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Ian Hamilton Finlay opens at deCordova in May 2014
First American museum exhibition of the artist’s work in over two decades

Lincoln, MA, March 3, 2014—DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum is pleased to present Ian Hamilton Finlay: Arcadian Revolutionary and Avant-Gardener, an ambitious survey exhibition of the work of the internationally renowned Scottish artist, poet, and garden designer. On view from Friday, May 16, through Monday, October 13, 2014, Ian Hamilton Finlay will showcase over 200 objects including sculptures, prints, and books. The show will be the first museum exhibition of the artist’s work in the United States since his show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1992; the exhibition will also be the first of the artist’s work in the United States since his death in 2006. In addition to filling deCordova’s Linde and Foster Galleries, the exhibition will contain a number of works installed outdoors in the Sculpture Park.

After founding Wild Hawthorn Press in 1961 and publishing hundreds of artists’ books, Finlay rose to prominence as one of Great Britain’s foremost experimental literary artists making concrete poetry, a practice which wed language with sculptural form. In 1966, he and his wife Sue Finlay built Little Sparta, a garden in Dunsyre, Scotland, which became the site for the ultimate realization of his aesthetic program. Finlay treated Little Sparta as a site for engaging with cultural inquiry and criticism rather than as a sanctuary or more traditional pastoral setting; he literally placed language into the landscape in monumental form, encouraging a discourse on the reconciliation between nature and modern society.

Finlay freely mined human history to source imagery for his work. He believed that most positive symbols in Western culture had been drained of their meaning through consumerist assimilation and desensitization, and so employed universally powerful symbols of violence and authority such as machine guns, tanks, and guillotines in his work. Finlay’s merger of beauty, violence, and the sacred spoke to his belief in the disintegration of contemporary society’s cultural ideals. When encountered in juxtaposition to emblems of nature and classical idealism, Finlay’s epigrams provoke contemplation of society’s need for a reclamation of civic and aesthetic values.

Several works demonstrating Finlay’s signature fusion of classical beauty and violence will be on view in deCordova’s exhibition. Apollo/Saint Just after Bernini (1985-2003) is a suite of bronze sculptures of the youthful Olympian deity, each equipped—upon closer inspection—with modern weapons such as hand grenades and submachine guns, rather than flutes or harps. Similarly, Finlay’s Aphrodite de la Terreur (Aphrodite of the Terror) (1987) is a plaster sculpture of the Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality—this time adorned with a modest red necklace, a chilling reference to the red string worn around the necks of mourning relatives of the beheaded during the French Revolution.

Finlay’s work often commands attention through his simple visual and verbal plays on language: Wildflower Vase (1985) is an ephemeral bouquet in a classical white vase labeled with the text...
Wildflower: A Mean Term between Revolution and Virtue. Finlay’s text causes the work’s immediate beauty and representation of nature to become a prompt for the contemplation of communal mindfulness. In a comparable gesture, Finlay’s Panzer Leader (1976) is a cast tortoise whose shell is embossed with the word Panzer, a German word that can be translated as tank, armor, or turtle shell. Although Panzer Leader appears to be an unassuming, tank-like reptile at first glance, Finlay’s application of language quickly renders it a more sinister evocation of the thunderous crush of German tanks during World War II.

Finlay’s challenging engagement with landscape and history does not make allowance for a passive viewing experience. The artist’s work encourages viewers to question the role of the detached consumer and to utilize the tools of awareness that Finlay presents in his work in order to consider their responsibility in articulating the future of society.

About the Artist

Ian Hamilton Finlay was born to Scottish parents in the Bahamas in 1926, and his family returned to Glasgow when he was a child. Although his formal education ended with the outbreak of World War II, Finlay began to write short stories and play while working as a shepherd during his early adulthood. He rose to prominence as one of Great Britain’s foremost experimental literary artists after founding Wild Hawthorn Press in 1961, through which he published hundreds of artists’ books. Finlay died in 2006 in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Today, Finlay is regarded as one of the most influential British artists of the twentieth century for his work as sculptor, poet, and landscape designer. Finlay’s work has been exhibited internationally, including solo exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Tate Gallery, London, England; and the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut. In addition to being collected by numerous institutions, his work has also been permanently installed in public and private outdoor spaces throughout Europe and North America. Together with his wife, Sue Finlay, the artist created Little Sparta, a vast garden at Stonypath in Dunsyre, Scotland, which blends landscape, sculpture, and language, and currently contains nearly 300 examples of the artist’s work.

About deCordova

Established in 1950 and located just 20 miles west of Boston, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum is dedicated to fostering the creation and exploration of contemporary sculpture and art through a dynamic slate of rotating exhibitions, innovative learning opportunities, a constantly changing 30-acre landscape of large-scale, outdoor, modern and contemporary sculpture, and site-specific installations.

General Information

DeCordova is located at 51 Sandy Pond Road in Lincoln, MA. Summer hours (beginning Memorial Day weekend) are every day, 10 am to 5 pm. Winter hours (beginning Columbus Day weekend) are Wednesday–Friday, 10 am to 4 pm, and Saturday–Sunday, 10 am to 5 pm. Admission is $14 for adults, $12 for seniors, $10 for students (ages 13 and up), and free for children 12 and under. Members, Lincoln residents, and active duty military personnel and their families are admitted free of charge with proper ID. Public, private, and self-guided tours of the Sculpture Park and of the Museum are also available. Visit decordova.org or call 781.259.8355 for further information.