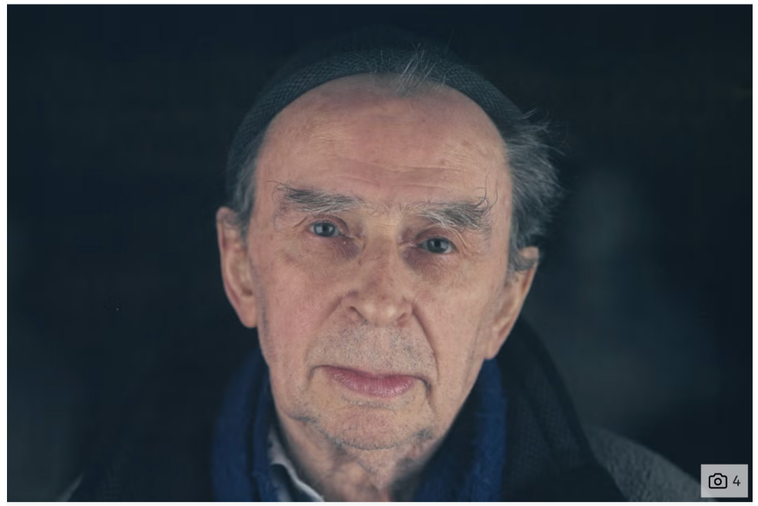
INDEPENDENT

Ian Hamilton Finlay: The groundbreaking artist and poet who created ‘Little Sparta’

The revolutionary Scotsman, who created in his Lanarkshire garden 'Little Sparta', would have turned 100 this year

Tom Lubbock • Monday 21 April 2025 11:13 BST



(Thomas Joshua Cooper)

To mark the centenary of Ian Hamilton Finlay later this year, the poet and artist is the subject of ‘Fragments’, a new expansive book and exhibition from Victoria Miro. Below, you can find The Independent’s original tribute to one of Scotland’s greatest artists following his death in 2006

Ian Hamilton Finlay, poet and artist: born Nassau, Bahamas 28 October 1925; CBE 2002; twice married (one son, one daughter); died Edinburgh 27 March 2006.

In Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden at "Little Sparta", in Lanarkshire, there's a small upright stone, like a milestone or a gravestone, standing by a path. Inscribed on it are two lines of words: MAN / A PASSERBY. In the abstract it means, presumably: humans come into the world, and vanish from the world, but the world was there long before them and will be there long after. Humans only pass through, pass by. But by setting these words on a stone by a path, the work fixes its general mortal reflection on to you, the viewer, as you experience it. You stand in front of it for a time. Then you pass by. It feels like disappearing.

Our greatest living artist is dead: his work survives him. It continues in the world, and that shouldn't be forgotten, even while his embattled career is being remembered. Obituaries and biographies too often equate the work with the working life. It's something that stops when the artist stops. But the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay is a wonder of its time, and I would think for a long time to come.

What should be more and more impressive is the magnitude of it: the diversity of its forms, the abundance of its invention, its sheer range of experience and perspective. It doesn't plough a single furrow, a theme, a look, a procedure. It is comprehensive in a way we have learnt to expect art not to be. And, while there are many things that are puzzling about Finlay's art, that low expectation may cause needless difficulty.

Finlay's manifold creations include postcards, prints, poems, books, inscriptions, embroideries, neons, gallery sculptures, permanent installations and landscapings around Europe, and - above all - his philosophical/poetic garden in southern Scotland. Trying to encompass its vision, no brief sentences beginning "it's about . . ." will do. It engages with - among other things - agriculture, architecture, warfare, the home, love, gardening, friendship, revolution, music, the organic world, the sky, the sea, classical mythology and philosophy, romanticism, modern art. It practises a sustained and interlocking meditation of these themes, and continually gives hints of an embracing world-view.

Or, trying to catch its tone, you must realise that this is an art with many tones. It has the breadth of response that a mature art should have. It straddles the grand and the severe, praise, wonder, militant ferocity, elegy, idyll, wit, sweetness, daft jokes. It is a world.

In today's loose art-speak, Finlay was a conceptual artist. He always called himself a poet. He began as a poet. All his mature visual work has an essential verbal component. All of it was made in collaboration with executing artists and craftsmen, who were themselves - very rare in contemporary art - always publicly credited.

Finlay was born in 1925 in the Bahamas - father a rum-runner - but his childhood was mostly in Scotland. He spent his youth as art student (briefly), serviceman, Orcadian shepherd, advertising copywriter. In the late Fifties he began to publish poems and short stories. In the early Sixties he was a leading member of the international Concrete Poetry movement - a poetry of few words, where typography and layout are crucial elements, and whose imperatives were for him moral: "a model of order, even if set in a space of doubt".

