Living in New Zealand -- Island mentality'. Below that note are the titles 'Born in New Zealand' and 'Born alive in New Zealand'. In a talk given at the Auckland City Art Gallery, Thursday 8 August 1990, Killeen stated that the the cut-out title *Island Mentality* came from a conversation with the Dutch-born photographer Arne Luit about the difficulties of living and working in New Zealand -- Luit had remarked that New Zealanders had an 'island mentality'. Killeen also noted the irony of his having to be exhibited under an Australian banner in order to appear at the 1990 Venice Biennale -- New Zealand art institutions, so Killeen remarked, themselves had an 'island mentality', and had no care to promote New Zealand art abroad. Similarly, he related of various works entitled *Inversion Layer*, that they referred to a layer which prevents things from rising, a layer strongly operative in 'our society'. One might also recall here as apposite the title *Flying above the negative society*, in Killeen's *Social Document* series.

From the the 1930s through until the 1970s, and sometimes even beyond, New Zealand art was judged -- by painter and critic alike -- for its New Zealandness. Critics reviled painters for not painting real New Zealand subjects; they celebrated those who did. Painting, it was said, should be painted *of* New Zealand, *by* New Zealanders, *for* New Zealanders.³

Killeen's titles like *Born alive in New Zealand* might properly be placed in the context of such claims as Professor James Shelley's that 'The interpretation of New Zealand requires a specialised viewpoint, that of the native born painter',⁴ or against poet and critic A.R.D. Fairburn's peremptory remark that 'we really are people of a different race, and have no right to be monkeying around with European culture'.⁵ (One might think here again of *Monkey's revenge* -- Killeen, in his consideration of Darwinian and post-Darwinian evolutionary theory, demonstrates that New Zealanders too may have something to say about the the highest achievements of European thought; he represents the triumph of intelligence over Nationalist rhetoric in its least anthropoid aspect.) These 1930s Nationalist proclamations come from the opening time of a rhetoric which continued powerfully through until the 1970s. Nor was a New Zealand nativity considered sufficient -- as late as 1990, New Zealand born artists may be castigated as un-New Zealand, as 'not New Zealand artists', should they dare to leave New Zealand's sacred shores.⁶ The rhetoric of a necessary New Zealandness continues to this day, and it is against and in it that Killeen's New Zealand titles sound.

If we go through all the paintings of the Nationalist period, that period directly preceding Killeen, there is hardly one which which does not in some way announce a specificity of place, and thereby justify its plea for a local consumer. Rita Angus' *Cass*, 1936, provides a well-known example. [fig. 216] The name of a place -- 'Cass' -- is literally inscribed in this painting as its largest signature. It is a potent legend: a more perfect answer may hardly be imagined to Allen Curnow's and the general Nationalist belief that: 'the signature of a region, like

³ My phrasing here echoes Allen Curnow's of a play 'which is of this people, by this people, from this people...', 'A Conversation with Allen Curnow, *Islands*, Winter 1973, p. 158.

⁴ James Shelley, (Christchurch) *Press*, 25 March 1933.

⁵ A.R.D. Fairburn, *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, p. 63.

⁶ The inclusion of the expatriates Boyd Webb and Bill Culbert in the Auckland City Art Gallery's NZXI, 1988, an exhibition which toured to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, provoked a storm of such abuse, as did the European curator René Block's selecting them as two of four artists to represent New Zealander in the Eighth Biennale of Sydney, 1990.

that of a witness written below the poet's, can attest value in the work.'⁷

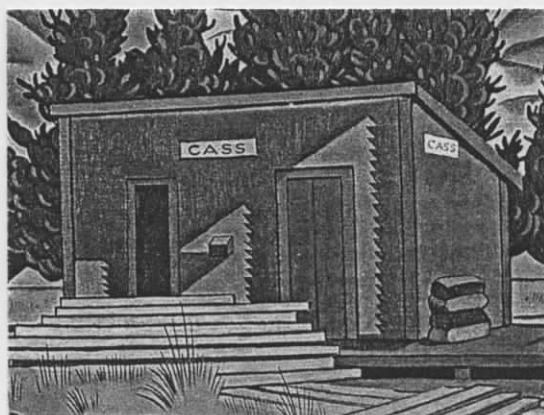


fig. 216. Rita Angus, *Cass*, 1936 (detail)

