

# Landscape Portrait/Portrait Landscape

In conversation with Robin Gillanders on Ian Hamilton Finlay

Greg Thomas

The garden proceeded as a series of what I call little "areas." Usually each area gets a small artefact, which reigns as a kind of presiding deity or spirit of place. My understanding is that the work is the whole composition – the artefact in its context. The work is not an isolated object, but an object with flowers, plants, trees, water and so on.

In this quote, reproduced by Alec Finlay in his Afterword to the 1998 book of the exhibition *Little Sparta: Portrait of A Garden*, Ian Hamilton Finlay emphasises the degree of personality with which he endowed the sculptural works around his garden: almost as if they were more pristine or ideal versions of garden guests.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, no poem is an island. Each work's personality is also, in part, the reflection or imprint of its surroundings: plants, trees, water, and so on.

Robin Gillanders, whom I interviewed in August 2022, in a light and foliage-filled flat in Edinburgh's New Town, had been working primarily as a portrait photographer at the time he got to know Finlay.<sup>2</sup> He noted as much in a quick precis of his own creative life up to that meeting, which occurred during or just prior to 1993:

I taught history for seven years but was always fascinated by photography. I am probably best known for my portraiture, but I also opened a general commercial studio with a friend of mine when I left teaching in 1983. I worked for a variety of design consultancies but specialised in portraiture and fashion.

A long way from concrete poetry, then. However, we might hazard a guess that Robin's knowledge of history was a notch in his favour as far as his pugnaciously erudite friend was concerned. 'I didn't know much about Finlay at the time', Robin recalls. Like many working relationships of the late poet's, the connection came through a recommendation to Finlay from a mutual friend, in this case one whose father had been at school with the poet, reflecting the importance of camaraderie, a community of feeling, to Finlay's working methods.

This friend recommended Robin to Finlay to make a particular photograph. 'So, I went down to Little Sparta from Edinburgh and the stone that Ian wanted me to photograph was, *A Remembrance of Lorine Niedecker*'.<sup>3</sup> The work in question consists of a list of boat names inscribed down a small standing stone slab. The terms, from 'Strandline' and 'Aurora' to 'Annie' and 'Integrity', evoke something of the placid and homely qualities of Niedecker's neo-objectivist verse, which often describes the surroundings of her home in Black Hawk Island, marshy rural Wisconsin (while remaining keenly attuned to global events and discourse.)

The creation of the postcard version of *A Remembrance of Lorine Niedecker* (1993) was the start of a relationship that reached its creative and practical apex with a 1998 exhibition in two parts, *Little Sparta: Portrait of a Garden* and *Collaborations*, at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, featuring thirty-three of Robin's photographs of Finlay's Little Sparta alongside several collaborative works. The fact that Finlay not only gave the show his blessing but "basically left it to me" to develop a curatorial through-line (discussed below) suggests the faith placed in Robin as a creative compatriot by this point. The book accompanying the exhibition – containing the images included in *Portrait of a Garden*, though not *Collaborations* – features an interview with Finlay conducted by Robin, reproduced in this book, which indicates the ease and intimacy of their friendship by this stage (see p18).

All this lay ahead when Robin first arrived at Little Sparta in the early 1990s, a 'wee laddie' who 'didn't know who Lorine Niedecker was'. The photography went swimmingly, however. 'I was lucky with the light, and Ian was absolutely delighted with the photograph. You could see his eyes were lighting up because he was thinking, I can use this guy...'. At this point, it is worth reiterating Robin's grounding in the skills and techniques of portrait photography, particularly, as he describes, a willingness to wait for a sitter to move into a position that captures some particularly salient quality of character; either that or proactively position and pose them.

