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A VOLATILE LANDSCAPE

FINLAY'S LITTLE SPARTA

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Photographs by John Stathatos



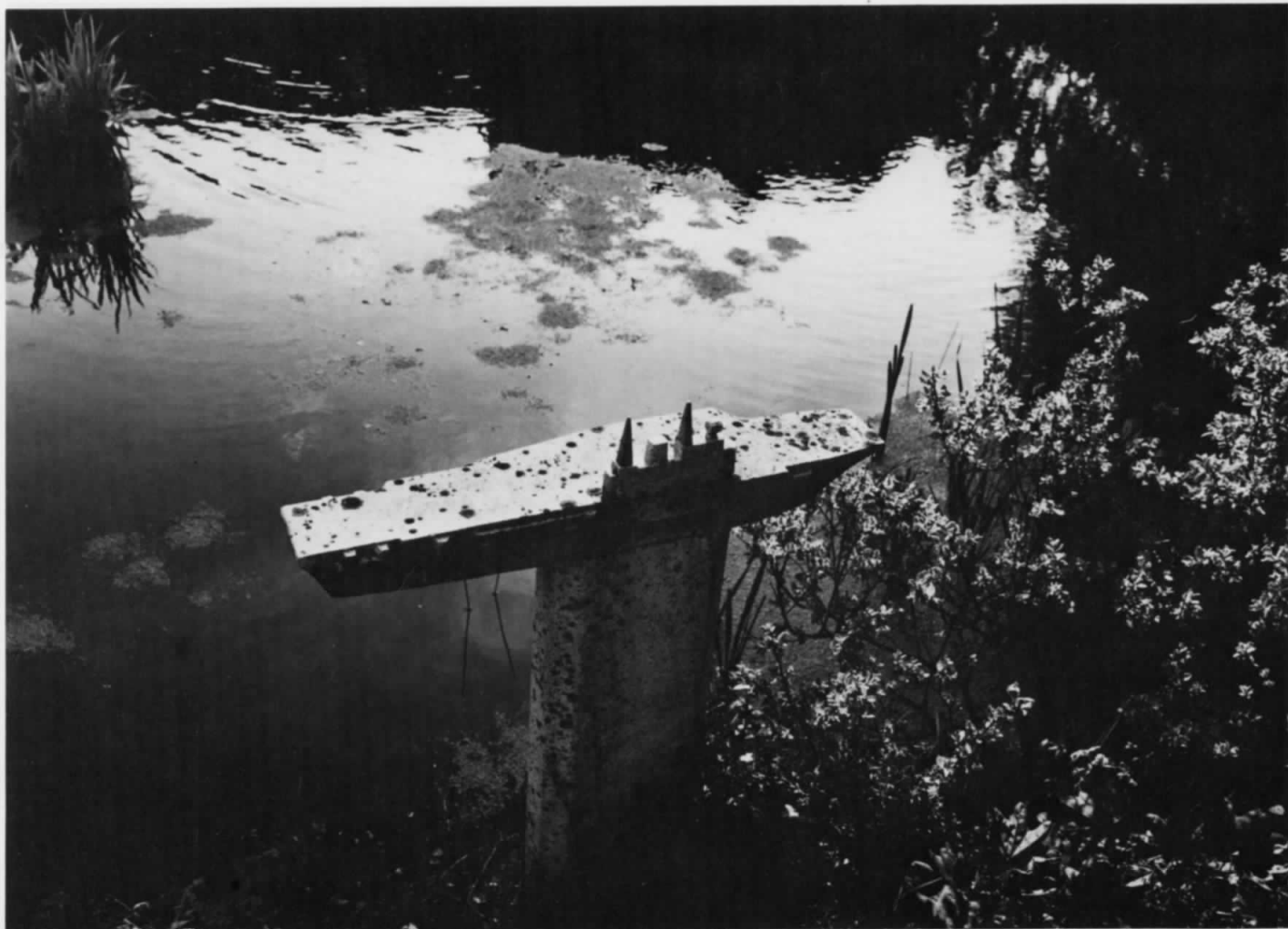
Panzer Leader by Ian Hamilton Finlay, Stonypath, 1981.

