

## Social documents



fig. 247. *Social Document*, 17 June 1984

The second feminist occasion in Killeen's work is that of the twelve numbered drawings of the series *Social Document*, 17 June 1984, [fig. 247] first exhibited at Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, in September 1984. *Social Document* is an explicit, public and large scale response to feminism, as the titling of its parts makes clear.

The titles of the parts are as follows: (1) *Language is not neutral*; (2) *Natural and Unnatural Selection*; (3) *The Politics of Difference*; (4) *Present but not Perceived*; (5) *Myth as the Meaning of Life*; (6) *Looking at Women in Our Culture*; (7) *Pooled Memory and Some Empty Fish and People*; (8) *Flying above the Negative Society*; (9) *Centred but not Symmetrical*; (10) *Interdependence*; (11) *The Nature of the patriarchy, Men must Change*; and (12) the title and key.



**fig. 248.** *Social document, 1984 (detail) 1. Language is not neutral*



**fig. 249.** *Social document, 1984 (detail) 2. Natural and Unnatural Selection*



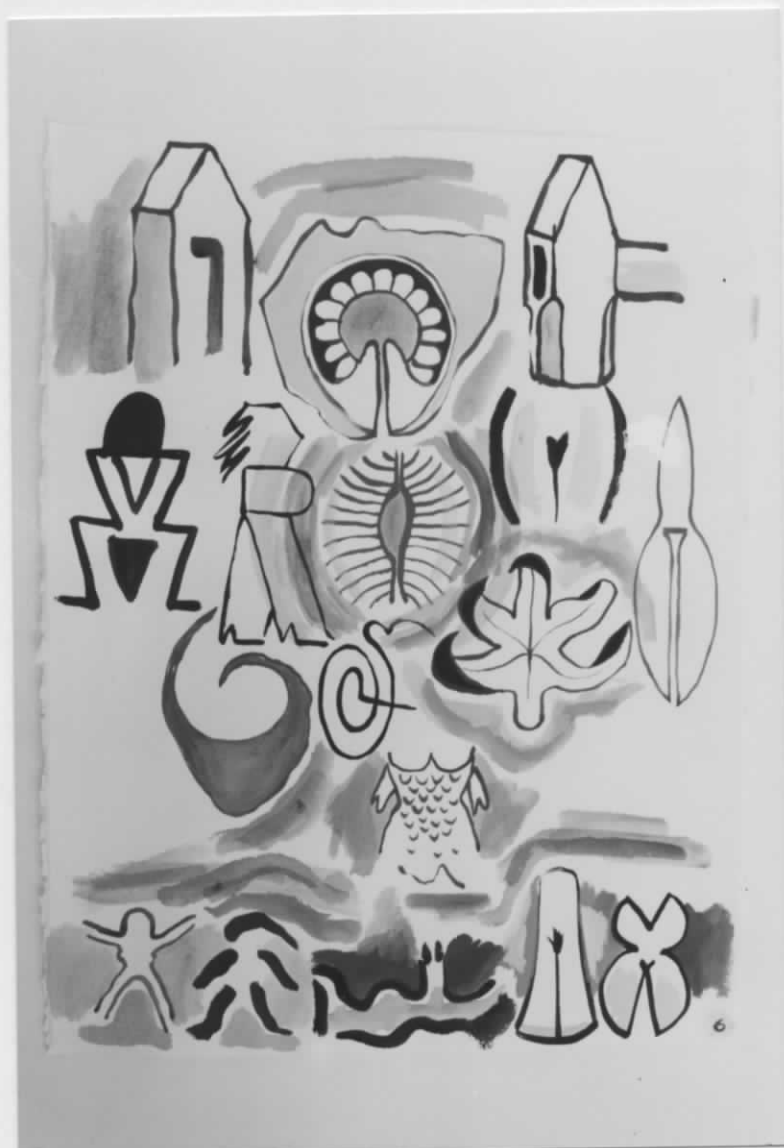
fig. 250. *Social document, 1984 (detail) 3. The Politics of Difference*



