

# From the collection

## Art

The University of Auckland Art Collection was quick to take an interest in the work of Richard Killeen, purchasing two paintings from Barry Lett Galleries in 1969 and a monotype print-on-canvas from his first solo exhibition at Barry Lett the following year.

Subsequently, a good selection of the artist's many career phases have come to be represented in the collection.

Killeen's early works, in stark contrast to the romantic New Zealand landscapes common at the time, depicted figures bustling in suburban streets and domestic interiors. Even at this early stage, having graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts in 1966, Killeen was exploring relationships between nature and culture, figure and field, image and pattern, figuration and abstraction, concerns that still dominate his work. As in the abstract work of Gordon Walters, whom Killeen met in 1970, an ambiguous relationship between foreground and background brought a dynamic tension to the work.

Killeen's early figurative paintings give the impression of being constructed by quoting and combining existing components into new arrangements within a single image. In the following years, his work would become increasingly abstract, often using a dice to determine colour or composition, but his patterns would either be derived from or embedded in a figurative image.

In 1978 he famously liberated the forms in his paintings to exist as free-floating individual motifs that collectively form a larger work in endlessly configurable combinations of 'cut-outs'. The

instruction for configuring his work *Red Insects*, *Blue Triangles* (1980), which hangs in the entrance to the General Library, is simply: "hang in a group."

At first he began with silhouettes of shapes or creatures appropriated from a variety of sources. However these are not simple animal shapes but



representations of the way animals have been depicted in different ways by different cultures. Combined, these image samplers form complex narratives. Each shape is a form translated and redeployed from a prior source, often within Killeen's own work. These are icons, pictograms, logos, patterns - all representations of things that have their own narrative as representations and tell us about the way we perceive the world. Later

cut-outs would become containers for further images, which may in turn have images drawn onto the surface of each shape. Like words, Killeen's iconography can be traced through its usage and origins. Together they form sentences and stories.

The increasing accessibility of computers for digital storage and processing has had a marked effect on Killeen's practice, turbo-charging his ability to cut-and-paste, layer and transform, cultivating an ever-growing image bank. Earlier icons now become three-dimensional forms, wrapped, decorated and populated with patterns from new and old designs. These hyper-worlds present rich story-telling possibilities, some of which bear an intriguing resemblance to Killeen's early suburban works, teeming with suited clones.

*Butterfly Morning* is a prime example of Killeen's recent return to working within a single canvas, composing his cut-out forms with a variety of computer software and outputting compositions of dizzying complexity. It was first shown at Ivan Anthony gallery in the May 2008 exhibition *Butterfly Evening*, a memorial to the artist's late son. Immediately afterwards it was included in the Gus Fisher Gallery exhibition *The Swarm* and subsequently purchased for the collection, adding yet another important phase of the artist's career to the campus environment.

Andrew Clifford

*Richard Killeen (b.1946) Butterfly Morning, 2008  
Pigment ink on canvas, 1360 x 1360mm The University  
of Auckland Art Collection*