For Robin, this distinction means that 'there are many more possibilities in a portrait for interpretation and manipulation than there are with a plastic artwork'. An alternative contention, however, is that, as per Finlay's sense of (some of) his garden poems as presiding deities, personalities, it is the photographer's capacity to wait for that moment when the poem, like the sitter, seems particularly itself that marks out many of Robin's portraits of Finlay's works. Indeed, Robin acknowledges the comparison in discussing his naming of the 1998 exhibition and accompanying book, while emphasising the individuality of his interpretation:

A portrait has to be something more than just a picture of someone standing against a wall and you capture a likeness of them... There has to be some interpretation, – usually personal. Which is why I called this 1998 book [and exhibition] *Portrait of a Garden*. It's a personal interpretation of that garden.



Above:  
*A Remembrance  
 of Lorine Niedecker*  
 1993

How does this kind of interpretation play out? In the Niedecker photograph, a shaft of light falls precisely across the upper half of the stone surface, in the way one might light a moody shot of a torso and head, with the garden, the encompassing context, reduced to shadow. The effect of this focalisation might partly be a subtle anthropomorphism, in the sense of figurative analogies with the framing of the human form. But it's also that the light illuminates certain sections of lettering, particularly the prefixed *LN*, with such seemingly deliberate intensity. This is testament to Robin's dramatic wielding of shadow using his preferred black-and-white spectrum, and implies a revelatory moment that the photographer has long anticipated and sought out.

Robin brought a portraitist's eye to many of his subsequent collaborations with Finlay—or, to both specify and widen out that claim, he brought the patience to wait for the right moment, as one might if the objects in front of the camera were animated. Which, of course, they are, by external forces including the wind and light that can send shadows of leaf pattern dancing across a surface of stone, or set foliage rippling in air. The movement of foliage was a particular feature of the landscape-poem – which, as Stephen Bann and others have argued, incorporates the surroundings of the poem-object as a signifying component<sup>4</sup> – that Robin learned to work with. You can see the results in photographs included in *Little Sparta: Portrait of a Garden* such as *The Rowan is Learning to Write* (1997) (see p32). Here, the dapples of light and shade on the tablet literalise the symbolic value of the little curved, incised lines on its surface, produced by an off-camera flash: as branch-shadows dancing across the stone like a nib or quill. A different effect is achieved in *Mare Nostrum* (1997) (see p31), a photograph of Finlay's tree-plaque of the same name, bearing the phrase used by the Romans to refer to the Mediterranean, 'Our Sea'. To the left is the rough bark of the trunk. To the right, a soft-focus ripple effect seems to convert the leaf-cover behind into a sheet of water, the whole scene almost appearing as a bay lapped by little waves.

Through these and other creative endeavours the relationship between poet and photographer developed, with a number of works reproduced in this book appearing during the mid-1990s. These include interior scenes at Stonypath such as *After Jacques Louis David* (see p119), *Boatshelf* (see p121), and *Sail-boat on the Pillow* (all 1997) (see p123), the latter of which again implies Robin's tendency towards a more direct, albeit still understated, anthropomorphism of the object. One major project that Robin recalls after *Homage to Lorine Niedecker*, however, led him back out into the garden. *Highlights: A Homage to André Derain* (1997) (see p76) was an 'artist's book' created in collaboration with Finlay and the painter Janet Boulton. The rendering of atmospheric effect as formalised, symbolically significant aspects of the composition is, again, typical of Finlay's landscape poems.

Greg Thomas

As Robin explains, 'Janet... painted highlights onto the actual trees in white paint. So, I had to photograph these trees in very dull, flat conditions, so there were no actual highlights'. The thin horizontal stripes are presented as an homage to the Fauvist painter Derain's use of chalky white highlights in his portraiture, and of patches of white dots in the facture of his landscapes. The book invites a rhythm of reading which Finlay first developed with his poem-booklets of the 1960s, with each set of tipped-in images followed by a blank page containing a central full stop. The photos thus become like 'stanzas in a poem', as Robin suggests. The work is quintessentially Finlayan, both in presenting an artistic elevation of nature as somehow purer than the original, and in dextrously entwining the effects of reading and looking for the interpreter. What is also worth considering, however, is whether the project was conceived of with Robin's past photography in mind, as a means of reifying or materialising the effects of light and shade he had so skilfully begun to capture through his photography of the garden.

