

## A man with a landscape in his head: Killeen and the regionalist

*Unfortunately too much New Zealand art is not related to overseas trends, but to what has gone before in New Zealand, and the preoccupation with the New Zealand landscape.*

*(Killeen, quoted Michael Brett, 1974)<sup>1</sup>*

The New Zealand Nationalist is a 'man with a landscape in his head' -- a native landscape. (A 'man'? -- Nationalist rhetoric is a phallic rhetoric, a rhetoric of hardness, of hard light, of hard men on hard land, a rhetoric which would dismiss the foreign and female 'soft' and effete.)<sup>2</sup> The Nationalist painter or writer is an urban person who paints the rural for other urban persons; the Nationalist is that urbanite who has a head full of native earth...<sup>3</sup>



fig. 220. The black notebook, p. 122 (detail)

'A man with a landscape in his head'. That nice phrase is Killeen's, not my own. It comes as the part title to a drawing in the green notebook which shows the profile of a head with a landscape inside it. [fig.35] This profile with an interior landscape recurs, nearly twenty years later, in the black notebook, [fig. 220] and in all six of the 'New Zealand' titled cut-outs. In *Born In New Zealand -- for Martin*, September 1985; [plate 139] *Born In New Zealand -- for Samuel*, October 1985; [plate 140] *Born Alive in New Zealand*, October 1985; [plate 141] *Born*

<sup>1</sup> Richard Killeen, as quoted by Michael Brett, 'Abstracts come in from the cold', 'The Auckland Diary', *NZ Herald*, 9 March 1974.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller analysis of the phallicism of Nationalist rhetoric, the reader will have to await the 'Harsh clarities' and 'The land sexed' chapters of my yet to be published *The Invention of New Zealand: a Nationalist Mythology of Landscape*. For the moment, see my 'Nationalist Antitheses: a Compendium', *Antic*, June 1986, pp. 72-84.

<sup>3</sup> For an account and an analysis of earth metaphors in New Zealand art and letters, see the 'Earth, soil and roots' chapter of my yet to be published *The Invention of New Zealand*.

*Alive in New Zealand* no. 2, October 1985; [plate 142] *Born Alive in New Zealand* no. 3, December 1985; [plate 143] and *Born Alive in New Zealand* no. 4, April 1986. [plate 147]

Below the black notebook sketch of 'a man with a landscape in his head', Killeen writes:

*The dominant group makes some subject  
matter more important than others  
eg. The sublime things that are 'strong'  
intellectual, male, spiritual.  
Everything else is superficial  
(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 222) <sup>4</sup>*

There are also in the *Born Alive in New Zealand* group those 'landscapes' I have compared to a geological model. *Born alive in New Zealand -- for Martin*, September 1985, has a volcano landscape which is cut-out like a square of turf from the land, and displayed so that its underground part is seen in section. *Born alive in New Zealand -- for Samuel*, October 1985, *Born alive in New Zealand* no. 2, November 1985, *Born alive in New Zealand* no. 3, December 1985, and *Born alive in New Zealand* no. 4, April 1986, have two such volcano squares.<sup>5</sup>

*Floating Islands*, March 1986, [plate 146] and *Floating Islands with Strange Birds and People*, May 1986, [plate 148] have the most 'landscapes' of all: a piece of a plain cut out and seen in section; a volcano which has been cut out from its surround so that the irregular contour of its 'ground plan', as it were, appears in section; a piece which might be a stylised geological diagram of the folding of rock layers on over another; one of those hill and plain fragments we have already seen in several versions of the man with a landscape in his head; a volcano diagrammed in profile; and the profiles of hills above a wave pattern which clearly represents sea; and various items which might be hills in flat silhouette, cut off at their base as though by a flat line of sea.

The title *Floating islands* is taken from a passage in Margaret Orbell's *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Note dated 3 . 6 . 85.

<sup>5</sup> Such radically curtailed landscapes are not entirely confined to the *Born Alive in New Zealand* group and the two *Floating islands* cut-outs. Also, *Domestic*, 24 October 1986, *Domestic with warship*, 5 March 1987, and *Domestic (black and white)*, 23 March 1987, each include a stone building on a rock landscape so cut out so that its underground part appears in section.