He founded the Wild Hawthorn Press in Edinburgh, for his own and others' publications, and the verbal-visual periodical Poor. Old. Tired. Horse. He made and exhibited toys. There were some early battles with cultural institutions. He invented the one-word poem (but it may have a title, of indefinite length). "The Clouds Anchor / swallow."

In 1966 Finlay and his second wife, Sue, moved to Stonypath, a group of farm buildings in a bare spot in the Pentland Hills. Here they began to garden, reclaiming, shaping and cultivating the land, planting trees, digging ponds, installing sculptures and inscriptions. This was the beginning of the work for which Finlay is most recognised, and the subject of his best-known epigram: "Some gardens are described as retreats, when they are really attacks." (He is, among other things, one of the great modern aphorists. Here's another, in a completely different register: "Scotland's birthright: the scone of stone.")



In Ian Hamilton Finlay’s garden at Little Sparta in Lanarkshire, there’s a small upright stone, like a milestone or a gravestone, standing by a path – a tribute to the poet and artist *(Shutterstock / Vatcharakris)*

Early works in the garden included Nuclear Sail, a black marble monolith that was a sub's conning tower-cum-tombstone, which rose menacingly at the end of a big pond. There was also a group of maples and hornbeams with an inscribed stone plaque before it: BRING BACK THE BIRCH. A great clump of high grass was "signed" with Albrecht Dürer's monogram carved in stone, recreating for real the artist's famous drawing The Great Piece of Turf. Lurking under bushes were stone tortoises, marked like Panzer tanks. Art and nature and ocean and war were set in dialogue - a body of work and a body of ideas mysteriously growing in tandem, a revolutionary idea of what a garden might be.

The work and the struggle expanded. The 1970s and 1980s were the years of Finlay's most high-pressure invention and high-profile battles. He produced piercing visual/verbal metaphors with amazing fecundity. He discovered classicism, and from it developed a quasi-religious doctrine, usually defined as against contemporary values. His most explicitly argumentative and combative works were a series of publications and exhibitions that engaged in open culture-critique: a campaign against meaninglessness, in which classical and neo-classical values were mobilised and renewed in opposition to modern liberal utilitarian secularism.

Footnotes to an Essay (1977), Heroic Emblems (1977), Poussin Over Again After Nature (1979), Unnatural Pebbles (1981), Talismans and Signifiers (1984), The Third Reich Revisited (1984): each of these was "an attempt to raise (in a necessarily roundabout way) the questions which our culture does not want to put in idea form". The questions concerned the place of power and violence in the world, the relationship of spirituality to nature and to politics; the work was dedicated to redeeming these concerns from the infecting taint of Nazism.

Finlay pointed to the way liberal society is utterly blank about what value to attach to the military force that underpins its existence, the way it has no doctrine of nature except as a (diminishing) resource. There were also swipes at meaninglessness in modern art, including the delightful Detached Sentences on Pebbles, where the Kettle's Yard cult of artless-natural-form-as-highest- beauty is subjected to deep mockery. "The modern PEBBLE is proposed as a sculpture, as it were, of a PEBBLE."

A prominent (and to some, puzzling) theme of this period is the French Revolution. Finlay once explained its origins simply. His first public installations had been constructed to such low standards that he had thought, "We need a revolution. So I looked to see what revolutions there had been." The (classically inspired) French Revolution, especially the Jacobin phase, became for Finlay the exemplary historical event. Its episodes, personalities and ideas provided the terms in which he framed his conflict with the contemporary world. It also embodied his tragic conception of politics, where idealism and catastrophe are inextricable.



Ian Hamilton Finlay at his home and Sculpture Garden 'Little Sparta' *(Alamy Stock Photo)*

