

Selecte  
by Ian Har

A POESY

Selected Works

by Ian Hamilton Finlay

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nilton Finlay



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## Art that stops short of art is not enough.<sup>2</sup>

The artist Ian Hamilton Finlay began as a poet: his work begins in language. His representations, even in gardens, start with the word.<sup>3</sup> In 1961 he founded ... his own publishing company, the Wild Hawthorn Press – still active today – which soon limited its scope to the publication of his own work. In the following year he published the first issue of his literary journal *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*<sup>4</sup> It ran to twenty-five issues, the last of which appeared in 1968.<sup>5</sup> During this period Finlay concentrated exclusively on lyrical poetry and rapidly became one of the more noteworthy exponents of concrete poetry.<sup>6</sup> [IHF] once described the concrete poem as “a model of order ... set in a space full of doubt.”<sup>7</sup> Finlay developed other forms of presentation for his poems. These reflect both his experimental curiosity with respect to the possibilities of creating expanded contexts for the written word and his desire to make his art broadly accessible with an eye towards a more complex integration of art and daily life.<sup>8</sup>

My work is the very opposite of making a division between the real and the idea; to me the real is the material which is to embody the idea;<sup>9</sup> What a possibility in a newly dug turf!<sup>10</sup>

He is an artist who works less with pure forms than with the forms of our understandings. The pleasure one derives from his texts or objects necessarily involves both formal appreciation and an act of interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

Art is not a question of self-indulgence, self-expression, it's a question of certain duties ... I've always seen what I think is the crucial thing and stuck to that, whatever the consequences.<sup>12</sup>

Finlay's world-view gives a particular place to art: it is a central place in the world as the bearer of meanings and ideals. He envisages a public, a religious function for art, and thus a world in which it would perform this function. So what the artist does is, in a sense, a form of “direct action.” He can create work which performs this role; or at least offers to perform it, and the work becomes not a picture of the world it envisages, but an instance of it (an anticipatory instance).<sup>13</sup>

My work and my life treat culture as something that is real and that exists, and that is an explication of the object. Hegel ... says that ... philosophy is a thinking consideration of objects ... that the only ideas that matter are those that people are committed to unto death ... It is perfectly clear what he means: you stake your life on what you write, or make. It's not purely an intellectual attitude. It is founded in your being ... The point is something else: to stand up for certain things you believe in and to understand that things only exist because people stand up for them. They don't exist because people write little thoughts in notebooks.<sup>14</sup>

Finlay's own journey has taken him back to the temples of the Greeks, to 17th-century visions of Arcadia, to the Enlightenment, to the virtues and the horrendous excesses of the French Revolution, to classicism and to its appropriation by the National Socialist regime in Germany. Wildflowers and idyllic maritime motifs are as important to his vocabulary as are the guillotines, tanks and warships.<sup>15</sup>

All my work is made on the supposition that culture exists. Now, we know that this strange thing has been happening in Western culture. That it's more and more repudiating itself, so

that one can't take culture as being a kind of environment for the work, but I maintain I have the right to acknowledge that whole perspective of Western culture and to write and work and behave as if that culture exists as a number of fixed points which illuminate what one is doing.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the texts are Finlay's own, while others were culled from a wide range of sources: the names of boats, for instance, and quotations from the Roman pastoral poets of the Augustan age (Virgil, Horace and Ovid in particular), from the eighteenth-century philosophers such as Hegel and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and from Antoine de Saint-Just, the young French Revolutionary writer and member of the Committee for Public Safety.<sup>17</sup>

I try to confront ... pervasive unclear, liberal, sloppy thinking, with its decadence and lack of decision, its refusal to set up values and stand by those values. What a long way from the Greeks! A whimsical universe without conflict, without tragedy. I don't apologise for the militaria because I hope I work across the whole range of the world. The sum of my work is tragic. But it is centred on the lyrical; so much of it is pastoral, Virgilian.<sup>18</sup>

