

Artists Gardens

Assignment 3

*- Detailed description of two works by
Artist, Ian Hamilton Finlay -*

Art and the Environment 315
Visual Cultural Studies

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Prologue

“...Monet’s garden at Giverny is perhaps the best known small garden in the world. It was not only a stimulus for so many of his later paintings but was in itself an outstanding art work. Similarly Ian Hamilton Finlay’s garden and farm Stoneypath is both an artwork and the source of his imagery and symbolism. These two gardens represent the idea that installations can enter directly into the environment.”

Goddard, J. (1999 p. 7)

Introduction

Beyond the constraints of coded categorization such as land art, earth works, installation or environmental art, lies the setting of the garden in which the individual creates using a privileged mode of expression. This supports the focus of Artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, that a garden can be an instrument of wisdom and purity, exploring the very culture from which it evolves.

Ian Hamilton Finlay has developed and established a garden with such reverence for the classical notions of purity and clarification of humans elevation with nature, that it's development has drawn much acclaim and respect. The legal battles between Finlay and local authorities over the nature of his work has also drawn considerable media attention. Those supporting Ian's right as an individual to display objects embedded with philosophical and theoretical nuances foster this attention.

'*Stoneypath*' or '*Little Sparta*' as it has become known, was forged by Ian and his partner Sue out of an abandoned four-acre hillside farm with only a small stone house and some out-buildings left standing. It's transformation into a center of lyrical expression has raised many controversies and viewpoints much to the artist's delight.

Ian has worked in numerous roles, such as a shepherd for example, prior to the garden's conception. This has had some bearing on his decision to mold this landscape into a 'concrete metaphor' of his life's work as a poet. Indeed Ian Hamilton Finlay's work consistently melds text and object, each work created with a notion in mind and not by the artist himself - rather that of a crafts person to exact specifications.

The struggle between the aesthetic and the contemplative politic occurs at an implicit and explicit level for the audience he considers. An example of this struggle is in a permanently sited building on this property known as 'The Garden Temple', a stone building used initially to house exhibits of work then converted into what Ian described as "a building used wholly or mainly for religious purposes" in Crowther (1994, p. 90).

When addressing a question about 'The Garden Temple' in an interview conducted by Paul Crowther in 1994, Ian stated it evolved from his actualization of conflict between his own visions for its place in his garden and the surrounding culture it is embedded in.

This paper seeks to explore the sacred groves and witty wordplay Ian uses to transform the 'Temple' and works such as 'Eleven Stones' or "Flock' into memorial classicism, solarising and intensifying the literary' derivative for each object.

Garden Temple

At the heart of Little Sparta lies the Garden Temple, essentially a converted barn where Ian Finlay displayed concrete poems and other collaborations. This building has been at the center of a long and drawn out dispute with the Strathclyde Regional Council primarily concerned with disagreeing to 'terms' relating to its use. The inscriptions etched in lintels and door stones embellished with gold leaf are imbedded with classical expression and also contemporary barbs for mitigating conflicts.

An interesting feature of the Garden Temple is its painted stucco, double height plaster columns with Corinthian capitals on its broad side wall. The transformation into classical mode from a humble stone cottage came about, according to Cooper & Taylor, G. (1996, p.1) as a direct result of the renaming of Stoneypath to that of 'Little Sparta'.

What had been a gallery of sorts now became a temple. Finlay pursued the concessionaire tax exemption for such religious buildings but was refused exemption based on refusal to acknowledge its quasi-religious purpose. Legal disputes followed between Finlay and authorities.

This in turn led to artworks being removed from his property' altogether by the local authorities, without even entertaining the fact that Finlay considered this building to be of religious significance

“...It turns on the official acceptance and recognition of a certain idea of a 'temple', or at least on making this idea the subject of public debate. Perhaps the final result will only be proof that there is indeed no public place for this idea, as things stand.”

Lubbock, T (1991, p. 234)

Asked why he had developed a garden with such a moral attitude he replied that he was driven by a cultural notion to express these reworkings of the classical and neoclassical, not just a horticultural derived view for composition. Finlay expressed his disappointment at the secular, liberal, pluralistic and materialistic values the general public subscribes to and so he developed a romantic and picturesque setting, known as Little Sparta to challenge these values. .