fig. 251. *Social document, 1984 (detail) 4. Present but not Perceived*



fig. 252. *Social document*, 1984 (detail) 5. *Myth as the Meaning of Life*



**fig. 253.** *Social document, 1984 (detail) 6. Looking at women in our culture*



**fig. 254.** *Social document, 1984 (detail) 7. Pooled Memory and Some Empty Fish, Birds and People*





**fig. 255.** *Social document, 1984 (detail) 8. Flying above the Negative Society*



**fig. 256.** *Social document, 1984 (detail) 9. Centred but not Symmetrical*



fig. 257. *Social document*, 1984 (detail) 10. *Interdependence*



**fig. 258.** *Social document, 1984 (detail) 11. The Nature of Patriarchy, Men must Change*

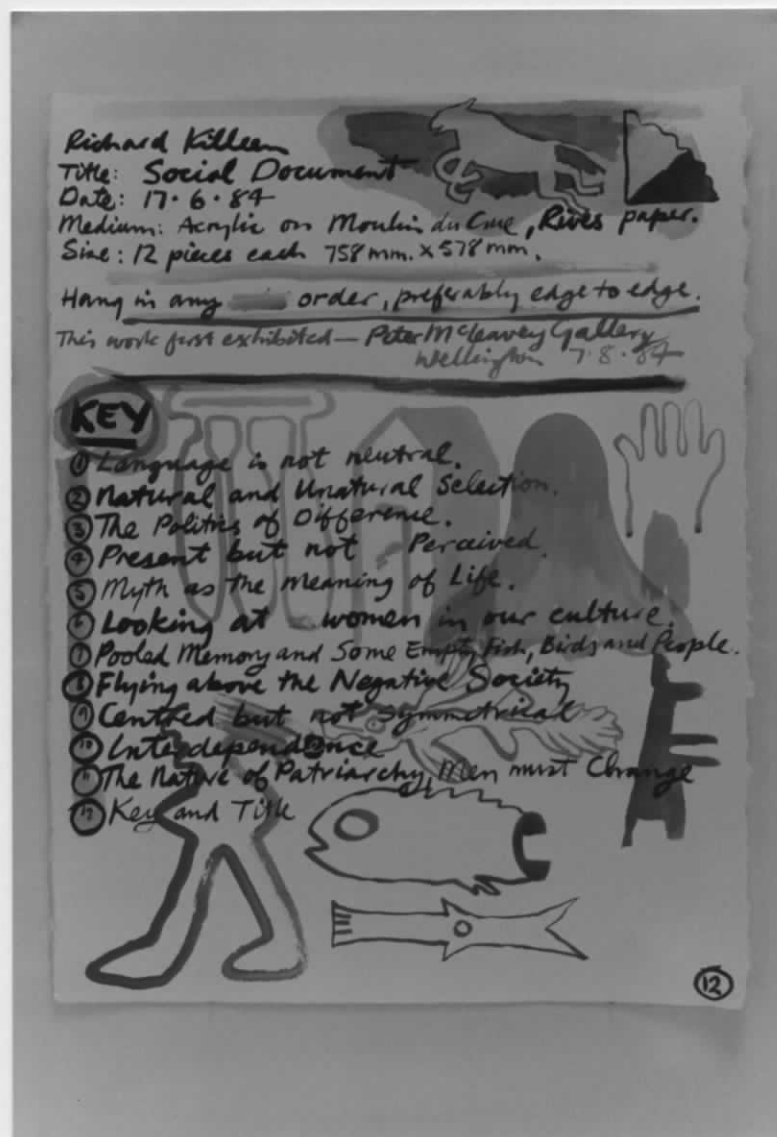


fig. 259. *Social document*, 1984 (detail) 12. *Key and Title*

As with the pieces of the cut-outs, the various drawings of *Social Document* may be hung in any order, and as with the pieces of some cut-outs, there is the further instruction that they be hung edge to edge. Also reminiscent of the pieces of the cut-out, perhaps, is the fact that, by the artist's fiat, they must be kept together as a set -- an unprecedented requirement for a Killeen drawing. However, since each drawing is rectangular, since each is individually numbered in a continuous fashion from 1 to 12, and since the twelfth drawing is a numbered key to the titles of the rest, they will tend to be hung in a grid or a line, and in the order the numerical sequence suggests.