Over the past fifteen years, Ian Hamilton Finlay and his wife Susan have created a unique garden in the Pentland Hills, not far from Edinburgh. Originally called 'Stonypath' after the small farm at its centre, this garden was in the last few years supplied with the additional, culturally resonant title of 'Little Sparta'. The new nomenclature is significant. From the very start, the garden at Stonypath was bound to seem an unexpected and perilous achievement. On this bare hillside, where rough pasture land met the uncultivated moors, it was indeed difficult to envisage the making of a garden which would be comparable with the luxuriant gardens of Southern England. Nevertheless, the Finlays persisted in their efforts, harnessing the waters of a small burn to provide a carefully graded series of ponds and encouraging the growth of hedges and other vertical elements in order to protect the flowering plants. Stonypath therefore began its existence as a transplanted cottage garden, which derived much of its charm and strangeness from being discontinuous with the fine upland landscape of the Pentlands. However from the early 1970's, this model was progressively supplanted by another, more specific cultural pattern. As a result of

what Finlay once referred to as the 'neo-classical rearmament', the sundials, birdbaths, garden sculptures and inscribed stones have been given an increasingly precise reference. They relate equally to the machines of modern warfare and to the classical terms of the Graeco-Roman tradition. 'Little Sparta' suggests the small scale of the enterprise. But it also implies the convergence of Finlay's thematic patterns upon the austere ideal of an antique heroism.

Recording this garden through photographs, as John Stathatos has done here, is not simply a work of documentation. This is partly because Finlay himself has often worked with the photographic image, particularly in the poem booklets which he produced in the 1960's. He has encouraged a large number of photographers to work at Stonypath, over the last ten years, and has relied upon them to communicate to a wider public the special quality of the landscape which he has created. But a glance at one of the most complete surveys, Dave Paterson's group published as *Selected Ponds* by the West Coast Poetry Review, indicates the care with which such a sequence has been assembled. Finlay's own concern to shape and inflect what is in a sense the narrative of the garden is

apparent at every point, arranging the counterpoint of images as he has arranged the juxtaposition of garden 'corners'. But this is not the only point worth bearing in mind. It is also important to note that Finlay has increasingly designed particular sections of the garden with a view to their being photographed. This began, no doubt, with a subtle and witty conjuncture like his imitation of Dürer's 'Great Block of Turf', where the bounding lines of the photographic image were necessary to create a clear identification between the real 'turf' with its inscribed stone and the prototype of the turf in Dürer's celebrated water-colour. Such an idea was carried to a further stage in Finlay's remarkable exhibition, 'Nature over again after Poussin'. Here, Dave Paterson had photographed not the garden as it exists for the visitor, but a series of 'tableaux vivants', as it were — particular aspects of the garden chosen in order to evoke the style of a great landscape painter and 'signed' with his professional signature. John Stathatos evokes this group of images with his photograph of the 'CLAUDI' inscription, placed beside a group of young trees which are intentionally reminiscent of Claude's evocative landscape painting.



Homage to the Villa D'Este by Ian Hamilton Finlay, Stonypath, 1981.

The photograph thus serves Finlay as a kind of relay. Through its capacity to clarify and objectify the image — through its power to suggest a homogeneous and self-contained pictorial space — it enables him to use the tradition of classical landscape painting as a vocabulary of diverse terms and individual effects. But this amplification of his range is not its own justification. Lying behind it, and underlying the whole relevance of photography to Finlay's work, is a position which can be best understood if we refer parenthetically to Susan Sontag's book, *On Photography*. Sontag effectively, and rightly, diagnoses the contradiction in the attitudes to nature held by a modernist photographer like Edward Weston. Weston defined photography as 'a way of self-development, a means to discover and identify oneself with all the manifestations of basic forms — with nature, the source'. But, as Sontag argues, 'the habit of photographic seeing — of looking at reality as an array of potential photographs — creates estrangement from, rather than union with, nature'. We do not necessarily have to hold the same, somewhat censorious views as Sontag, in order to see the relevance of photography as 'dissociated seeing' (in her words) to

the world which Finlay has created. We need to be reminded, when we have only a passing, or a fading acquaintance with 'Little Sparta', that this is not a garden which celebrates 'nature'. It does not even celebrate 'nature' under the mythic form of the Earthly Paradise, which has been so lasting a pattern for gardens from the Persians and the Medievals to the revivalist exercises of William Morris. Instead, it concerns itself precisely with the anti-natural, with what is culturally preconstituted. In what we may call the conventional garden, it is the intention that garden 'furniture' — which includes everything from the garden seat to the sundial — should be a mere adjunct to the main purpose, which is the display of flowers, trees, shrubs and lawns. Finlay has overturned this convention: the intervals of lawn are almost elided in the succession of objects to see and read and meditate on. Vegetation still plays a necessary role. But more often than not, it is used to create a 'niche' for the garden sculpture and is metamorphosed by the power of the carved object — as when the nuclear submarine 'Nautilus' emerges from a hedge of fir, which becomes, through that potent connotation, the green depths of the ocean.