His design is not so much to recover the immediacy of classical antiquity ... as to test the remnants of the classical tradition in a hostile environment.<sup>19</sup> Finlay ... seeks to remind us that classical links between pastoral and epic are not to be ruled out because we live in modernist (or postmodernist) times.<sup>20</sup> The designing of sundials ... demonstrate[s] his concern to keep alive a tradition which has its roots in philosophical considerations, poetry and craftsmanship.<sup>21</sup>

Sundial: The motto is silent. The shadow speaks.<sup>22</sup>

For Finlay this classical sense of clarity (fine cutting edge, one might say, of the guillotine) is fundamental: one of his highest compliments is to call something "uncluttered" ... Kahnweiler says of Gris's painting and of cubism generally, that they "made us 'see' and love so many simple, unassuming objects which hitherto escaped our eyes." This love for "simple, unassuming objects" is clearly visible throughout Finlay's work, and the element of play is also plainly displayed.<sup>23</sup>

A lot of my work is to do with straightforward affection ... and it always amazes me how little affection for ANYTHING there is in art today.<sup>24</sup>

The compilation of a series of "Detached Sentences" in the manner of the eighteenth-century poet and gardener William Shenstone's "Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening" (1764) is a mode which Finlay has adapted to a number of topics. The move from "thought" to "sentence" is itself significant, since the oldest and broadest senses of the word "sentence" incorporate the important notions of affirmation, citation, judgement and authority.<sup>25</sup> One of the artist's favourite means of linking culture, revolution and nature involves pastiching dictionary definitions.<sup>26</sup>

**REVOLUTION** n. scheme for the improving of a country; a scheme for realising the capabilities of a country. A return. A restoration. A renewal. (Revolution, n., 1986).<sup>27</sup>

Instruments such as the sickle or an axe emphasise the domestic and pastoral aspects of the Revolution. Finlay does however oppose such imagery to the Terror conducted during the rule of the Robespierrests.<sup>28</sup>

The questions which are raised by the revolution seem to me to be very much those of our time, especially what is to me the central problem of Western culture, the complete absence of any notion of reverence. My interest in Robespierre is that he saw better than anyone that you cannot have a completely secularised democracy ... The Thermidorean reaction (which deposed Robespierre and Saint-Just and all they stood for) was like a little version of the secular Terror which, in my opinion, we now have throughout the west, in which any form of the ideal or of reverence is instantly attacked.<sup>29</sup>

Finlay's posters and quotations from Saint-Just, or his own sentences on revolution, constitute political and moralistic maxims, the ethical dimension springing straight from aesthetic considerations.<sup>30</sup>

You cannot step into the same Revolution twice.<sup>31</sup>

The drama of the revolution is action, followed by remembrance ... John Berger cites Saint-Just as a model Revolutionary. He represents an absolute commitment that ultimately takes the form of the exchange of his life ... Saint-Just represents a rejection of the world as it stands, and of the circumscribed order of existence. *He Spoke Like an Axe* [IHF quoting Barère on Saint-Just], and thereby fell, Icarus-like.<sup>32</sup>

Finlay's disputes or "wars" are other means to interrogate culture.<sup>33</sup> It has been over principles that Finlay has fought his succession of "wars": with Fulcrum Press; with Strathclyde Region; with the Scottish Arts Council; with the publisher Jonathan Cape; with the National Trust ... and [in 1989], with those who caused the cancellation of his proposal for the Bicentennial Memorial at Versailles.<sup>34</sup>

The bureaucratic battle is a language battle.<sup>35</sup>

Justice is a cottage industry.<sup>36</sup>

Until we have confronted the depth of the ancient connection between *armis* and *litteris*, the pen and the sword, the power of art and the poetics of war, we cannot possibly make the ethical renunciations, heroic in a different sense, our political situation requires of us. The dedication of the garden temple at Little Sparta "To Apollo. His Music. His Missiles. His Muses." reminds us that only when we give the Gods of the thunderbolt, metaphorically speaking, their due, may we cherish the possibility of avoiding the sacrifice of humanity in their services.<sup>37</sup> *For the Temples of the Greeks Our Homesickness Lasts Forever* ... Finlay borrowed the line from Herman Hesse's Ode on Hölderlin ... The most prominent feature ... is the silhouette of a small warship.<sup>38</sup>

