

## From the collection



Teaching him at the Elam School of Fine Arts, Colin McCahon noticed that Richard Killeen's compositions seemed assembled from separate parts, like jigsaw puzzle pieces. This one even takes its title from the three significant features in it, and orders them in a descending hierarchy of importance. Richard's subject matter is both realistic and abstract, and his work allows a reading of both modes. Yet if painting in the Realist tradition was once considered a window onto the world, Richard is showing in this work that the opening is now closed. His stylised figure has become a flattened shape pasted over the background, casting little shadow. Is the Realist mode just the alibi for the investigation of figure and field with image and pattern, or does narrative linger on?

Richard's simple colours and representation of the banality of everyday life relate to American Pop Art, but his composition also responds to local traditions of Realism. He retrieves Regionalism from the Canterbury hinterland and dishes it up in Epsom. The man wears the businessman's burqa: his drab suit jacket, pale shirt with cufflinks and slightly askew dark red neck tie mark him out as a professional. But what is a city slicker like him doing loitering with intent outside a house in broad daylight? Why isn't he at the office where he belongs, instead of being at home, disrupting

gender role stereotyping? His short-back-and-sides Brylcreemed haircut denotes a conservative conformist rather than a rebel. Crossing his arms protectively across his body to mark out the limits of his tolerance, he presents both literally and metaphorically as a square. He will need to keep a grip on himself as the times are changing, as the 1964 Bob Dylan song warns. Judging by his receding hairline, time is not on his side. He is Man Alone, not in the bush but in the "burbs", and his way of life is under threat.

Like him, the window to the man's left is formally attired with tailored appurtenances. Only part of the house's exterior is evident, but it is an index to the whole. From just the detail of the side-hinged casement window, the rest of the Edwardian villa can be assumed. The man's blank expression is paralleled by the way the brown Holland blind at the window is drawn down, excluding prying eyes. Also matching his sobriety is the orthodoxy of the colour scheme of brilliant white weatherboards set off by Brunswick green trim on the windowsill. Everything chimes in: painting houses and painting pictures, framing windows and framing art. Even the scalloped edges of the blind and awning match the rhythm of the hairline framing the man's heart-shaped face.

It seems that there is nothing exceptional about either man or house, except the relationship between the two. Ironic in the context of these buttoned-down appearances are the carnival Tip Top colours gaily striped across the awning which shades the window. They are like a mnemonic for playtime in a childhood long forgotten by the man, imprisoned in his garb and adult responsibilities. Put a man, a window and an awning together in a picture and you've got trouble, it seems, an image which is a sign for the times.

Linda Tyler

Richard Killeen (b.1946)  
*Man, window and awning*, 1969  
Oil on board