*Natural World of the Maori*, published the year before:

*E hopu to ringa nga rimu rapa nui, hai whakatau ringa.  
E tae koe ki Moehau, titiro to kanohi nga motu whakatere --  
Ko Rangitoto pea nge! Wakaoho to reo!  
Tena to matua te whakamoe mai na  
Kai roto i te whare kohatu!*

*Grasp the kelp with your hand, to steady yourself.  
At Moehau, let your eye gaze at the floating islands.  
Rangitoto is there! Lift up your voice!  
Your elder is sleeping in his stone house!*

*'The floating islands' is a beautifully exact way of describing the islands of the Hauraki Gulf. In some lights they do seem to be floating.*<sup>6</sup>

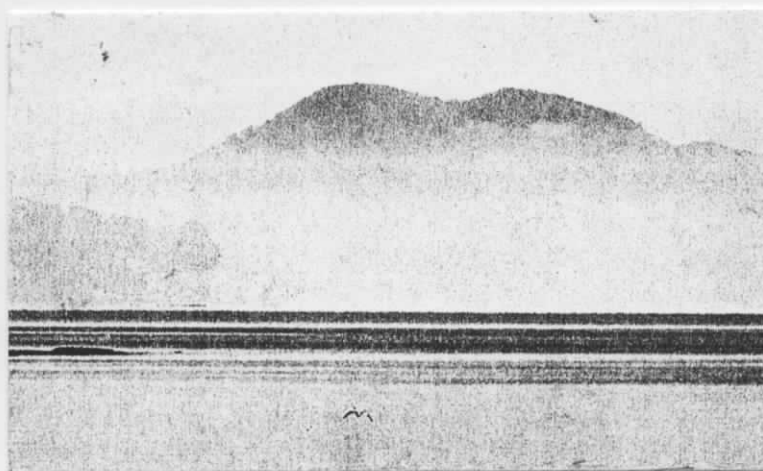


fig. 221. Margaret Orbell, *The Natural World of the Maori*

The photo Orbell uses to illustrate this passage is remarkably similar in its floating effect to those pieces showing hills in flat silhouette, cut off at their base, in Killeen's *Floating Islands*, in *Floating Islands with Strange Birds and People*, and in earlier cut-outs.<sup>7</sup> [plates 146, 148 & figs. 18, 220, 221] Also, the phrase

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Orbell, *The Natural World of the Maori*, Collins, Auckland, 1985, p. 81. (Orbell, a professor of Maori studies at the University of Canterbury, is married to Gordon Walters: Orbell's profound knowledge of Maori culture provides a further extension of the Primitivist/Walters/Killeen axis.

<sup>7</sup> Such silhouetted hills stretch back through a number of years of Killeen's cut-outs. *Dreamtime*, June 1980, for instance, and *Rainbow's reach*, August 1980, have several hilly profiles cut horizontally off at the base as though by sea.

'floating islands' would have been known to Killeen from Peter Tomory's use of it, to characterise all of New Zealand's art history, in his 'Imaginary Reefs and Floating Islands: the Romantic Image in New Zealand Painting', an article published in the same edition of the magazine *Ascent* (July 1968) in which Killeen's *Man, Land and Sky*, 1968 [fig. 179] -- itself a 'man with a landscape in his head' -- was reproduced.

We know that in his last year at art school, and in the year after he left, Killeen was landscape painter in something like the requisite regionalist manner. We know that in the realist works of 1968 and 1969 there are various landscapes. Then, after 1970, when Killeen's painted his realism over and out, landscape disappeared from his art, seemingly for good. Yet now, it seems, after an absence of a decade, landscapes of a sort are recurring in the cut-outs themselves. Why?

In New Zealand, as we have seen, to paint landscape means far more than simply happening to acquiesce to a traditional genre of European art, more than a merely unconsidered conservatism. Landscape here is liable to sound as a declaration of allegiance to some forty or fifty years of Nationalist quest; and it is the occasion of an official patriotism, which would have every New Zealander gawp with love at the native dirt.

*The politics of landscape*

*This is not a landscape*

*Really the politics of identity*

*parochialism*

*Lack of confidence*

*Use of the landscape implies it contains  
some indigenous unique content.*

*Trying to belong to a place*

*Born in New Zealand*

*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 211)<sup>8</sup>*

*cross in landscape*

*use of the land*

*colonisation*

*mystic of the land*

*misunderstanding of  
culture*

The 'mystic of the land' is the Nationalist painter and viewer. Landscape painting in New Zealand was inextricably a matter of God as well as of nation.

<sup>8</sup>McCahon is the obvious example of such a Nationalist 'mystic of the land'. Another such is the landscape painter M. T. Woollaston, who once explained: 'I believe the bible is as good a textbook for art as for religion, and that modern Christian art is due.' ('Toss Woollaston Explains Himself', *Art in New Zealand*, vol. 16, no. 1, September 1943, p. 13.)

God's name, in a kind of spiritualising graffiti, had been brushed over every hill. So indelibly brushed, in fact, that to paint a landscape was, even regardless of one's intention, again to speak that God-script. Inevitably, in the McCahonian and Nationalist context, landscape was read in spiritualising terms.