From the fixedness of the images' place in each drawing of *Social Document*, a fixedness disallowed in his paintings, but unavoidable in drawings, Killeen is able to make use of those hierarchical codes of placing the cut-outs forbid: high versus low, centre versus periphery. So, for instance, he may place those figures labelled as 'Suprematist Women' above those labelled 'Women as tools'; while in drawing (9) *Centred but not Symmetrical* he can focus on what it is to see woman at the centre and not put to the side.

The title of (1) *Language is not neutral*, comes from a passage in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*.

*We come to know ourselves through being able to use language. But the language of a particular culture prescribes in advance positions from which to speak: language is not a neutral vehicle...<sup>1</sup>*

Language is not neutral, and neither, therefore, can the depiction of women be neutral, nor made from a neutral place. And so, when pictorial language approaches the female, Killeen subjects its forms to a kind of systematic indecision, in which those qualities traditionally called male (geometric, intellectual, active) and those traditionally called female (organic, intuitive, passive) keep changing their respective places: they don't stick where they ought; each imitates the form and style of the other. There is kind of constant slippage from one opposite to its other, such a sliding out of the old oppositions that their orders seem all but undone.

There are two obvious depictions of the female in (1) *Language is not*

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<sup>1</sup> Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 114. (My emphases.)

*neutral*. [fig. 248] One has her drawn in geometrical style, in forms akin to those of Malevichian Suprematism: a suprematist woman, then. Here, there is an attempt to defeat the code by using its own resources against it, by using forms traditionally regarded as male (the Malevichian geometric) to depict the female (traditionally, organic), to reverse the endless rush of the code, or, at least, to stop it, for a moment, in its tracks. The other depiction has woman drawn in the traditionally organic way, nude, curvaceous, her pudendum covered only by a bikini (that shape which signifies, as by its shape it echoes, what it conceals). We are here shown woman, a feminist might say, minus her head (the site of intellect), and minus her limbs (the site of action); the female as the classic object of male desire.

Just as the geometric is traditionally associated with the intellect or the cultural, so the organic is with the natural: woman as a creature of nature, as, in, or with flower, as in innumerable classic depictions. Or woman as labiate flower, with corolla divided to suggest the lips or labia, sign of the female sex. Here, a pink, pink bloom -- hibiscus-like, tropical and luxuriant.

Killeen does not decide between these manners of representation. Rather, he shows them all: these, he says, are the ways of representing women, and they are not neutral. We are offered not so much a truth, as an undoing of all claim to transparency, innocence and neutrality in matters of representation.

Woman as vagina flower, for instance, as in Georgia O'Keefe, or as in Judy Chicago's vagina plates, woman as in an essentialist, biologicistic feminism, which accepts the signs assigned women in the cultural code, but attempts to change their reception, and, in celebrating what was once denigrated, to make of them an assertion of power. This too Killeen shows -- the feminism which would celebrate as 'natural' the signs of women's difference. There was hardly a feminism of any other kind in New Zealand at the time than the Lippardian essentialist kind. There was not a feminism which would regard sexual identity as a cultural construction rather than a biological given, and which would put its energy instead into questioning the assigned languages of representation, or into seeking some other as yet unknowable language in which woman might speak. There were no feminist writers in New Zealand, until Lita Barry entered the critical scene,<sup>2</sup> who could write, as Barbara Kruger did for women: WE

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<sup>2</sup> For Lita Barry's acerbic critiques of essentialist feminism in New Zealand, see her 'Remissions: Towards a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality', *Antic* 1, June 1986, pp. 87-103; and her 'Further Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality: Deferrals', *Antic* 2, March 1987, pp. 18-47.

