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HYPERALLERGIC

Ian Hamilton Finlay's Philosophical Gardening

For Finlay, the garden was not simply a place of beauty, but rather a liminal space bordered by nature and culture, where visitors are invited to meditate on the different ways time passes.

John Yau | September 29, 2018



Installation view of *Ian Hamilton Finlay: "The garden became my study"* at David Nolan, New York (all images courtesy David Nolan, New York)

Ian Hamilton Finlay, Marcel Broodthaers and Cy Twombly: I see them sitting in a neoclassical gazebo overlooking a shimmering lake, talking passionately about poetry, different kinds of script (from handwriting to calligraphic lettering to typefaces), gardens, and the distinction

between cultivated flowers and wildflowers. Their literal writing — from Finlay’s concrete poems to the pairing of words and images in Broodthaers’s graphic works to Twombly’s transcriptions of poems by various poets — is what initially enthralled me, but this early enchantment has blossomed into much more.

Like many poets of my generation, I first learned about Finlay when I came across his concrete poems in the indispensable gathering, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, edited by Emmet Williams, and published by the legendary Something Else Press, under the guidance of Dick Higgins, in 1967. Recalling that early encounter — I was in my first year of college — I wonder if it was Finlay’s playful variations on the same letters and words that interested me in the possibility of language being something to both to read and look at? Or did the roots of my fascination start much earlier, when I was a child happily watching my mother using a brush and ink to practice her calligraphy on Sunday afternoons?



Installation view of Ian Hamilton Finlay: “The garden became my study” at David Nolan, New York

In 2016, Broodthaers had a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Twombly had one at the same museum in 1994-95, 15 years after his 1979 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, which opened the eyes of a lot of people. For a variety of reasons, however, Finlay’s work remains little known in America. As such, anyone with even a passing interest in the meeting of poetry and art, language and object, should go to the exhibition, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: “The Garden Became My Study,”* at David Nolan and leisurely explore both floors of the galleries — while technically not part of the exhibition, there is a selection of

concrete poems in the open office area on the second floor that I urge visitors to see, as it hints at the creative scope of this far ranging, inimitable artist.

Finlay's work can be tender, sweet, caustic, satirical, unsettling and downright gnarly. Not derived from a dictionary or thesaurus, his use of language comes from his deep reading in divergent subjects, from the French Revolution to classical literature, and a punster's sensitivity to homophones and other links. By this, I mean that instead of appropriating readymade definitions, as a number of conceptual artists have done, he lived inside language — from sound to orthography to calligraphic and pictorial possibilities. For Finlay, like the poet Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote the sonnet "Voyelles," language already existed as matter.

In 1966, when Finlay was in his early 40s, he moved, with his wife, Sue, and children, to a small farm on the moors of Pentland Hills, near Edinburgh and little more than hour by car from Glasgow. There, on seven acres of land, he spent the rest of his life concretizing words and passages he read (and reread) into sculptures and art works, which were then integrated into different gardens and areas that he carefully cultivated. Not surprisingly, he became a gardener who seldom left his garden, which he called *Little Sparta* because he was at war with the rest of society.



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In order to make these works — in materials such as wood, clay, bronze, and concrete — he collaborated with craftspeople of all kinds, as well as poets and printmakers. For Finlay, the garden was not simply a place of beauty, but rather a liminal space bordered by nature and culture, where visitors are invited to meditate on the different ways time passes, from the cycle of seasons to the recording of history. His garden became a philosophical inquiry into and reflection on our relationship to the natural world. He was influenced by his readings, which began with the Presocratics, often considered Western civilization's first philosophers and scientists, and included such writers and thinkers as Virgil, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and E. M. Forster.

Almost all the works in this exhibition address the themes of the garden and the imbalanced relationship between nature and culture. The one exception is a rectangular stone plaque, "Only Connect" (1998), made with John Andrew. The piece, measuring 7 7/8 by 11 1/2 by 1 7/8 inches, is engraved with the phrase "Only connect," which comes from the novel *Howards End* (1910) by the English writer, E. M. Forster. It is useful to cite it, as it gives further insight into Finlay's thinking:

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.

Finlay recognized that humanity had become estranged from the natural world, and that we see the latter as something to subjugate and profit from. We live fragmented lives, completely out of tune with nature, the seasons, and the various cycles of time. His approach to art was to make connections, to bring things into proximity so that we would consider the links, which we might find challenging, illuminating, enchanting or disturbing. He wanted us to hear Forster's imperative to connect, to try and attain a more holistic relationship to nature.

In "Osiris, Osiers" (1983), made with David Ballantyne, we see two similarly sized brown ceramic plaques mounted on the wall. The word "Osiris" has been incised in one plaque; the word "Osiers" in the other. The obvious link is the shuffling of two letters ("r" and "i" becomes "e" and "r") to spell two words, which leads us to ask: what has Finlay connected?



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In Egyptian mythology, Osiris is the god of the underworld who grants the dead everlasting life. He is associated with the coming of spring and the yearly flooding of the Nile, which, in ancient times, made the land around it fertile. Osiers are willows that grow in wet habitats; their flexible shoots and twigs are used for basketry and furniture. By linking the two — one is the product of man and the other something found in nature — Finlay asks us to recognize the way we deal with nature and natural resources. Are we committed or not to the renewal of a resource?

In the installation, "Homage to Seurat" (1995), made with Gary Hincks and Candida Ballantyne, a blue wheelbarrow, a blue watering can, and a partly blue hoe, all of which are speckled with mostly red and yellow dots, has been placed in the middle of the room, in front of a wall painting. The painting is defined by a band of brown dots. Inside, we see a few lines and a lot of numbers, suggesting we are to "connect" the dots, so to speak. Even as this joke surfaces in your consciousness, you realize that the dots you must connect are those on the gardening implements to the white space demarcated by numbers and a few gracefully billowing vertical and lines, offset by one horizontal. As you begin thinking about this, you might notice that the dotted frame is brown (earth) and the garden implements are blue (water and sky). It quickly becomes apparent that the numbers and lines allude to one of Seurat's maritime scenes and that we are to connect gardening with the ocean, which we also harvest. However, do we replenish what we harvest?



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By compelling the viewer to make the connection and go on to discover what links his pairings, often between language and things, Finlay invites us to contemplate our relationship to the earth and how we use it. As much as I have learned about and seen his work, including a memorable afternoon spent at *Little Sparta*, I am still astonished at all the different ways he plays with words, typography, and lettering. In "EVENING" (1967), the first three letters (EVE) are typographic equivalents of engraved letters, while the middle letter (N) of this seven-letter word is solidly colored in the lower half, but not in the upper half. Finally, the last three letters (ING) are solid blue. It seems that the sun is setting on the left and night approaches from the right. Visually, Finlay's representation of the word reminds us that "evening" is the period between day and night, and that we are on the "eve" of night.

It is amazing how much can be teased out of Finlay's work. This is true even of what seem at first to be the simplest ones. The density of Finlay's thought, in tandem with his incredibly supple, visual imagination, led him to produce a powerful and provocative body of work that remains too little known in America.