***Ian Hamilton Finlay – Sentences*: Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh**
29 July - 23 October 2005.
***The Philosopher's Garden*: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh**
24 September - 20 November.
For information about the garden at Little Sparta: www.littlesparta.org

A milestone, or a gravestone, stands in the grass by the side of a path winding through a small wood. It's a short, round-topped, granite tablet, far from conspicuous, and a flourishing fern is beginning to upstage it. But if you notice it, you'll have no trouble reading its two lines of inscription. First line, a single word in large roman capitals; second line, in smaller capitals:

MAN

A PASSERBY

This terse phrase has a source, it's a kind of quotation in fact, but it speaks well enough for itself. In the abstract it means, presumably: human beings come into the world, and leave the world, but the world was there long before them and will be there long after. Human's only pass through, pass by.

But see how this message is made to speak specifically to whoever is standing there reading it. This a work of art that actively involves its viewer, and its setting, and the duration of its viewing. Inscribing these words on a stone by a path, it fixes its general mortal reflection onto you, as you reflect on it, in this particular spot, for a particular time. You've stopped and looked. Soon enough you'll be on your way. Your temporary stay here is made analogous to our human stay in the world.

It's as if the dead and the living had changed places. We think of the dead as stuck in the ground, in their graveyards, and that's what makes them dead. Whereas the

living can visit these graves, and replenish the flowers, and stand there in contemplation, and then move on, back into the stream of life, and that's what makes them alive. But this work by Ian Hamilton Finlay turns those feelings around. The stone stays standing there. You pass on. Being alive is just visiting. The wind moves in the trees.

I've never known an artwork give me such a strong sense of having myself disappeared. Most images of death, the skull, the hourglass, the brief candle, the broken column, picture it from the point of view of mortals and their limited lives. This one shows the view from the other side – our absence, the earth going on without us. It's like walking over your own grave.

Ian Hamilton Finlay is 80 years old at the end of the month. He is, as the phrase goes, our greatest living artist, and still at work. But I don't want to spend too long on a citation of achievement – the breadth of his output, the abundance of invention, the diversity of forms, the range of subject and perspective, the sheer surprise of a modern art that can engage with agriculture, architecture, gardening, sewing, sailing, the home, romantic love, revolution, music, warfare and the violence of nature.

Finlay's manifold creations (always made in collaboration) include post-cards, prints, poems, aphorisms, books, inscriptions, embroideries, plaques, monuments, permanent installations, landscape- and garden-works in various corners of the world. Above all there's Little Sparta - his neo-classical philosophical/poetic garden, covering a few acres in the Pentland Hills just south of Edinburgh, constructed over the last 40 years. It's there, among many other works, where that milestone/gravestone stands.

At this moment there isn't a great deal to see. The garden, having drawn its largest ever visitor numbers this summer, is closed to the public until late spring. There's a beautiful exhibition called *Sentences* at Inverleith House in the Edinburgh Botanical Gardens, a purely verbal exhibition, open for one more week. A selection of Finlay dicta and visual poems are painted on the white walls of the empty gallery, generally

horticultural in scope, in a range of moral tones: “Flowers in a garden are an acceptable eccentricity”. “IDYLLS END IN THUNDERSTORMS”. There’s an ongoing show, *The Philosopher’s Garden*, at the Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, with photographs of Little Sparta by Robin Gillanders. There’s a small display of prints at Tate Modern in London.

You could also look at some books, and good ones have come out recently. Jessie Sheeler’s *Little Sparta* (Frances Lincoln) is a complete illustrated guide to the garden. *The Blue Sail* (WAX 366, Glasgow) is an anthology of Finlay’s poems from the last 40 years. *Fleur de L’Air* (Wild Hawthorn Press) records in dense and suffusing monochrome photos a garden installed in Provence. And *Ian Hamilton Finlay - Domestic Pensées* (Aggie Weston’s Editions) is a collection of aphorisms, alternately high-minded and witty: “all paint is mortal”, “precision is a form of the good”, “art critics seem to be obsessed with the word Obsessed”, “Scotland’s Birthright: the Scone of Stone”.

What I can do best here is something that I’ve noticed doesn’t get into print so much: to try and explain the feeling of this work, why it’s so moving, why I always want to see it again. When we praise Finlay’s work, it’s the meanings that tend to be stressed. We talk about its engagement with the classical world, the tradition of neo-classical art, Western philosophy, the French Revolution, the Second World War – and the range of cultural reference, the brilliance of the metaphors, the themes and the arguments and the imagery. It comes over as something enormously ingenious, learned and idiosyncratic - or, as some say, “obsessed”!

Yet who would stay with it, if that was all it was? So what is it in the work that so often causes me, and others, to tremble? It seems there are three aspects to it.

One is its *reach*, the distances it can throw a line across. The crucial difference between visual art and conceptual art is that with visual art (when it works) your attention is fixed upon the art-object, while with conceptual art (when it works) your

attention is sent off from the art-object on a journey of connection. In this sense, Finlay's art is conceptual. Its basic device is connection. A single work presents words and an object, words in particular lettering and spacing, an object and a place. And putting these elements together, the mind finds itself carried across breathtaking distances – from land to sea, from ground to a swallow in the sky, from the present to remote antiquity, from tranquillity to destruction. The mental sweep is transporting.

Another aspect is its *embrace*. It would be possible to know only a single work by Finlay and understand it, but even then, I think, you'd feel that it came from something larger, of which it was only one manifestation - like the emblem of an as yet unknown religion. Finlay's works imply a world. Their continually interlacing themes, their startling variety of mood (sublime, homely, polemical, praising, elegiac, idyllic, jokey), point to some overarching vision, something as big as life, which anyone engaged by the work will find themselves trying to define and piece together, though it may not be easy. What I'm stressing is here not what the vision is, but the sense that it's there, something above both the work and the artist, presiding, guiding, whose embrace the viewer enters into too.

A third aspect is its *care*. Finlay's art is always alert to the limits of its making. A work is made of elements it did not make - whether that's cloth, stone, bronze, wood, neon, paper, the words of a language, the letters of the alphabet, the colours of the spectrum. (The colours used in *Sentences*, say, have a way of standing apart from the words which are painted in them.) A work is set in an environment it did not make, in growing and encroaching nature, in changing wind, light and weather, and it respects that distinction, through scale and restraint. This tact of handling and placing, this conduct of art as an act of observance not an act of mastery, gives the work its grace.

And it reflects the fundamental axis of Finlay's vision: the encounter between the human and what is not the human. His art is an affirmation of our inhabitation,

cultivation and working of the world; and, at the same time, an emphatic statement of human limits. It looks to where those limits are met, in wild green world, the boundless sea, the convulsions of nature and human destructiveness, death. Human life – man, a passerby - is understood in relation to what is beyond it, a realm that is often characterised as the divine, the gods, to be honoured and propitiated. The perspective is pagan, classical, tragic.

That religious vision has a power to move too, though I don't myself assent to it. But then intellectual assent isn't quite the point. It is there in the work, in the experience of the work, as in any true religious art. And the work will survive.