Reading Gordon H. Brown's *Colin McCahon: Artist*, 1984,<sup>9</sup> had provoked Killeen to consider again the Christianised landscapes of his erstwhile teacher:

3.1.85

*Reading the Brown book on McCahon --*

*McCahon uses religion to colonise the land.*

*The land is seen as empty and wild -- it*

*needed an angel (I saw an angel in this land)*

*The patriarchy strikes again.*

*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 209)*

The 'I saw an angel in this land' is an endlessly quoted sentence from McCahon's essay, 'Beginnings'.<sup>10</sup> Killeen is referring here to the fact that McCahon's early paintings often depicted biblical incidents, inserting them into the New Zealand landscape, shifting them to his own time and place just as had the 15th century Italian and Flemish painters, shifting annunciations, crucifixions, the three Marys at the tomb, and so on, to the local land. And to the fact that later, McCahon had emptied out the landscape entirely (no people, no human dwelling or artifact) so that he could fill it entirely with the word of the Patriarchal Christian God, by writing all over it with biblical texts.<sup>11</sup>

Killeen's choice of the word 'colonise' is telling. New Zealand was constantly seen by the Nationalist poets and painters as painfully empty, as silent, as full only of solitude and silence, as lacking a history and a past.<sup>12</sup> And so, when McCahon inscribes the European God into the alien landscape, he makes an occupying and colonising force of Christianity -- a 'spiritual occupation of the landscape', as the essayist and Christian mystagogue M.H. Holcroft has it; and,

<sup>9</sup> Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80, vol. 20 no. 4, December 1966, p. 364.

<sup>11</sup> I owe this reading to a conversation some years ago with Margreta Chance, Killeen's wife.

<sup>12</sup> For instances of this Nationalist rhetoric of emptiness and pastlessness, see my 'Silence, Solitude, and the Invention of New Zealand', in *Interstices* 1, February 1991, pp. 61-82.

simultaneously, he marks that landscape with European history and culture, of which Christianity is a part. Thus the land's perceived emptiness and pastlessness is filled, the alien is clothed with the familiar, and the land's silence and solitude relieved.

And all this is disastrous of course, reactionary, from Killeen's point of view. Which is why he marks with distaste the sign of the cross on one of his 'this is not a landscape' sketches of 1985. [fig.]

At all costs, then, one must not paint landscape. And so Killeen writes this sentence three times in his notebook: 'This is not a landscape'.<sup>13</sup> It seems he was considering it as a title, and this in the same months as the *Born in New Zealand* works. Once, the sentence accompanies the sketch of an island sliced off at its base -- 'not a landscape', then, in the sense that it is a sign, or a geological model, and not a landscape proper -- not, that is, a 'prospect' or 'view'.

Killeen was also aware, as the transcendentalising Nationalists were not, that landscapes were depictions of property -- of rural real estate -- and that a 'good view' was worth a material sum. Perhaps he remembered, too, from his reading of *Frames on the Land*, the claim that the New Zealand tradition of landscape painting came in part out of the 18th century English topographic tradition, which itself had its origins in the portraiture of gentlemen's houses and parks -- in the depiction, that is, of rural properties.<sup>14</sup>

29. 11. 85

*The politics of land in N.Z.*

*The politics of landscape.*

*The politics of land. -- & property*

*This is not a landscape.*

*pieces of land*

*property*

*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 208)*

<sup>13</sup> Killeen, the black notebook, p. 199, p. 208, and p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*, Collins. Auckland, 1983. (This little book was the first published text to claim a politics to 19th century depictions of land once owned by the Maori, and to see such painting as itself a symbolic form of appropriation. I recall Killeen discussing this claim with me, and I remember one particularly stimulating conversation in which Margreta Chance extended the claim to encompass 20th century New Zealand painters like Colin McCahon.)



*Floating islands and the politics of property*  
*(Killeen, the black notebook, p. 234)*

An economic determinism has often been adduced to account for New Zealand's constant issue of landscapes. Dr. Rodney T.L. Wilson, asking why Van der Velden should have responded better to N.Z. landscape than to N.Z. people, plausibly answered:

*the landscape is, in the first place, an unavoidable presence in this country. New Zealand's population was, and still is, sparsely spread over a land of constant variety and presence. It is there, and dominates our lives; even our city dwellers whose lifeblood is in the city are nurtured by the land and its products. As long as New Zealand remains pastoral, until it becomes predominantly urban in character and our principal livelihood becomes non-rural, then landscape painting will remain an intrinsic element in the country's art.<sup>15</sup>*

Similarly, Brown and Keith, after noting what they call 'a general orientation to landscape' as 'a readily available subject', write that 'the reason is obvious:

*New Zealand is not a densely populated country and in general the New Zealander does not think instinctively in terms of cities or community groupings. Only in the last ten years has any kind of urban life or distinctly urban attitudes made their [sic] appearance.<sup>18</sup>*

It is noteworthy, in this regard, that only after the entry of Britain to the Common Market did New Zealand cease to act, and to think of itself as, a kind of gigantic off-shore English farm; and it is notable too that this substantial economic change coincided with the large-scale shift away from landscape painting in the several generations of artists which emerged in the 1970s and 80s.

