Ian Hamilton Finlay/MATRIX 116
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Aphrodite of the Terror, 1987
Photo: Antonia Reeve

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Certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks.

Ian Hamilton Finlay

Unconnected Sentences on Gardening, 1980

Reverence is the Dada of the 1980's as irreverence was the Dada of 1918.

Ian Hamilton Finlay

The Little Critic, Victoria Miro Gallery, 1988

Ian Hamilton Finlay is internationally known as a poet, artist, and garden designer. In the 1960s he came to prominence as Britain's foremost practitioner of an experimental literary form known as concrete poetry. Over the last decade Finlay has gained increasing recognition for his three-dimensional works of art made in many mediums, frequently in collaboration with other artists and artisans, and for his widely acclaimed magnum opus, the garden of Little Sparta at Stonypath in Dunyre, Scotland.

Beginning in 1966, through years of arduous labor, Finlay and his wife Sue Finlay have transformed an abandoned farm site in a desolate hollow 30 miles southwest of Edinburgh into a cultivated domain of flowers and plants, ponds, bridges, lawns, grottoes, and temples. Stonypath is, however, more than a beautiful four-and-a-half acre cottage garden. It is celebrated for reviving the tradition of the garden as a vehicle for political and social commentary.

In Britain this tradition blossomed in the eighteenth century, often in the gardens of poets, scholars, and politicians. Two notable poets who retired to the country, Alexander Pope and William Shenstone, created gardens at Twickenham and the Leasowes with deliberately built ruins intended to prompt nostalgic musings on the distance of the present from the past. But despite this appearance of pastoral exile and the fostering of an elegiac tone, these gardens were anything but retreats from the external world. They used a vocabulary of architecture, statuary, and inscription rife with symbolic allusion to promulgate their
designers' political and philosophical ideologies. The fact that each spadeful of earth brings the gardener closer to imposing a specific order upon unruly nature made the garden a paradigm for action based on ideas and ideals.

Finlay continues this precedent of the garden as an assertion of social values. Inscriptions abound at Stonypath. Language is embedded directly in the physical environment on stone slabs, plaques and planters, clay tiles, wooden posts, and other three-dimensional forms. This incorporation of language in the garden began in the late 1960s as the next logical step in Finlay's practice of concrete poetry. In concrete poetry the visual arrangement of letters and words on the page and the typography and character of the surface upon which these are imprinted become crucial components in producing a poem's overall meaning.

At Little Sparta text and site animate and modify each other, with the words both determining and reflecting the mood and character of their particular setting. By committing words to durable materials and anchoring them in the garden earth, Finlay cast language into a most palpably real state, while at the same time expanding its metaphoric capacities. Placing poetry in the garden, then, further advanced Finlay's avant-garde concerns with formal and linguistic experimentation.

Over the last twenty years, in an undertaking he calls the "neoclassical rearmament project," Finlay has intermingled references to the classicisms of antiquity, the Renaissance, and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By means of these allusions, often presented as fragments or juxtaposed with seemingly incompatible contemporary forms, he intends to induce a meditation on the current plight of Western culture as adrift from its traditions. Finlay's use of the past is not about stylistic appropriation, as is often practiced in postmodernism. Nor does he labor under the long-abandoned notion that the past orders of classicism might be revived or reduplicated in all their glory. Instead, he engages classical forms and ideas as an ethical and philosophical means by which to bring present culture into sharper focus.

Finlay is concerned, above all, about the diminished role of reverence in contemporary culture. This he expresses in *Aphrodite of the Terror* (1987), a work featured in his Garden Temple and recreated for this exhibition. Finlay
alters a plaster cast of the famous Roman statue of the *Venus de Medici* by performing a minimal but chilling gesture: he encircles the goddess's neck with a red silk thread. In the French Revolution, during the Reign of Terror, bereaved relatives signified their loss of loved ones to the guillotine by wearing such a thread. In Finlay's *Aphrodite of the Terror*, the goddess signals the loss of her own divine relatives, but not to the blade. Instead, the gods have been sacrificed to what Finlay calls the Secular Terror, a contemporary dissolution of belief in the ideal. "The secular," says Finlay, "is something that acknowledges only one level in the universe."¹ By conjoining in the same work beauty and violence, the sacred and the secular, Finlay hopes to dramatize the "immense pressure which contemporary life has brought to bear upon the the tissue of European culture."²

Finlay often uses this approach of pairing seemingly contradictory concepts as a way for one term to illuminate the other. This exhibition presents two central themes in Finlay's work: the garden tradition and the French Revolution. In both the garden and the Revolution the opposing forces of culture and nature are dynamically joined. A garden, as every gardener knows, is order wrested from chaos, an artifice imposed on nature and maintained only by constant intervention. Similarly, the very word "revolution" has dual connotations, evoking images of both violent political and cultural upheaval as well as the anticipated, rhythmic cycles of nature.