The year after *Highlights* was published, *Little Sparta: Portrait of a Garden and Collaborations* were presented in tandem, following conversations with Julie Lawson, a senior curator at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, who was 'thinking of doing something about little Sparta.' 'I already had a lot of pictures of Little Sparta, but I'd go down every day when it was reasonable weather between May and August: getting up at four o'clock, being down there for five so I could get the light'. The garden-focused section of the exhibition followed a tripartite structure conceived by Robin, which he characterises as moving through 'the environment of Little Sparta [to] the relationship with the sea, and then the darker works which relate to the French Revolution and so on'. Included, alongside portraits of poem-objects, was a portrait in the more conventional sense that has since become an exemplary image of Finlay in his later years – used on the cover of Alec Finlay's *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections* in 2012<sup>5</sup> – and stands as a touching marker of a friendship at the peak of its creative fruitfulness.

In the photo (see p6), Finlay sits in a small wooden sailing boat in Little Sparta's upper lochan, knees up and oars to the side. As Robin recalls, 'I had the luxury of thinking for a long time about this portrait before I actually did it'. Perhaps as a result, he was able to nod to Finlay's love of making toy sailing boats, as well as his physical and emotional isolation within Scotland, an agoraphobic poet who didn't leave the grounds of his garden for three decades, and had fallen out with swathes of the country's literary and artistic establishment:

I thought, the photograph has to be in his boat. The thing about Little Sparta is, it's as far as you can get in Scotland from the sea, but [Finlay's] fascination with the sea was such that it had to relate to it in some way. In the upper lochan there was a very small rowing boat, and I thought: that's great, because he makes these toy sailing boats, so a toy-like boat, is a nod to the fact that Ian, sometimes, was like a wee boy with his excitements and his interests...I knew that I was going to compose it in such a way that there was plenty of space around it. One of the things in portraiture you have to think about is how much space you're going to give someone in the frame... If you give someone a lot of space, and you exclude peripheral stuff outside of the frame, it gives a feeling of isolation. Whether you like it or not, just intuitively, the photo says: this guy's alone, he's isolated, you know. And that relates, for me, to his existence at Little Sparta by himself..., and also his isolation artistically in Scotland.

The poet's expression seems infused with that mixture of irony, vulnerability, friendliness, and volatility that many of his collaborators describe. The sense of glorious isolation that comes from the empty space around the sitter, meanwhile, including the barrier of water separating him from the viewer, is offset by the comic ungainliness of his frame perched in the little vessel.

The expression also seems one of trust. Indeed, the friendship brought with it a creative licence that allowed the photographer to bring creative flourishes and subsidiary metaphors to his presentation of the work at Little Sparta, as Robin notes discussing the effects achieved in *The Rowan Is Learning To Write*:

it's maybe not very obvious to most people... I may not often succeed but I do try to do that kind of thing, extend the metaphor for people... You know I don't think I even bothered to tell Ian what I was doing, and whether he noticed or not I don't know'.

The paradigm Robin describes here relates to a broader point about Finlay's relationship with his collaborators, revealed to me over an ongoing series of interviews with the poet's former creative contributors, commissioned by the Fleming-Wyfold Foundation. 'What Ian used to do', Robin states, 'is give you the bare bones of what the idea was and then let you go and do it. He wasn't standing beside you when the photos were taken'. Compare this to an assertion made in interview with this author on January 19, 2022 by the stone-carver Nicholas Sloan, who executed the sculptural work *Gods of the Earth/Gods of the Sea* (installed 2005), discussed by Alistair Peebles in this book, as well as other works photographed by Robin including *The Present Order...* (installed 1983) (see p43):

mostly,...he'd give us a lot of rope, particularly if he got to know you.... I found very early on he was giving me ideas and letting me run with them. I would always choose the stone for jobs, for example.... It was great – that was always the very good side of working with him.