Such is the context in which Killeen's return to landscape reference

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<sup>15</sup> Rodney T.L. Wilson, *Van der Velden*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1976, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Brown and Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

occured. The Nationalist use of the European genre of landscape, and a post-Nationalist abandoning of it, provide at once the ideological fields out of which Killeen's 'landscape' fragments arise, and a receptive ground for them.

A number of Killeen's landscape references in the cut-outs encourage a still more specific contextual reading. Those geological model-like pieces, for instance, are liable to call up, for the New Zealand viewer, the name of Colin McCahon, Killeen's teacher, and the painter who is widely regarded as the most successful seeker in the Nationalist quest.

It is well known to New Zealand art viewers that, in searching for the essence of the local, McCahon had recourse to the diagrams of typical New Zealand landforms in Professor Cotton's *Geomorphology of New Zealand* (1922).<sup>17</sup> The diagram, of course, in seeking only those features necessary for exposition, already approaches the spareness assumed to characterise an essence. (No one ever thinks that the essence of a thing might be in its detailedness rather than in its generality, in its variety rather than in its uniformity, in its surface rather than in its depths.) Cotton's diagrams, it is believed, will have removed all accident, the merely accessory irregularities in structure, will have deleted the variable to show the invariable beneath.

The process, as McCahon and his generation conceived it, is one of stripping: of removing the merely contingent, the accidental garment, to get at the naked truth, the land's veritable essence beneath. (Such a purgation of superfluities was, of course, also a modernist rite, the process of abstraction -- even if, according to the principles of Nationalist decorum, abstraction was not meant to be carried too far.) Thus McCahon remarked of his *Takaka: Night and Day*:

*The actual valley as I saw it was like a geological diagram, only overlaid with trees and farms. In my painting all this has been swept aside in order to uncover the structure of the land . Anne and I were given a copy of professor C.A. Cotton's geomorphology for a wedding present ... Cotton's explicit and ordered drawing was, and still is, a very big influence on my work.*

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Andrew Cotton, *Geomorphology of New Zealand*, 1922, several diagrams from which are reproduced by Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, p. 23.



(Colin McCahon, 1969)<sup>18</sup>

New Zealand is not so much made, or invented, according to this often rehearsed claim of the 'essence', as it is discovered, or dis-covered. It is 'caught', or it is 'seized', or 'captured'; or it is 'expressed', squeezed out like milk from the motherland's breast. The essence is already visible there in the landscape, and may be caught in the painting, as in a trap; or it is hidden beneath the surface (nothing superficial about it), from which depth, by the sufficiently assiduous painter, it may be dug up.<sup>19</sup> In either case, the painting is conceived of as a transparency, through which the truth of appearances may perfectly be seen, or that deeper truth, which is hidden beneath appearances: the painting is a window, unimpeded by style, to the already present, the discoverable truth of the world.

And what might be the post-Nationalist counter-text to all this, the scandal which refuses all essence? It is, say, Killeen's posing of style -- so refusing any possibility of transparency through to the world. There are no essences in the world, so the cut-out proclaims, but only manners in which the world is seen, invented, made up. Whereas McCahon used Cotton's spare diagrams as a merely preliminary aid, to get him closer, as he hoped, to the land's naked truth, to what lay hidden beneath its cloak of trees and of grass, Killeen focuses on the geomorphological model itself. Rather than using it, as McCahon famously had, as a finally dispensible aid through to a truth, he fixes on the diagrammatic model, as one form of the picturing in which Nature comes.

*McCahon believed in the beliefs of a belief system whereas we believe in belief systems. (That they exist.)*<sup>20</sup>

For Killeen, the New Zealand landscape is not -- as if in and of itself -- the site of a hidden essence and discoverable truth. For him, the truth is only that Nature comes always already as picture, as humanly constructed sign, as ideology embodied. The truth is only that Nature is a product of Culture. It is Killeen's kind of picturing, refusing all essence, which has re-placed the old Nationalist art.

<sup>18</sup> Colin McCahon, 'All the Paintings, Drawings and Prints by Colin McCahon in the Gallery's Collection', *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, double number 44, 1969, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> For examples of Nationalist claims of capturing an 'essence' of New Zealand, see my 'Nationalist Antitheses: a Compendium', *Antic* June 1986, pp. 72-84.

<sup>20</sup> Killeen, marginal comment on m.s. for the present paragraphs.