As you will appreciate, there is a comparison being made, between the small and perfect (aesthetically perfect) warship, and the Greek Temple ... The ungiven, implicit text is Goethe's "Kennest du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen ..." – Do you know the country where the lemon trees flower – : which I am taking as an invocation of the South-land of classical culture ... What the warship and the temple share, is an absolute (neither is a secular construction). This is why they can be interchanged, or is why the "aesthetic" is not merely whimsical. Democracies are not at ease with their weaponry, or their art, since both involve ... other values – those of the "South-land." Perhaps democracy should be homesick for its own unbuilt temples – alternatives to weaponry, a truly democratic pluralist art – or perhaps such alternatives, and such art, are

just not possible. Classicism was at home with power; modern democracies ... are not. The warship is an unrecognised necessary temple. From the citizen armies of the post-Revolution period, there is a return to mercenary armies (the soldier as outsider). Pacifism, which should be the real "creed" of democracy is obviously no more than a form of the utilitarian ... The homesickness for classical culture was an impetus towards wholeness, and since this clearly included the gods, and power (for gods without power are a contradiction), it had an ambiguous aspect; it was in our terms **dangerous**.<sup>39</sup>

The sheep, the flute, the country love affairs, are emblems of a directness of relations, a more felicitous association between person and person, between humans and animals, between society and the natural world. We are being asked to consider value. The images remind us of the essential ingredients in a civilised life.<sup>40</sup> His love of ships and boats – for fishing boats in particular – which runs like a continuous thread through every part of his oeuvre, has another dimension apart from the biographical one ... The fisherman, who (like the shepherd) faces the elements alone must eke out an existence in the midst of the forces of nature, knowing full well that he cannot earn his living unless he achieves harmony with them, is an archetype of coexistence. The life of a poet and gardener amidst the raw Scottish landscape shares a great deal with the fisherman's lot.<sup>41</sup>

A wild flower is a garden flower in a state of liberty.<sup>42</sup>

Many English gardens have been hedgehog gardens, enclaves standing for one kind of culture against a surrounding culture.<sup>43</sup>

Stonypath, especially after 1983 in its reincarnation as Little Sparta, is a direct descendant of the political gardens of the eighteenth century, but one very much part of contemporary, post-World War II society. It reflects the age in which it was built, and the accumulated history and culture that this age has inherited, as well as the political philosophy of the man who created it.<sup>44</sup>

Landscapes are **ideas** as much as things.<sup>45</sup>

It is true of the garden, and of his art as a whole, that there is not one narrative or argument, but rather a series of ideas or epiphanies through which we find our way.<sup>46</sup>

Text by Janet F. Murchison (JFM). Works selected by JFM, Ann Finlay Murchison, and Peter Trepanier.

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## NOTES

1. W. Christensen, in Finlay 1994, p. 105.
2. IHF, in Finlay 1995, p. xx.
3. L. Burkhardt, in Finlay 1995, p. 215.
4. Phalke, in Phalke and Simig, p. 250.
5. Abrioux, p. 1.
6. Phalke, in Phalke and Simig, p. 250.
7. T.A. Clark, in Finlay 1995, p. 136.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
9. IHF, in Finlay 1995, p. xvi.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Abrioux, in Finlay 1995, p. 160.
12. IHF, in Finlay 1995, pp. 13–14.
13. T. Lubbock, in Finlay 1995, pp. 243–44.
14. IHF, in Day, p. 66.
15. Phalke, in Phalke and Simig, p. 4.
16. IHF, in Day, p. 65.
17. Day, p. 9.
18. IHF, in Finlay 1995, p. 12.
19. Abrioux, p. 168.
20. E. Morgan, in Finlay 1995, p. 139.
21. Abrioux, p. 232.
22. IHF, *Sundial*, no. 52.
23. Scobie, p. 187.
24. IHF, in Finlay 1994, p. 68.
25. Abrioux, p. 219.
26. Abrioux, in Finlay 1995, p. 168.
27. IHF, in Finlay 1995, p. 168.
28. Abrioux, in Finlay 1995, p. 169.
29. IHF, in Day, p. 11.
30. Abrioux, in Finlay 1995, p. 164.
31. IHF, in Day, p. 49.
32. Finlay 1994, p. 130.
33. Finlay 1995, p. xix.
34. Day, p. 13.
35. IHF, in Abrioux, p. 220.
36. IHF, in Day, p. 54.
37. C. McNelly Kearns, in Finlay 1995, p. 88.
38. Phalke, in Phalke and Simig, pp. 272–74.
39. IHF, in Abrioux, pp. 191–92.
40. T.A. Clark, in Finlay 1995, pp. 152–53.
41. Phalke, in Phalke and Simig, p. 262.
42. IHF, *A Book of Wild Flowers*, no. 62.
43. IHF, in Finlay 1995, p. xxi.
44. Day, p. 17.
45. IHF, in Finlay 1995, p. xix.
46. Finlay 1995, p. xx.
47. *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.
48. *Ibid.*