'Reality must be local and special at the point where we pick up the traces', so the New Zealand poet and anthologist Allen Curnow says in a famous passage, 'as manifold as the signs we follow, and the routes we take.'⁸ The 'local and special' argument, of which Angus' *Cass* is so successful a syllogism, was to last until regionalism's end. Even a painter like Killeen's teacher McCahon, whose mature work was infected with such a modernism that it is no longer possible to call him a 'regional realist',⁹ continued to inscribe his paintings with the name of a place. See, for instance, his all but abstract *Piece of Muriwai canvas*, part inscribed as it is 'Muriwai'. We are offered here, still, what Allen Curnow had emphatically called for, 'the signature of a region, like that of a witness', to 'attest value in the work'.

All of Nationalist painting was posed, and posed itself, as a kind of immense signature of place.¹⁰ Painting's signs became, from the 1930s on, a sort of sig-Nature, where New Zealand Nature might seem to sign itself. This is not only a matter of a signature as in *Cass*, where we may literally read the name of a place. It is also a matter of signature in the sense of the recognisable 'personal style' of a country or region, 'the set of idiomatic marks that a signer might leave by accident or intention in his product'.¹¹ It is signature as the 'style' of a place

⁷ Allen Curnow, *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960, p. 51.

⁸ Allen Curnow, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁹ 'Regionalist modernist' might be a more appropriate term.

¹⁰ By Nationalist painting I mean that New Zealand painting which from c.1930 -- c.1970 was concerned to discover (or to invent) an essential New Zealandness.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Signeponge: Signsponge*, transl. Richard Rand, Columbia Press, New York, 1984, p. 54.

or of a country; it is signature as the idiom of a local geomorphology and a local meteorology -- as with the much proclaimed 'harsh clarity' of New Zealand light, which is endlessly claimed to have signed the painting 'New Zealand' as if all by itself.¹² So Nationalist painting offered also signatures of place which endeavoured to hide their inscriptive nature, which did not seem to be signs at all, pretending rather to 'stand as natural objects in the open air, in the sun, in the rain, in the wind'.¹³

New Zealand's signature, then, or the signature of a region of New Zealand, were for some forty years offered as an authenticating and contracting act, 'attesting value', as Curnow would say, like that signing you do on a cheque. It was as if the signature of the country or region allowed the country itself to speak, and to say: 'it is indeed I who here paints -- certified, affirmed on my honour'. It was as if New Zealand Nature *itself* countersigned the painting or poem. Nationalist art might, therefore, be defined as that art which, over a period of some forty years, erected a monumentalised signature of New Zealand, and made that signature into an institution.

Don't get me wrong. It is not that the signature of place is entirely lacking in post-Nationalist art such as Killeen's. As I say, Killeen does offer fourteen localist titles out of some two hundred and five titles. And there are, we will see, a number of what might be called regional signs scattered throughout Killeen's work -- a far larger number than the paucity of regional reference in his titles might seem to suggest. (Indeed, Killeen's signs might be read as engaging with a regionalist painting focused on things as treasured signs, as in Angus or Binney - he might be seen as at once *in* that tradition and as criticising it from without.) It is just that signature of place is no longer regarded as an absolute prerequisite, as the be-all and end-all of painting in New Zealand; it is just that it is far less often asserted today.

Furthermore, in a post-Nationalist art, that signing a painting 'New Zealand' which was an imperative under the Nationalist regime may now *itself* become the subject of painting. We have already seen that this is the case with Killeen's early *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?*, [fig. 17] which was

¹² For samplings and a discussion of this hard light rhetoric, see my 'Harsh Clarities: Meteorological Determinism Refuted', *Parallax* 3, Winter 1983, esp. pp. 24-27; my 'Nationalist Antitheses: a Compendium', *Antic* 1, June 1986, pp. 72-84.

¹³ Francis Ponge, cited by Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

not a Nationalist landscape, but rather a kind of meta-landscape which questioned the whole national landscape notion. Perhaps something of the interrogatory irony of *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?* persists in the cut-outs with 'New Zealand' titles -- it may be that Killeen's 'Born in New Zealand' is not a simple signature of place. Rather, perhaps, it is, at least on one level, an ironic citation of the Nationalists' requisite of a native nativity and viewpoint.