WON'T PLAY NATURE TO YOUR CULTURE.<sup>3</sup>

The 'suprematist woman', a nice pun, but not my own. It is inscribed as title on two Killeen drawings.<sup>4</sup> For a Christian, a damnable, a heretical pun. A pun, then, with a certain political push. 'Suprematist': at once the style of the Russian revolutionary painter Malevich -- a supreme moment in the history of abstraction, that apparently 'male' style of painting in which woman is here inscribed by Killeen, and, in its root of *supra*, above, previous, before in time -- a reversal at once of woman's biblical and political role. The Suprematist woman is **above**, first in time, previous to man, not merely plucked from his rib: she is **supreme**: 1. highest in authority and rank, 2. greatest possible, extreme; and she is **suprematist**: advocate of (woman's) superiority. Thus, in a pun at once visual and verbal, Killeen subjects to a violent reversal the classic and Christian arrangement of male/female in a hierarchical order which grants the first term *priority* -- in both its qualitative and in its temporal sense.

The suprematist woman comes up again in (9) *Centred but not Symmetrical*, [fig. 256] where again it is marked that language is not neutral. What is centred there is the spiral, a sign coded as female.<sup>5</sup> To be granted the centre, in the language of classic painting, is to be privileged, to be granted that point about which all else revolves, towards which, and for which, all else gazes and points: hence the usual avoidance of centrality in Killeen's art. The exception here is provoked by the very urgency of the political case: if Killeen abandons his usually a-central composition it is for a political need -- for the purposes of a specific propaganda.

*Centred but not Symmetrical*, then, is *About drawing a woman in the centre*, to borrow the title of a related drawing, or about *Trying to draw a woman in the centre*, to borrow the title of another.

If in classic painting there is a hierarchy according to distance from the centre, there is also a hierarchy about a vertical axis. It is by using this latter

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Kruger, *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture*, undated photographic collage, illus. cover, Craig Owens and Jane Weinstock, *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture: Works by Barber Kruger*, ICA, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> These drawings are dated 3-5-84, and 12-5-84. Both are in the artist's possession, as are all further related drawings referred to in this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> For the spiral as a sign of woman, see Barbara C. Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols & Sacred Objects*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988, p. 14. Killeen owns this book.



system against itself that the female is accorded power in (8) *Flying above the Negative Society*. [fig. 255] Here, a 'primitive' goddess figure flies, in the company of a flying paintbrush, tool of depiction, and a bird and a kite, above a landscape which looks like a geological model -- a landscape already constituted as sign, on which there is a galloping cow: a New Zealand landscape, no doubt, the landscape of a country where, so it is said in the vernacular, the tall poppy is quickly cut down. The female here is -- in the title words of two contemporaneous drawings, where again she soars up, *Flying over the dominant culture*. It is a matter of *Women across the top*, and men across the bottom, as in the inscription of a contemporaneous drawing, where, in the same code of violent reversal, two women and a Y sign of woman occupy the top of the page, while a phallus appears below.

What is depicted in *Social Document*, and in the related drawings, is the depiction of women in this culture, how woman is signified, how woman is made: in the words of other Killeen drawing titles of the time:

*The problem of drawing a woman within the patriarchal framework*

*The difficulty of drawing Suprematist woman*

*The difficulty of perceiving women these days*

*Try drawing a woman in this culture*

*The difficulty of drawing a woman in our culture*

That, precisely, is what is being tried here. Being attempted and brought to trial. Killeen's drawings are, at one and the same time, a presentation of drawings of woman, and a prosecution of those drawings, and a summons addressed to you concerning that presentation.