The French Revolution, in fact, made explicit use of natural imagery to "ground" its ideas. In 1793 the Jacobin political leaders created a new calendar, with 1792 as *Year I*, to replace eighteen centuries of time structured by Christian beliefs and traditions. The months and days were renamed after objects of bucolic virtue such as fruits, vegetables, crops, flowers, farm animals, and agricultural implements. By means of hyperbole, as is the poet's license, Finlay has characterized this merger of the political and the natural in an aphoristic sentence: "For the best of the Jacobins the Revolution was intended as a pastoral whose Virgil was Rousseau."³

In *Year II*, on the day called *Arrosoir* (Watering Can) during *Thermidor* (Month of Heat) -- July 28, 1794 -- two of the principal Jacobin leaders during the Reign of Terror, Maximilien Robespierre and Louis Antoine Saint-Just, were
themselves sent to the guillotine. For Finlay, these two controversial leaders represent an uncompromising commitment to the highest ideals of the French Revolution, in contrast to the concessions to bourgeois values by the Gironists and Thermidorians who, in Finlay's view, sabotaged the realization of the original goals of the new Republic.

Two works in the exhibition refer directly to the deaths of Robespierre and Saint-Just. A ceramic watering can, **Arrosoir** (1985), is a pastoral memorial to Saint-Just, with his dates of birth and death painted on its side. In **Thermidor** (1987), Finlay presents eight clay flower pots with plant markers, along with a ram's bell and a watering can, which together identify the Jacobin agricultural names for the days of the décade (the new ten-day week) leading up to their deaths. This combination of the promise of young seedlings with the denouement of tragic violence makes explicit the meaning of revolution as both cyclical and tumultuous, a natural and a political regeneration.

A startling sight in the garden of Little Sparta, presented in a photograph in the exhibition, extends this conjunction of the sublime (in its original meaning of terrifying) and the pastoral. At one serene edge of the Woodland Pool a large gold head sits among a mass of leafy plants. It is Saint-Just portrayed as the avatar of Apollo, with an inscription on his forehead, **Apollon Terroriste**. Apollo was not only the god of the arts and himself a master lyre player but also a warrior whose bow and arrow often meted out swift and sure death, sometimes cruel and undeserved. Saint-Just, one of the severest, most unyielding of the Jacobin leaders, was also an accomplished flute player. As Apollo's attributes are the bow and lyre, so Saint-Just's are the blade and flute. The large head on the garden floor is eerily reminiscent both of Saint-Just's condition after the guillotine and of something rising from the earth.
The frequent complicity between culture and violence is also conveyed by the slate board *Tableau Noir* (1987) which displays a statement by Albert Mathiez, a twentieth-century historian of the Revolution, about Robespierre: *He was the first schoolmaster of democracy, a severe schoolmaster, who did not temper either truths, or warnings, or reprimands.* Robespierre conceived of the Revolution as a grand program of moral education in which terror and virtue play the primary role. "Virtue without which terror is harmful and terror without which virtue is impotent," he said, expressing his view that opposite extremes are often necessary components of the same enterprise.

The French Revolution, then, provides Finlay with a model of idealism wedded to action. It exemplifies the rigorous pursuit of a pure vision, requiring the subordination of individual will to collective purposes. The Jacobins' desire not only to change material conditions but also, as Finlay puts it, "to change the being of everything," elevates for him the status of the Revolution to the sacred.

The blade occurs in Finlay's work as a metaphor of this willingness to act on beliefs. In its own time, too, the guillotine became an emblem of revolutionary action. It performs the same function in Finlay's art as do the miniature aircraft carriers, submarines, and tanks in his garden or his replacing of Apollo's bow with a machine gun. Such instruments of modern warfare are, as Finlay has pointed out, the imagery of our own time. Furthermore, in the twentieth century, tanks, battleships, and fighter planes have been not only instruments of destruction but also the means of liberation. To those who suffered the malevolence of Nazi aggression, for example, the arrival of Allied tanks is a memorable image indeed. Thus, for Finlay, militaristic images--now sometimes evocative only of evil--embody both the savage and the noble actions of humankind.

