

Ian Hamilton Finlay was born in Nassau in 1925 and moved to Scotland as a young boy, his father having made and lost a fortune running a Bootlegging schooner in the Bahamas. In 1939 he was evacuated from the city of Glasgow to the remote Orkney Islands, where his relationship with the sea and a love affair with the idea of a pastoral idyll began.

Finlay first became known in the 1960's as a writer of short stories, plays and poetry and soon made his name as a leading figure in the international concrete poetry movement, producing prints booklets and cards under the imprint of his own Wild Hawthorn Press, which continues to this day. Indeed language has been the point of departure for most of his work over the past 40 years, in which time he has emerged as one of the most distinguished European artists of his generation and one of the greatest conceptual artists of all time. He is a poet; a philosopher; and a gardener, a man of letters, thoughts and ideas whose work (always executed by other artists and craftsmen after his designs) has been exhibited and collected by many of the world's major museums. A reputation that seems remarkable given that he has never attempted to position his work in a contemporary context. If anything Finlay has striven to distance himself from the more obvious avant-gardes of the later 20th century, choosing to live and work in self imposed isolation at Little Sparta, the garden that he has built around his home on a bleak moor in the Pentland Hills, some 25 miles south-west of Edinburgh.

This garden, widely acknowledged as one of the most important to have been created in Europe in modern times, is at the heart of all that Finlay does: a fusion of so many of his artistic ideas and principally of his concern with man's relationship to nature. It is essentially a Poet's Garden, in the tradition of those established by literary figures like Alexander Pope and William Shenstone in the 18th century, and it is filled with references to the themes that have dominated Finlay's life's work: the classical world; the French Revolution; the Second World War; the sea; fishing boats and landscape painting. Taken as a whole, the garden is also a remarkable work of art, a classical garden built where there should not be one, a contradiction in terms that reminds us to expect the unexpected.

All of Finlay's work, in whatever medium, stems from his fundamentally poetic view of the world: a view which finds the possibility of poetry anywhere and everywhere; in the simple arrangement of letters across a page, or in the names and numbers of fishing boats. It is also, frequently, a humorous view, with a playfulness that balances the underlying seriousness of intent.

The prints and paper-works selected for Finlay's first exhibition on Australia soil at Boutwell Draper in October 2005 covered most of the major themes and pre-occupations of Finlay's working life. It included a number of very rare editions from the 1960s alongside some of his most recent prints. Despite their incidental, or (in comparison with his stone sculpture) sometimes ephemeral nature, these printed works have always been an important and equal element of his artistic output and a vital means of communicating his ideas with the wider world. Ian Hamilton Finlay celebrated his 80th birthday last year with numerous exhibitions in the UK. Most importantly, an exhibition at Tate St. Ives and a major retrospective

Sadly, Ian Hamilton Finlay died at his now famous garden Little Sparta in Scotland, on 27th March 2006.