All works were published by Wild Hawthorn Press, Lanark, Scotland, unless otherwise noted. The Press also published materials for the Committee of Public Safety, Little Sparta. The works come from two collections: Art Metropole Collection, Collection of Jay A. Smith, Toronto (on loan to the National Gallery of Canada); and the collection of Ann Finlay Murchison and Janet F. Murchison, Ottawa.

In common with many contemporary artists Finlay works with collaborators.<sup>47</sup> It has remained his practice to credit these collaborators ... From 1966 to 1989 Finlay's primary collaborator was his wife Sue Finlay. Together they created the garden at Stonypath, Little Sparta. She also collaborated on the realisation of his permanent landscape, garden and civic projects. Since 1989 Finlay's exhibitions and permanent landscape, garden, and civic projects have been realised with his associate Pia Simig.<sup>48</sup>

## LIST OF WORKS

1. "The Tug, the Barge ...," journal, drawing by Peter Lyle. *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*, p. 20 (1961–67).
2. *Ocean Stripe Series 4*, design and drawings by Emil Antonucci, 1966.
3. *A Sailor's Calendar: A Miscellany*, with Gordon Huntly. New York: Something Else Press, c. 1971.
4. *Blue Water's Bark*, folding card, with Ron Costley, 1979.
5. *Detached Sentences on Weather in the Manner of William Shenstone*, decorations by Jo Hincks, Christmas 1986.
6. *Snow Bark*, card, with Ron Costley, 1979.
7. *Charm*, card, with Laurie Clark, 1984.
8. *A Calm in a Teacup*, card, with Richard Demarco, 1973.
9. *Airs, Waters, Graces*, with Ron Costley, 1975.
10. *So You Want to be a Panzer Leader*, drawings by Laurie Clark, 1975.
11. *In World War I, Many Ships Were Sunk ...*, invitation. London: Serpentine Gallery, 1977.
12. *Exercise X*, with George L. Thomson, 1973.
13. *Menu à la Carte*, card, 1987.
14. *Saint-Just Sundial Badge*, multiple, 1981.
15. *Nature Is the Devil*, card, 1987.
16. *He Spoke Like an Axe*, folding card, 1987.
17. *Les Sans-Culottes*, folding card, with Laurie Clark, 1987.
18. *After Basho*, card, 1988.
19. *Knitting Was a Reserved Occupation = Le tricot était une occupation réservée*, two posters, with Laurie Clark, 1987.
20. *The Flageolet's Surname*, card, illustration by Kathleen Lindsley, 1989.
21. *Blades for Michael Blum, Jonathan Hirshfield, Yves Hayat*, concertina card, with Gary Hincks, 1988.
22. *Lique des Droits*, card, 1988.
23. *Pink Melon Joy and More*, card, 1983.
24. *The Present Order*, card, with Nicholas Sloan, 1983.
25. *Carnation*, card, 1987.
26. *Both the Garden Style ...*, print, with Gary Hincks, 1987.
27. *Don't Put Your Heads All in One Basket*, card, 1988 (Picabia Series 2).
28. *The Bicentennial Proposal: The French War: The War of the Letter*, foreword by Susan Watterson; essay by Peter Day; designed by Susan Pritchard and Todd Richards. Exhibition catalogue. Toronto: Art Metropole, 1989.
29. Photograph of Ian Hamilton Finlay, 1983.
30. *Football Match*, card, Christmas 1983 (also called Little Sparta's Christmas Card).
31. *The National Trust Follifies ...*, card, 1987.
32. *Two Flutes for St-Just: Music for the Opening of Ian Hamilton Finlay's Bicentenary Celebrations*, music by Peter Davidson, 1989.