It is possible to characterise the best relationships between Finlay and his collaborators as involving a productive creative tension. There was generally a kernel of meaning that Finlay demanded be realised with absolute fidelity, often involving a poem's linguistic component and some aspects of the relationship between language and material context. But there was a space between that inner essence and the outer visible and tangible form of a poem wherein the collaborator could bring their own creative spirit to bear. For Robin, perhaps, this partly involved watching the play of light, waiting for the moment when the poem came into its own through some final illustrative, symbolic, or atmospheric flourish; not to mention the black-and-white palette which is Robin's signature, but which so effectively speaks to that aspect of Finlay's creative universe rooted in the northern Romantic and philosophical tradition, of darkened pine forest and wood path, of Hölderlin and Heidegger.

It is also possible to characterise the best relationships between Finlay and his collaborators as genuine friendships. As Finlay became older, the dynamic between Robin, Robin's wife Marjory, and Ian evolved into one partly based on care, on small acts of generosity – like trips to coffee shops after the sudden lifting of the poet's agoraphobia around 2000 – and of spotting the everyday wishes of an elderly, often taciturn, man who had developed a certain social anxiety. After the book launch of *The Philosopher's Garden* in 2004, Robin recalls:

We had a little party here, and we got in some champagne and nibbles...Ian just sat... and looked miserable, not saying anything, but being very polite, saying "yes... yes." Eventually I went over to him and said, "Ian would you like to go through to the sitting room and watch the football?" And he said "oh yes!" He couldn't get out of there quickly enough [laughs].

Robin's publications in remembrance of Finlay, who died in 2006, perhaps express above all else those elements of their relationship that extended beyond creative connection. By way of looping back to the subject of portraiture, I want to conclude by discussing one of these.

*A Remembrance of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (see p140) was photographed in 2009 and exhibited as a small publication as part of Robin's retrospective exhibition at Stills Gallery in Edinburgh in 2017. It consists of five photographs, presented in colour, unusually for Robin: as if some pervasive, heavy mood of historicisation or mythologisation has lifted. Each photograph is named after an object or interior space within the Stonypath farmhouse, the Finlays' home in the grounds of Little Sparta. *Robespierre* shows an empty shelf on which a bust of the French Revolutionary thinker and agitator had stood. *Boatshelf* depicts a surface once teeming with Finlay's little toys, a call-back to Robin's busier *Boatshelf*, from 1997. *Mantelshelf* shows a similarly evacuated space, while *Bookshelf* is a close-up shot of an empty varnished wooden surface, the absence of its previous contents suggested by the irregular line of dust. *Sail-boat*, the final piece in the quintet – presented as a folder of large postcards – shows an empty window-frame from within a slightly darkened interior, looking out to the bright garden beyond, and references his earlier *Sail-boat on the Pillow* from 1997. At the front of the nearest flowerbed a stone tablet stands, taking on more clearly than ever the connotations of a gravestone.

This little set of images captures the sometimes sweet, sometimes unbearable, intensity of pacing a house where a deceased loved one used to live. But it is not the poet we are missing, it is the objects: objects infused with the character of the poet to such an extent that they can be presented as palpable absences within the scene, by a portrait photographer whose most famous likenesses arguably don't depict people at all. 'In terms of my own development as a photographer, an artist and a teacher', Robin notes towards the end of our conversation, 'Ian was immensely influential'. But it was also 'a really everyday friendship'.

1. Alec Finlay, Afterword, in Robin Gillanders et al, *Little Sparta: Portrait of a Garden* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 1998). All subsequent references to this text are to this edition.

2. All subsequent quotes from Robin Gillanders are from this interview.

3. The photograph version of *Homage to Lorine Niedecker* and all other photographs of Robin's discussed here are reproduced elsewhere in the text, with publication details provided.

4. See for example Bann's 1969 article 'Ian Hamilton Finlay: The Structure of a Poetic Universe', in which he discusses the early development of Finlay's landscape poems, noting the way in which "[a] fragment of language suggests a link between objects originally outside the 'poem,' and in this way formalizes them" (80). *Studio International* 177:908, pp.78–81.

5. Alec Finlay, ed., *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Selections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.)