'Little Sparta' is thus an *anti-physis*. It

subverts the idea of the garden as a place of 'union' with nature. It relies upon the potency of metaphor to convert one natural domain into another — and in doing so, it suspends the normal expectations of scale and measurement. The 'Silver Cloud' marble slab is suspended between earth and sky on its own small, man-made island. But besides this physical suspension, it is poetically suspended between the two natural orders which its inscribed text alludes to. 'Silver Cloud' is both the name of a ship, with the appended phrases illustrative of that ship sailing under different conditions — and at the same time, metaphorically representative of the cloud 'sailing' in the sky above. As the passing clouds are reflected in the pond surrounding the island, they mimic the movements suggested in the text. But, of course, to 'read' nature in this way is precisely to 'dissociate' ourselves from immediate, empirical experience. It is to make the appearances of nature subject to invisible laws of coherence and conflict. Small wonder that Finlay became increasingly fascinated, over the past decade, with the cosmological theories of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Heraclitus who held 'polemos' or strife to be the governing principle of the universe. Small wonder



SS Flash by Ian Hamilton Finlay, Stonypath, 1981.

is it to be a payment for simply being an artist? In either case, the subsidy cannot fail to seem a weak link in the chain of cultural expenditure. It is, inescapably, benefitting two types of uncontrollable, unquantifiable activity — on the one hand, the individual artist's creative work, and on the other, the no less personal response of the individual spectator.

The relevance of 'Little Sparta' in this connection is very clear. By a kind of dialectical reversal, Finlay has problematised the relation of the individual to the public which is implied in the previous argument. Nothing can avoid the fact that the garden is the creation of individuals — Finlay and his wife. At the same time, no one can deny the fact that its impulse has been towards an ever more public significance. Virtually all of Finlay's work is executed in collaboration with stone-cutters, potters, carvers, embroiderers and a variety of other craftsmen and craftswomen. It can serve, quite apart from its other interest, as a standing exhibition of contemporary craft techniques. Equally, Finlay's work is the creation of a dense network of allusions, which symbolically convokes the philosophers and artists of the Western tradition — and in so doing follows the example of an eighteenth century poet and

gardener like William Shenstone. In proposing the garden as a collective work open to all visitors, Finlay has in effect inevitably assumed the public role to which these options have impelled him — and he has been rewarded by a continual stream of visitors from Britain and from abroad, acquiring at the same time a semi-official status in guide-books to Scotland. But he has not made, and will not make the final step towards institutionalisation — precisely because his transition from private to public is a critique of the inadequate public policy which the state institutions embody. Deprived of the chance to identify with transcended in the present secular society, he is forced to make symbolic links with transcendence in other societies — whether with the Rousseauesque ideology of the French Revolution or with the compromised heroism of the Waffen SS. It is not a question of aligning with 'Right' or 'Left' — terms so easily bandied about in the debased political debate of today — but of positing belief, and spiritual aspiration, as the *sine qua non* of any artistic enterprise whatsoever. Corot is celebrated on a column base surrounding a young tree — just as he is added to the French revolutionary worthies of Finlay's 'Five Columns' for the Dutch Kröller-Müller

Museum — in the belief that the artist can, and must, make his contribution to the sustenance of a socially degraded spirit.

A final word is necessary about the simpler, but no less insistent aspects of 'Little Sparta's' predicament. All the previous explanation could seem theoretical if Finlay had not, in effect, run counter to the actual institutions which impinge upon the life of 'Little Sparta'. His concern that his 'Garden Temple' should be recognised by the rating authority as a building of public and spiritual significance, rather than as a commercial gallery, is met with incomprehension and vacillation. The solemn 'poinding' by a Sheriff Officer's warrant of three porcelain Dryads is a recent, and vividly demonstrative, illustration of the toils in which bureaucratic action has been caught. But it would be absurd to underestimate the considerable strain and anxiety which this confrontation has caused to Finlay and his family. The 'exemplum virtutis' — art as an example of civic virtue — is not an easy genre.



Sundial — Schooner Fleet, by Ian Hamilton Finlay, Stonypath, 1981.



Sundial — Tristram's Sail, by Ian Hamilton Finlay, Stonypath, 1981.



Claude Landscape, Stonypath, 1981.



Stonypath, 1981.



Garden Path, Stonypath, 1981.



Corot by Ian Hamilton Finlay, Stonypath, 1981.