33. *Boatshelf*, card, photograph by Robin Gillanders, 1997.
34. *Ian Hamilton Finlay and the Wild Hawthorn Press, 1958–1990 (Scottish Zulu)*, invitation, drawing by David Button. New York: Frith Street Gallery, 1990.
35. *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Prints, Cards, Books (Citron Bleu)* invitation, drawing by Gary Hincks; after a detail in a painting by William Gillies. Basel: Stampa, 1995.
36. *Event*, folding card, with Gary Hincks, 1997.
37. *Lemon on a Blue Cloth*, card, with Jo Hincks, 1997.
38. *Pencilling in a Porthole: Homage to Simon Cutts*, card, with Gary Hincks, 1996.
39. *Sanding a Rudder...*, folding card, with Gary Hincks, 1995.
40. *Lemon with Oranges*, card, with Janet Boulton, 1995.
41. *Untitled (from the Wall Text Series)*, 1995.
42. *A Sail in Plato (Parmenides Dialogue)*, card, 1995.
43. *KENNST DU*, card, 1995.
44. *6 Proverbs*, illustrations by Gary Hincks, 1997.
45. *BP*, concertina card, 1997.
46. *For the Temples of the Greeks Our Homesickness ...*, card, with Michael Harvey, 1995.
47. *The Wanderings of Ulysses*, card, with Diane Tammes, 1997.
48. *Ulysses Was Here*, folding card, with Ron Costley, 1979.
49. *Gateway to a Grove*, two prints in folder, with Michael Harvey, 1985.
50. *A Small Classical Dictionary*, Parret Press, Christmas 1980.
51. *An Improved Classical Dictionary*, Parret Press, Christmas 1981.
52. *Sundial*, folding card, illustration by Kathleen Lindsley, 1989.
53. *Proposal for the Garden of Arthur and Carol Goldberg*, folding card, with Pia Maria Simig and Nicholas Sloan, 1994.
54. *(Classical) Landscape ...*, folding card, with Kathleen Lindsley, 1996.
55. *Simple and Useful ...*, card tag, 1995.
56. *A Fragment*, folding card, Christmas 1988.
57. *A Waterlily Pool*, card, with Ian Gardner 1970.
58. *Flakes*, illustrations by Gary Hincks, Christmas 1990.
59. *Unnatural Pebbles with Detached Sentences on the Pebble*, with Richard Grasby; photographs by Hani Latif. Exhibition catalogue. Edinburgh: Graeme Murray, 1981.
60. *The Anaximander Fragment*, with Harvey Dwight, 1981.
61. *The Temple of Apollo*, Little Sparta, card, photograph by Andrew Griffiths. New Arcadians/Southampton Art Gallery, 1989.
62. *A Book of Wild Flowers*, illustrations by Gary Hincks, Christmas 1994.
63. *The Garden, Little Sparta*, map, drawing by Gary Hincks, 1992.
64. *Hedgehog Garden Hint*, card, 1988.
65. *The Difference between a House ...*, card, with Mark Stewart, 1987.
66. *All Art Constantly Aspires towards the Condition of Birdsong ...*, four cards, with John Bevis, spring 1997.
67. *A Country Lane with Stiles*, illustrations by Laurie Clark, 1988.
68. *Potatocut Robin ...*, folding card, Christmas 1990.
69. *Ventôse*, invitation, with Gary Hincks. Lübeck: Overbeck-Gesellschaft, Behnhausgarten, 1991.
70. *La révolution devrait faire pour le peuple ce que le cubisme a fait pour le couteau, la forchette et la cuillère*, silkscreen, 1998.



Many of his admirers ... know him best by way of his elegantly printed works ... [that] arrive in the mail like pressed leaves from an enchanted forest. Their size may be small but they have an internal monumentality that grows from their simple structural clarity.<sup>1</sup>

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