The Observer

Review

Ian Hamilton Finlay review – the visionary Scottish poet-artist's mind in closeup



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★★★★☆



'Poised between antiquity and conceptualism': Marble Paper Boat, 1975-6 by Ian Hamilton Finlay. Photograph: © the estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern Two), Edinburgh
Words and ideas are as one – and at war – in Finlay's witty, elegant work, from sculptures to screenprints, which are ideally displayed in this intimate centenary show

Star/Steer is a masterpiece from 1968 by the Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006). What you see can be simply described. The word "star" appears a dozen times, screenprinted in silver on deep grey. They graduate down the page in a swaying column. Right at the bottom is a 13th word, "steer", as if tethering – or guided by – all these descending stars.

Each star is like an instance of itself, glimmering out of a fog, and the winding pattern irresistibly evokes starlight on rippling water. You look up to the stars, and down to the invisible boat summoned by that noun-verb "steer". Which star to follow, how to navigate at sea, what the night skies can hold: the work is a visualisation, a poem and a prayer.



Star/Steer, 1968 by Ian Hamilton Finlay: 'a poem and a prayer'. Photograph: © the estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay

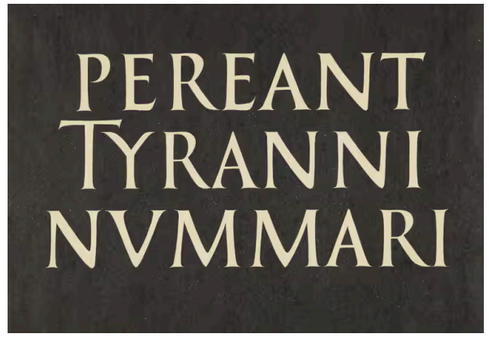
Finlay achieves all these sublime effects purely through the subtle arrangement of two words against two colours. His is an art of distillation, juxtaposition, thrift and contemplation. A poet before he became a concrete poet, a sculptor who became an "avant gardener", as he put it, of that fabled landscape known as Little Sparta in the Pentland Hills beyond Edinburgh, Finlay understood as few other artists the emotional power of letters cutting into form, shape and colour.

You sense it over and again in this wonderful centenary commemoration at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. It's there in the blue and white screenprint *Evening Sail*, which consists of the words "Evening Will Come They Will Sew the Blue Sail" running in classical script down a long deep blue banner, as if to suggest both the sail and the mariners' shrouds sewn in antiquity from such sails at the end of the day. It's there in the scarlet invectives, so exquisitely lettered on his behalf by Nicholas Sloan, against the government quangos Finlay despised: Pereant Tyranni Nummari (Let Perish the Money Tyrants).

And it runs through this show, as through his Pentlands garden, incised in all kinds of stone. A tank is delicately inserted into the pastoral relief *Et in Arcadia Ego*, embodying Virgil's ringing memento mori, carved in the marble below. A bird table for Finlay's garden doubles as a miniature aircraft carrier (imagine the birds landing and taking off), the letter E incised into its deck, a reference to the USS Enterprise, the longest nuclear-powered carrier in the world.

One gallery is filled with haunting photographs of Finlay's artists' signatures at Little Sparta, including his tribute to Albrecht Dürer. Above a stand of tall grass resembling Dürer's own *Great Piece of Turf*, hangs his famous AD monogram incised in stone – as if Dürer had himself signed nature.

> *His art scarcely seems to comply with an embattled personality at constant war with institutions*



'Scarlet invectives': Posters against the SAC: Pereant Tyranni Nummari (with Nicholas Sloan). Photograph: © the estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay

Finlay selects the *mot juste* with a poet's precision. Take a work such as *Wave Rock* from 1966. The word "wave" runs back and forth, horizontally, up against a vertical heap of the word "rock". The waves meet, depart, always unpredictable in their encounter with the rocks. Look closer, and the words "wreak" and "wreck" become discernible in the collision of letters. And all these words are etched on a sheet of sandblasted glass propped up in a bit of driftwood, like a letter in a rack. Everything flows, and connects.

Finlay's art is so refined, philosophical, antic in its wit and elegance, that it scarcely seems to comply with an embattled personality at constant war with institutions, galleries and publishers. But his long-running conflicts were notorious. A vivid gallery of films and photographs recounts his 1980s campaign against Strathclyde council for trying to force him to pay business rates on an old byre that he had converted into a classical temple. Local farmers joined in, blocking the marauding tax officials with their tractors. I especially like the poster *Shock Tropes for Little Sparta* (Sparta, of course, was at war with Athens).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