Despite the formidable themes in Finlay's art, he often presents his ideas with great humor and playfulness. Viewers appreciate the sharp wit and intelligence that wend their way
through his garden and other works. The ceaseless play of references, citations, and allusions opens up each phrase or object toward other works of art and literature and other bodies of thought. Finlay likens this cultural resonance to a "free floating metaphor," that is, an irrepressible intertextuality that resists closure and insists on the vitality of discourse.

As this exhibition indicates, Finlay works in many different mediums by collaborating with artists skilled in a variety of techniques. This fluidity of his working methods underscores his identification with the experimental aspects of modernist practice. But it also points to his emphasis on idea and object rather than on the personality and ego involved in forging an individual style. One such work in the exhibition, A Shaded Path (1986-87), consists of seventy-eight clay bricks each bearing the name "Virgil" in place of the manufacturer's stamp. The Roman poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.) is important to Finlay as the embodiment of the pastoral mode with its elegiac undertones. The German art historian Erwin Panofsky wrote of Virgil that, "with only slight exaggeration one might say that he 'discovered' the evening." Virgil's poetry produced a vespertinal mixture of tranquility and sadness in its recognition that even in Arcadia there existed strife and loss.

A Shaded Path reaches back to this ancient melancholy moment, yet the overall form of the brick path intentionally refers to floor pieces by the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre such as Equivalent VIII (1966), made up of 120 firebricks, which, when acquired by the Tate Gallery, London, stirred a national controversy. Instead of rejecting this audaciously self-contained modernist form Finlay infuses it with a spirit of tradition by embroidering it with a network of allusion and reference.

Although Finlay's work is internationally known, this is his first one-person museum exhibition in the United States. He was born in 1925 in Nassau, Bahamas (where his father was a bootlegger with his own schooner) but his family returned to Glasgow when he was a child. His education ended at age thirteen with the outbreak of World War II and his evacuation to the Orkneys for safety. He briefly attended classes at the Glasgow School of Art, then served three-and-a-half years as a sergeant in the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC). After the war he returned to the
Orkneys to work as a shepherd. There he began writing short stories and plays, which were published in the *Glasgow Herald* and broadcast by the BBC. He co-founded Wild Hawthorne Press in 1961 and the periodical *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* (P.O.T.H.) in 1962. Though Finlay has rarely left the boundaries of Little Sparta since moving there in 1966, his self-imposed exile has not resulted in a reclusive life. He corresponds widely and vigorously, having raised letter writing to an art form and honed it as a political weapon. He also receives many visitors from around the world.

John B. Ravenal
Assistant Curator of
20th Century Art
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art
Wadsworth Atheneum

1 Katherine Kurs and Christopher McIntosh, unpublished interview with the artist, September 13, 1987. The curators wish to thank Kurs and McIntosh for generously sharing the transcripts of their interviews with Finlay.


4 Kurs and McIntosh, August 4, 1988.


**Works in MATRIX:**

**Unnatural Pebbles,** 1981, cut and polished stones, selection from a set of 21, from c. 1 1/4" x 1 3/4" x 3/4" to 4 1/2" x 7" x 1 1/2" each, made with Richard Grasby. From The LeWitt Collection, Wadsworth Atheneum.

**Arrosoir,** 1985, ceramic, edition of three, 10" x 12" x 5 3/4", made with David Ballantine. Lent by Peter and Anne Nadin, New York City.

**Wildflower Vase,** 1985, ceramic, edition of c. five, 7 1/2" x 3 1/8" x 3 1/8", made with David Ballantine. Lent by Michael Klein, New York City.


Aphrodite of the Terror, 1987, plaster with silk thread, c. 78 3/4" x 35 1/2" x 35 1/2". Plaster cast lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, courtesy of the Queens Museum of Art, New York.

Tableau Noir, 1987, paint on slate board (to be placed on a painting easel), 27 1/2" x 36" x 3/4", made with Michael Harvey. Lent by Raymond Learsy, Sharon, Connecticut.

Thermidor, 1987, eight clay flower pots, bronze bell, watering can, painted wooden sticks, ribbon, soil, printed booklet, dimensions vary with installation. Lent by Galerie Jule Kwenig, Frechen-Bachem, Germany.

