THE ART NEWSPAPER

Exhibitions // Preview

Centenary celebrations for the unpredictable poetry pioneer Ian Hamilton Finlay

Work of the late Scottish artist—known for his "concrete" poetry, Little Sparta garden and prickly personality—to go on show in Edinburgh

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Ian Hamilton Finlay
Photo: Thomas Joshua Cooper

Poet, sculptor, printmaker, gardener, designer… Ian Hamilton Finlay defied categorisation. His art garden in Lanarkshire, 25 miles south-west of Edinburgh, is arguably Scotland's most popular piece of contemporary art. He was one of Britain's pioneering "concrete" poets; much of his verse is carved into stone, or wood or linocut. He made toys, created books, printed cards, designed screenprints.

Finlay died in 2006, but the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh is staging an exhibition to mark the centenary of one of its genuinely maverick sons. "There's 50-odd years of complicated, interesting, intellectually stimulating work," says Patrick Elliot, the chief curator of Modern and contemporary art at National Galleries of Scotland. "And what's so interesting is that the small works—the tiny little prints and postcards and so on—are just as meaningful as these big sculptural projects that he could afford to do later on."

The National Gallery's show, which, Elliot says, comes out of its own "very impressive holdings" is in fact just the start of a flurry of activity. Victoria Miro gallery, which represents Finlay's estate, is staging a show starting in April, and has designated May as "Ian Hamilton Finlay Month", when eight exhibitions will be running simultaneously, including in New York, Mallorca and Vienna. *Fragments*, a book edited by Pia Simig, one of Finlay's key collaborators, will also be published.



Ian Hamilton Finlay's engraved marble *Ring Net Dove* (1976)
Photo: Antonia Reeve, © Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay

Finlay, if truth be told, is an artist whose eclectic work was complemented, and to an extent eclipsed, by his unpredictable and occasionally confrontational personality. He has gone down in legend for a stand-off with Strathclyde council officials in 1983 over his refusal to pay business rates for a barn on his celebrated Stonypath garden, aka Little Sparta; hence the message "Death to Strathclyde Region", which adorns some of his prints.

He had furious rows with the Scottish Arts Council, and the show will include some beautifully lettered posters reading "Mors Concilio Artium" (death to the Arts Council). Finlay developed a reputation as a recluse but, Elliot says, that was due to agoraphobia, a condition he was diagnosed with in the early 1960s. "I think people expected him to be quite difficult, but they were always surprised when he turned out to be polite and kind and inquisitive and interested."



Et in Arcadia Ego (1976) by Ian Hamilton Finlay (with John Andrew)
© The estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay © Estate of John Andrew.

Finlay's agoraphobia, Elliot says, was "central" to his work. "He couldn't easily get out and organise shows, so he did shows in his back garden, literally. He's inverting the usual exhibition process." And Finlay's controversial interest in military imagery—he lost a commission in France in the mid-1980s over his occasional deployment of SS symbols —"comes out of his battles", Elliot says. "He wasn't into Nazism or anything. I shouldn't think he enjoyed having these fights—he was very principled and was only difficult if he needed to be.

"The key thing about his work is that it's very funny; it's a very Scottish, wry sense of humour," Elliot says. "But he couldn't easily defend himself because he couldn't get out there to do so."

• *Ian Hamilton Finlay*, National Galleries of Scotland Modern Two, Edinburgh, 8 March-26 May