The garden Temple with its decorations in Venturian traditions and of philosophical inscriptions draws upon Finlay's ability to use wit, sarcasm and satire as a tool to jolt the conscience. His epic ability' to find the heroic in the everyday, even an old bam, has shown to the viewer in a philosophical manner, the contradictions in the current debate courted by the reigning ideology. The Garden Temple has often been referred to as propaganda for Temples in general or as a monument to Temples while longing to assume it's 'correct' role as a spiritual site for contemplation..

‘Eleven Stones’ or Flock

Ian Hamilton Finlay begins all work as a poet. Postulating a garden with a message, with a genuine communication is the real intent of Finlay. A pastoral poem posing as a group of stones is place in a field suggesting that he has considered a setting for its relative antiquity also.

Placed in the foreground of a field it suggests that he has also considered background as essential to its interpretation. Blocks of stone with rough drilled edges, a polished top with immaculately carved text sparkle in the light. These stones are placed in a field of grass in such a way for the viewer to presuppose a shepherd.

“...Neither sheep nor stones tell us anything, except for one stone which has an inscription in the idiom of a dictionary, explaining the word ‘flock’. A flock, we are told, is defined by the fact that its number is fixed and it constitutes a unity.”

Burckhardt, L (1991, p.201)

Placed apart these blocks appear as a broken text, maybe a manuscript, or even an ancient tablet, yet grounded as landscape signifiers they carry further meaning. No ‘shepherd’ as such is present, so the viewer must examine the stones meaning unguided. Crowther, P. (1994) attempts to wrest the reasons and meaning for placing these stones in the formation they are, drawing attention to the poets past fixation with a complex assemblage of plots and subplots. It would seem that his experience with artistic composition and general instincts were his only guide in this case;

“...I didn’t know anything about plants or stone. I just had to discover it for myself because the sculptors and stone people didn’t know about it. I’d have thought that the sculptors and letter carvers would know how you sited stones but they didn’t really know much at all.” - Crowther, P. (1994, p. 93)

Finlay is often considered and labeled as a 'Concrete Poet', a landscape architect a poet-gardener or a concrete epigrapher. His courageous attempts at informing the public and creating infinite beauty bear testament to his persistence and professionalism.

These lyrical blocks of carved stone encapsulate all that Finlay attempts to elicit as an artist. They stand as testament to the Classical manifestation of man's relationship with nature. They also elucidate the literary realm in which the artist transforms a garden into a living communication. Text, object and setting all inform the viewer, although interpretation is the key element behind the works communication

Conclusion

The grammar of clichés so readily overriding today's show gardens, as they bulge with parades of vivid blooms, can not compare to the celebration of the Muses by Ian Hamilton Finlay at Stonepath. When we consider the reflective global contradictions Finlay poses by his use of allegorical assimilation in Little Sparta we must reconsider the deeper ramifications made by his aesthetic arrangements.

Described as a philosophical garden or as a manifestation of the western Spiritual garden it defies all reasonable logic as to why the Strathclyde Regional Council have so doggedly pursued a cause to cease Ian's expression of not only personal expression but inherently a cultural tradition.

Ian Hamilton Finlay has presented to the world the notion that gardens and the cultivation of herbaceous aesthetics have in fact the inherent capability of transporting the inhabitant into a realm of the culturally sacred. Finlay questions the sacred and places metaphors in all forms to evoke these qualities attributed to gardens use in general. The use of text and objects, slogans, word play and quotes all have a unifying context. These are the thematic concepts behind classical tradition.

It seems farcical and ludicrous that the very notions he seeks to explore, has woven a web of legal wrangles in which he now contorts. Finlay has argued that spirituality and the religious nature of the arts be considered for reclassification, with reference to the legal statutes that govern its existence in whatever the setting. The whole debacle of semantic association and principles behind re-classification of habitation or use of a dwelling has led to the closure of 'Garden Temple' in 1996, according to Charmant (1997, p.7).

Due to ill health and a developed agoraphobic condition, Finlay has eventually conceded to rename such a building as 'storeroom'. Over many years the ambiguous nature of Finlay's objects interspersed with the

natural setting has allowed both 'Garden Temple' and 'Flock' to speak of the secularization of culture, concerns of piety and moralizing madness governing their existence. The very art of gardening it can be argued therefore begins with a word, and with words Finlay seeks to juxtapose text with an objects implicit cultural function or meaning.

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