ARTFORUM



TOP TEN

KARLA BLACK

By Karla Black

Karla Black is a Scottish artist based in Glasgow. She is known for her large-scale, abstract sculptures made from everyday materials such as paper, plaster, cosmetics, and powders. Her solo exhibition at the Kunstraum Dornbirn in Austria opens in June.

01 IAN HAMILTON FINLAY, LITTLE SPARTA, 1966–2006



Ian Hamilton Finlay's Little Sparta, Pentland Hills, Scotland, August 2010. Photo: Gardenpics/Alamy.

One of the best artworks in the world is this garden, or poem, or sculpture—no one knows quite what to call it—in Scotland's Pentland Hills. Finlay made it in collaboration with his wife, Sue Finlay. The artist died in 2006, but the work continues to evolve in concert with nature.

Little Sparta requires pilgrimage, especially in these times; it stands there hostile to war, a monument in equal contemplation of both terror and the divine. It is an homage to and critique of Western "civilization," culture, intellect, artistry, brutality, and bloodshed, realized through the aesthetics of ancient Greece, the French Revolution, and World War II. It is built from stone, concrete poetry, and cultivated land.

Finlay ran Little Sparta as a separate city-state. The land, inherited from his wife's family, was originally named Stoneypath, after the militaristic Greek municipality. It was the site of a dispute in the 1980s when a local council refused to recognize the site's temple as a religious building and tried to impose exorbitant taxes upon Finlay. But he won out in the end, saving his work from falling prey to bureaucracy. I was lucky to walk the hills of Little Sparta with Finlay many times, a formative experience for me as a young artist. There is a lot of humor in what he did—I still believe that art can't be intellectually sharp without that.

If you go there, you will enter beneath a gated archway to the gardens, on which is carved the words of the French revolutionary Louis Antoine de Saint Just: A COTTAGE. A FIELD. A PLOUGH / THERE IS HAPPINESS.