Certainly, such a citationality exists in a number of other 1980s New Zealand paintings. There is no doubt that in the 1980s a number of artists were concerned to investigate the rhetorics of what they saw as the now defunct, if interesting, Nationalist tradition. Ian Scott's *New Zealand Painting*, for instance, whose title is lettered large over a copy of McCahon's *The Promised Land* of 1948, clearly comments on the assertion of New Zealandness as a declaration of allegiance, and as trademark and promotional device -- 'New Zealand Painting' as in 'New Zealand Apples' -- an earlier Scott title -- or as in 'Made in New Zealand', or 'Buy New Zealand' -- meaning support the local product. Here, with Scott's aid, we may literally see Nationalist painting as posing what I have called 'a kind of immense signature of place'.

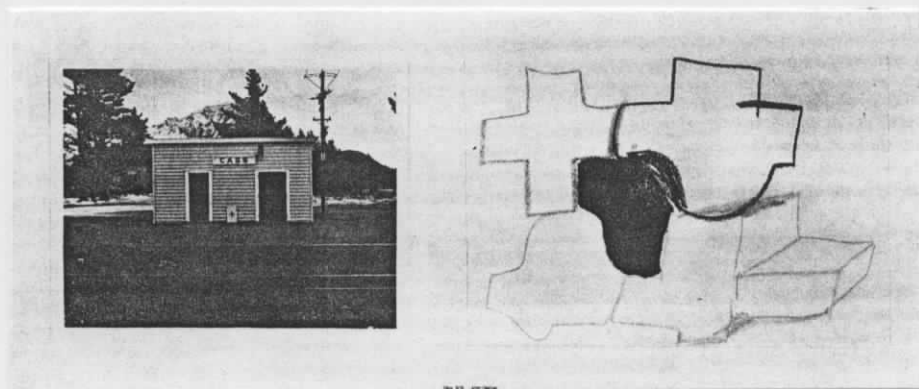


fig. 217. Julian Dashper, *Cass 8 / 10*, 1986

Dashper's *Cass 1 - 10*, 1986, similarly, may be taken to refer to the place of that name. But, for any viewer who knows something of New Zealand art, the word 'Cass' is far more likely to summon up the well-known and endlessly reproduced painting of that title by Rita Angus. Such was the success of the Nationalist project that today more people will know that painting than will know the place. Dashper himself made a pilgrimage to the place *because* it was the site signed in the locally famous painting. He drew a cross into 'his own' *Cass* in part because he saw a red cross there on a first aid box at the actual station -- 'because it was there', a true mark of place, as the Nationalist might stolidly say -- and in

part because so much Nationalist painting had taken place under the sign of the Christian cross. New Zealand landscape was, as Killeen comments: 'A landscape governed by the Christian cross'. So Angus's rural railway station becomes with Dashper a Station of the Cross.

For a post-Nationalist art, New Zealand is no longer as it had been for the Nationalists, an unknown landscape, 'a landscape with too few lovers',¹⁴ a landscape awaiting the paint which might serve to make it sufficiently known and loved. It is a landscape already much-ravished and loved: that which has long been prepared, posed, and anointed by painters and writers, powdered with pigments and words, mascara'd with ink, and lubricated with oils, made into a painted surface (Mallarme -- 'this art made of ointments and paints'): it is that which has already been covered over with paint and signed.

The New Zealandness of painters like Killeen, Dashper or Scott might then best be defined as the condition not of knowing a place called 'Cass', but of knowing a painting so named. The art of these painters is an art which knows -- with interest or distaste -- that the New Zealand landscape has been persistently represented as if it were signed under the sign of the cross. [fig. 218.]

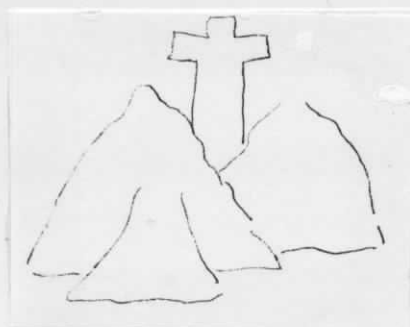


fig. 218. The black notebook, p. 211 (detail)

In any case, it was Killeen who first made that signing a painting 'New Zealand' which was an imperative under the Nationalist regime itself the subject of painting, and it was he who first made Nationalism's interminable litany of place an object of painted critique. He did this in *New Zealand Landscape Painting Tradition?*, 1971, and in all of the 'Goddam damn Home Sweet Hoooooome' works around it -- in his *Wish you were here*; in his *Postcard from here to the world*; in his *Godzone*; in his *Murderers from the Sea*; in his *Alive in*

¹⁴ This saying comes from the well-known inscription on McCahon's *Northland Panels*, 1958, National Gallery, Wellington.