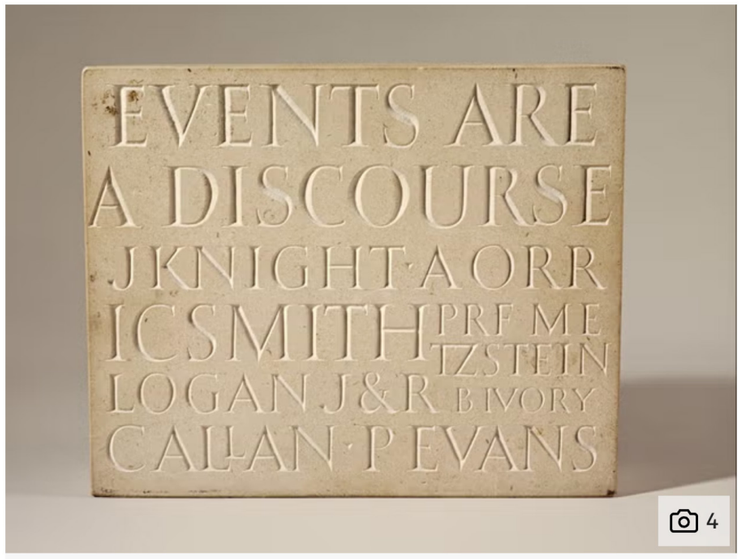
The 1980s were the decade of public battles. Finlay had a knack for warfare. His career was marked by feuds, withdrawn publications, cancelled exhibitions. At Stonypath, a barn was converted into a neo-classical "Garden Temple", dedicated "To Apollo His Muses His Missiles His Music". It was the cause of a long and bitter dispute with the local authority as to its rateable status, Strathclyde Region designating it an art gallery, Finlay a religious building. Finlay recruited a band of supporters, named (after the most fanatical Jacobin) "The Saint Just Vigilantes". In 1983 they repelled the Sheriff Officer's attempted raid on Stonypath, to impound works in lieu of rates. This was the First Battle of Little Sparta, as it was now renamed. The next raid succeeded, though.

There were other Battles, including one against a National Trust guide to "follies" in which the garden was presented as an eccentric whimsy. Each fight generated enormous propaganda, and was conducted with a mixture of fury, witty mischief and profound reflection.

A worse was to come at the end of the Eighties, when a commission to make a work in Paris, marking the bicentennial of the French Revolution, was opposed by a French art-world campaign that accused Finlay of being a Nazi. He had made a sculpture where the lightning-flash insignia of the SS was used to signify - the shock was deliberate - the utterly amoral violence of the natural world. After much litigation, the project was never undertaken.

To speak, as one can't avoid doing, of Finlay's doctrines and disputes shouldn't deflect attention from the substance of this work, its marvellous and somewhat elusive power. No other artist working in the conceptual mode has understood so well its essential devices of association and juxtaposition. (No modern artist full stop has understood so well the emotional force of typography.)

In its unceasing connection-making, Finlay's work reaches across huge distances, arranges the most far-flung and breathtaking unions, the most abrupt confrontations, the most homely similes. The machine gun as a flute (the air-vents, the finger-stops); the swallow as the sky's anchor (see its shape!); ploughed fields as "the fluted land", fluted like the grooves of a classical column; the floats of a fishing-net as lemons; the wake of a boat as stitching; a Malevich Red Square as the slant blade of a guillotine; a bird-table as an aircraft carrier; a sun-dial as a sail.



Ian Hamilton Finlay artwork 'Even Gods have Dwelt in Woods', 1976 *(Scottish Arts Council)*

The mental sweep is transporting, between war and peace, land and sea, wild nature and human cultivation, remote antiquity and the present day, home and the infinite. Or between the forms of art and the human heart - as in this definition of "arch" (creative definition being another of Finlay's favourite genres): "An Architectural Term. A Material Curve Sustained by Gravity As Rapture by Grief". The most startling effect is the way Finlay can, in the same breath so to speak, convey a severe high-mindedness and sheer fondness for the things of life; as he said,

A lot of my work is to do with straightforward affection, (liking, appreciation), and it always amazes me how little affection for ANYTHING there is in art today.

His great work is the garden. It continued to be extended, almost up to the artist's death. It will still be open to visitors in the summer months. What's most striking is the care and fragility of it, the way it's not a great act of moulding, but a series of small piecemeal acts of arranging and placing. It exemplifies one of Finlay's watchwords: piety. The works are set in an environment that is only partly a human construct, in growing and encroaching nature, in changing wind, light and weather, and it respects that distinction, through scale and restraint. This conduct of art as an act of observance, not an act of mastery, gives the work its grace.

It reflects the fundamental axis of Finlay's vision: the encounter between the human and what is not the human. His art is an affirmation of our inhabitation, cultivation and working of the world; and, at the same time, an emphatic statement of human limits. It looks to where those limits are met, in wild green world, the boundless sea, the convulsions of nature and human destructiveness, death. Human life - man, a passer-by - is understood in relation to what is beyond it, a realm that is often characterised as the divine, the gods, to be honoured and propitiated. The perspective is pagan, classical, tragic.

For years Finlay never left the bounds of his isolated territory. He had a kind of "agoraphobia". He saw friends and visitors. The work and the campaigns were conducted by post. The exhibitions were organised first by his wife, and later - after their separation - by his assistant Pia Maria Simig. He only left to go to hospital. But when he suffered the first in a series of strokes, around the turn of the century, this home-boundness strangely cleared. In his last years he went to his openings, went to restaurants, visited friends, went abroad. Already-conceived projects continued to be executed. He never originated another work.