LIBERTY EQUALITY FRATERNITY, 1990, carved wood with metal hinges, from a set of c. thirty, 8" x 14" x 3/4" open, with Caroline Webb. Lent by the artist.


Twelve color photographs of Little Sparta, C-print, 30" x 40" each: Woodland Garden (by Christopher McIntosh, New York City); Nuclear Sail, The Present Order (by David Paterson, London. Courtesy Reaktion Books, London); Apollon Terroriste, Wayfaring Tree, Plant Trough, Column (by John Ravenal, Philadelphia); Cusamis Tree Column Base, Garden Temple (by Antonia Reeve, Edinburgh); Elegiac Inscription, Claude Bridge, Homage to the Villa d'Este: Aircraft Carrier Bird-Bath (by Ianthe Ruthven, London).

TO DARE! IS THE POLITICS OF REVOLUTION EVENTS ARE A DISCOURSE EXALTATION IS VIRTUE ORDER IS REPETITION TERROR IS THE PIETY OF THE REVOLUTION

Five statements lettered on the wall, taken from inscribed marble slabs in the Garden Temple, Little Sparta.
Selection of cards, prints and artistbooks from Finlay's Wild Hawthorne Press. Lent by the artist; Graeme Murray Gallery, Edinburgh; Galerie Jule Kewenig, Frechen-Bachem, Germany; John Ravenal, Philadelphia; Wadsworth Atheneum.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

Battersea Park, London Silver Jubilee Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture '77; Hayward Gallery, London The Hayward Annual '83; Kassel, Germany Documenta 8 '87; Tate Gallery, Liverpool Starlit Waters, British Sculpture 1968-1988 '88; Glasgow Garden Festival Art in the Garden '88; Frankfurter Kunstverein & Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt Prospekt '89 '89; Messepalast Halle E, Vienna Von der nature in der Kunst, (in conjunction with Wiener Festwoche 1990 ) '90; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC Rhetorical Image '90; The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, NYC Paysage Démoralisé '90; Walter Gropius Bau, Berlin Metropolis '90; Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Holland Night Lines '91.

Selected Bibliography about Ian Hamilton Finlay:


Kenedy, R. C. "Ian Hamilton Finlay," *Art International* vol. 17 no. 3 (March '73), p. 37+.


Architectural Digest vol.46 no. 7 (July '89), p. 104+.


Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

Scottish National Gallery of Art, Edinburgh '72; National Maritime Museum, London '74; Graeme Murray Gallery, Edinburgh Homage to Watteau '76, Coincidence in the Work of Ian Hamilton Finlay '80, Unnatural Pebbles '81, Talismans and Signifiers '84, A Wartime Garden '90; City Art Gallery, Southampton, England '76, Liberty, Terror and Virtue '84; Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, England Collaborations '77; Serpentine Gallery, London '77; Collins Exhibition Hall, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow Nature Over Again After Poussin '80-81; Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Holland '80; Victoria Miro Gallery, London Marat Assassiné & Other Works '86, Homage to Ian Hamilton Finlay '87, Idyls '90; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris Inter Artes et Naturam '87; Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris Midway '87; Galerie Claire Burrus, Paris Pastorales '87; Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Jouy-en-Josas, France Poursuites Révolutionnaires '87; Galerie Jule Kewenig, Frechen-Bachem, Germany An Exhibition on Two Themes '88, New Works '90; Michael Klein Gallery, NYC '88; Hamburger Kunsthalle, Germany 1789-1794 '89; Art Metropole, Toronto Ian Hamilton Finlay: The Bicentennial Proposal: The French War: The War of the Letter '89; Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland '90; Christine Burgin Gallery, NYC '90; Kunstverein Friedrichshafen Gufts and Wars '91; Frankfurter Kunstverein Ideologische Äusserungen '91; Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh Ian Hamilton Finlay & The Wild Hawthorne Press: 1958-1991 '91.
Selected Bibliography by Ian Hamilton Finlay:


Finlay has produced many hundreds of publications with The Wild Hawthorne Press which he and Jessie McGuffie founded in 1961 to publish works by contemporary poets and artists. Over the years, the press has come to concentrate exclusively on Finlay's own production. These include books and booklets, cards and folding cards, prints and posters, and garden proposals. The most comprehensive listing of publications by Finlay can be found in A Catalogue Raisonné, Graeme Murray Gallery and the Frankfurter Kunstverein catalogue, both listed above.

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