New Zealand, in his *Been Rock*, and *Born in New Zealand*. It seems it was the birth of his son, and the birth of his sister's son, which provoked Killeen, a decade later, in the *Born in New Zealand* and the *Born alive in New Zealand* cut-outs, to think again about the matter of being born in New Zealand, and to revive the titles of his earlier considerations of that geographical fate.

*Born boiled bared buried
alive in New Zealand.*

(Killeen, *the black notebook*, p. 230)

Certainly, it seems that Killeen, like many of his generation, regards being born in New Zealand as a biographical fact -- whether pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be -- rather than as an aesthetic vocation...

Perhaps we should regard Killeen's re-issuing of his 1970s N.Z. titles, and his citation of the old Nationalist demands, not so much as a scene of hostility to the old Nationalist traditions, but rather as a of a kind of ironical 'creative revision'. 'For his art derives much of its power from its relation to history... and through a deliberate resume of his own earlier works. Irony is essential to his art, surely; but not as a means of negating history. Rather, it serves to distance his work from history, in order to see it again, anew, and then to represent it revised.'¹⁵

In Killeen's art, irony is 'a feint against the curse of Echo', which would have the artist dumbly repeat the precursor's speech, even when that precursor is the artist himself in an earlier incarnation. However, such Killeenian irony is not a total rejection, but rather 'a way of engaging and being sustained by history.'¹⁶

Killeen does not subscribe, in fact, to the simple old Nationalist opposition: regionalist/internationalist, though the old Nationalists, and their younger mouthpieces, may occasionally abuse him as 'blandly internationalist'. He is aware the dichotomy is a matter of polemics only, a mental fiction with no basis in fact, since the so-called regionalists are merely conservative internationalists,

¹⁵ James Cuno, 'Voices and Mirrors? Echoes and Allusions: Johns *Untitled*, 1972', in *Foirades and Fizzles: Echo and Allusion in the Art of Jasper Johns*, the Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987, p. 212.

¹⁶ James Cuno, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

whose stylistic basis is in late 19th century French post impressionism, and in that international regional realism of the 1930s -- the regional realism of the U.S.A., Sweden, South Africa, etc.. He knows that the regionalist is simply that internationalist whose sources are a century out-of-date.

The Nationalist polarity regionalist/internationalist is not for Killeen a reality, but a cultural construct only, which he makes the basis of an intellectual play -- *play*, in all its acceptations, including its sense too of a certain freedom or unrestriction of movement.

At least one critic has been perspicacious enough to realise that Killeen's art represents an undoing or upsetting of such stock oppositions as regionalist/internationalist; that it makes its play in the scission between.

What singles him out, more than anything else, is the brilliant juggling act that has enabled him to successfully combine in his work the two polarities that characterise recent art in this country: regionalism and internationalism. The regionalists -- Perkins, Angus, Binney, Smither, Brent Wong, et al -- the artists concerned with the expression and interpretation of place and their New York leaning opposite numbers whose work, manifestly, has no local point of reference. There has been considerable debate recently about the relative merits of these two schools which constitute the mainstream of 20th century New Zealand art... Killeen has long had a foot in both camps.¹⁷

Even in the 'most austere phase of his painting', so Rowe remarks, 'which itself stands as one of the more remarkable bodies of work executed in this idiom, figurative and geographic points of reference are never far away'. Even

In the most formal of his essays in geometric abstraction, specifically polynesian and Melanesian decorative devices abound. In his exhibition of cutout painted sheet aluminium shapes arranged randomly on the wall, ... similar references to place are explicit -- not least in the series title 'Island Mentality'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Neil Rowe, 'Brilliant Killeen scores again', *Evening Post* (Wellington), 24 May 1981.

¹⁸ Neil Rowe, op. cit..



fig. 219.

The Janus or double face motif in Killeen's art may be taken, then, to allegorise Killeen's own refusal of the monotheistic, of the McCahonian claim 'There is only one way'. Killeen refuses the stock regionalist/internationalist opposition, a dualism which privileges, as dualism always does, one of its terms, while denigrating the other: Killeen himself is a *Mask with a lateral view*. [fig. 219]