Drawing (6) *Looking at Women in Our Culture* [fig. 253] has a hammer at its top right and a phallic tower at its top left. Below the hammer there is a mother goddess crouching, as if to give birth; below the hammer, there is a female nude in classic style: again the codes of placement. In the centre, a flower like diatom (a microscopic, unicellular alga), a vagina like diatom, drawn in red -- woman as flower, woman as generative sexual organ. (It is fitting, surely, in an examination of the codes of representing women, that the diatom is a being uncertainly animal or vegetable, and neither male nor female: an animal/vegetable which refuses the codes of the either/or.) There is also a fish

turned into an armoured dress (*Female armour...* -- part title of another drawing), a group of women turned into tools (*Women as tools* -- title of several other drawings -- a pun again verbal and visual; and an organic woman with arms actively upraised -- a woman active, not classically passive.

Drawing (11) *The Nature of the Patriarchy, Men must Change*; [fig. 258] examines patriarchal society through images of violence, castration and power: military helmets, an upright hand with a bloody palm; an executioner's block; a domed church rhymed with an upraised phallus (Christianity, religion of the male god, Christianity, enemy of women); an aeroplane; classical columns and a castellated tower, another axeblood; a classic sculpture of a male (truncated columns of legs, arms and neck); diatoms, a trio of black bombs, rockets or aeroplanes, a classical sculptural fragment, a severed and pointing hand, classic sign of directiveness, of the monotheistic, of refusal of the plural -- go *this* way, see *this*, *this* is the centre.

*The language of Patriarchy* (title of another unexhibited drawing) is the language of power, and its nature is to seem to *be* nature, to be everywhere, and, through being invisible as language, to be lost inside everything, to utter itself through and through. Killeen's attempt is to make it visible, as in some contemporaneous drawings entitled *Columns everywhere*, where the patriarchy erects itself before our eyes.

Outside of the patriarchal system, so Killeen would say, there is, and there can only be -- as in the title of drawing (4) *the Present but not Perceived*. [fig. 251] The signs made perceptible here include: various organic shapes, such as diatoms (Microscopic organisms -- not perceived); a vagina like diatom; a Suprematist woman; Maori greenstone artifacts; a 'primitive' comb; an organic female profile. The powers Killeen remarks as made invisible by the patriarchy are: the organic, the female, the 'primitive', the non-European -- those powers which are by the patriarchy colonised and disempowered.

Military helmets -- aggressive signs of the male -- occur in drawing (1) *Language is not neutral*, [fig. 248] in drawing (3) *The Politics of Difference*; [fig. 250] and in drawing (11) *The Nature of the patriarchy, Men must Change*. [fig. 258] On several related drawings, Killeen offers a further counter-code, a reversal of the law which considers the military as the preserve of the male. The reversal comes clearest in *La Femme Militaire*, [fig. 260] where, in a kind of

pictorial sex change operation, Killeen transfers to the female not only (male) military dress, but also the geometric (male) style of depiction used in the companionian drawing, *L'homme Militaire*. [fig. 261]



fig. 260. *La Femme Militaire*, 4 April 1984

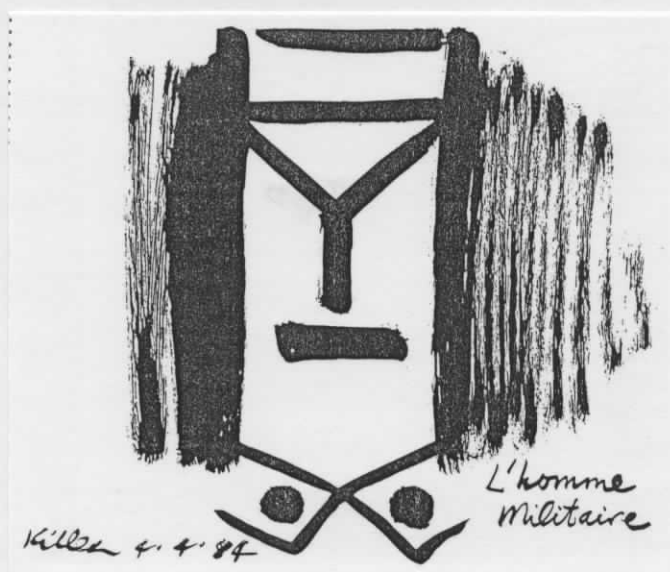


fig. 261. *L'homme Militaire*, 4 April 1984

Male military signs are also transferred to the female in a couple of amusing drawings which proffer a female armour, and dress the damsel in the signs of the knight. In *Female armour and weapons*, fish scale armour turns into a dress, and appears, along with various weapons of 'female' shape, next to a suprematist woman. *Female armour* grants a woman a helmet with + signs for eyes, and gives her an upraised fist, viciously mailed and spiked. Here, where Killeen is fooling about with the signs, the female is *mailed* -- is maled.

'Clothes maketh the man', Killeen ironically writes on another drawing. It is as if, as Virginia Woolf proposed, 'it is the clothes that wear us and not we them', as if gender were determined by clothing. (Doubtless this is why, in so many societies, there is a sartorial rule in which cross dressing is forbidden by law.) As Shosana Felman has said: 'If it is clothes alone, i.e. a cultural sign, an institution, which determines our reading of the sexes, which determines masculine and feminine and ensures sexual opposition as an orderly, hierarchical polarity; if indeed clothes make the man -- or the woman -- are not sex roles, as such, inherently travesties?'<sup>6</sup>

That maliciously upraised fist of *Female armour* brings us up against a further reversal of the code active male/passive female, that same code of opposites Killeen had played with in the green notebook in 1970/71. There are in *Social Document*, and in the related drawings, a number of depictions where the female has an upright or outstretched arm, a (male) sign of action, of signification, of power. This displacement is not as trivial as it might, on the face of it, seem.

An excellent example of the sexual code of action is provided by the signs of man and woman inscribed on the Pioneer spacecraft, schematic figures which (male) scientists intend to represent and explain humankind to extraterrestrial beings. These signs were first introduced to deconstructive attention by Laurie Anderson, in her performance *Americans on the Move*.

*Near the beginning Anderson introduced the schematic image of a nude man and woman, the former's arm raised in greeting, that had been emblazoned on the Pioneer spacecraft... this is of course an image of sexual difference, or rather, of sexual differentiation according to the distribution of the phallus -- as it is marked and remarked by the man's outstretched right arm, which appears less to have been raised than erected in greeting... Like all representations of sexual difference that our culture produces, this is an image not simply of anatomical difference, but of the values assigned to it. Here, the phallus is the signifier ... of the prestige and power that accrue to the male in our society... As such, it designates the effects of signification in general. For in this*

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<sup>6</sup> Shosana Felman, 'Rereading Femininity', cited Laurence Simmons, op. cit., p. 83.

(Lacanian) image chosen to represent the inhabitants of earth for the extraterrestrial Other, it is the man who speaks, who represents mankind. The woman is only represented; she is (as always) spoken for.

(Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism')<sup>7</sup>

In this sign, chosen of all signs to bear the weight of representing humankind, the man is active, the woman passive, the man the signifier, the woman the signified. As in all patriarchal culture. It is precisely this code which the active gesture of Killeen's suprematist woman throws into reverse.

'Full entry into society is marked by access of language' *Old Mistresses*<sup>8</sup> is a title of several drawings related to *Social Document*. Full entry to society is marked by access to signification. Consider finally, then, a drawing, where, in a gesture of mastery and of power, in an active act of signification, the right arm of the suprematist woman is, as phallus, upraised... [fig. 261]



fig. 262. *Suprematist Women*, 12 May 1984

<sup>7</sup> Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 1983, pp. 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, p. 114.