

PREFACE

“What are exhibitions for?”

It’s a very childlike question, isn’t it. What are animals for? What is the potato for? We’re all card-carrying functionalists. Nevertheless, the question has battery life, if not for obtaining its answer, then for segregating our expectations about the form. Today with the opening of

, *Will Holder*, , , ,

the first in a series of Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006) exhibitions, we expect the form to hold our necks back against the blade of resolution.

Over the next year, a number of scholars, curators, and long term appreciators* will each go into Reed College’s Ian Hamilton Finlay collection and come out with a different account. Different minds, different experiences, and all we ask of any is its own validity. As for specifics, we will happily yield to the impartial: the hagiographic, the gushy, the academic, the minor, the un-edified, etc.

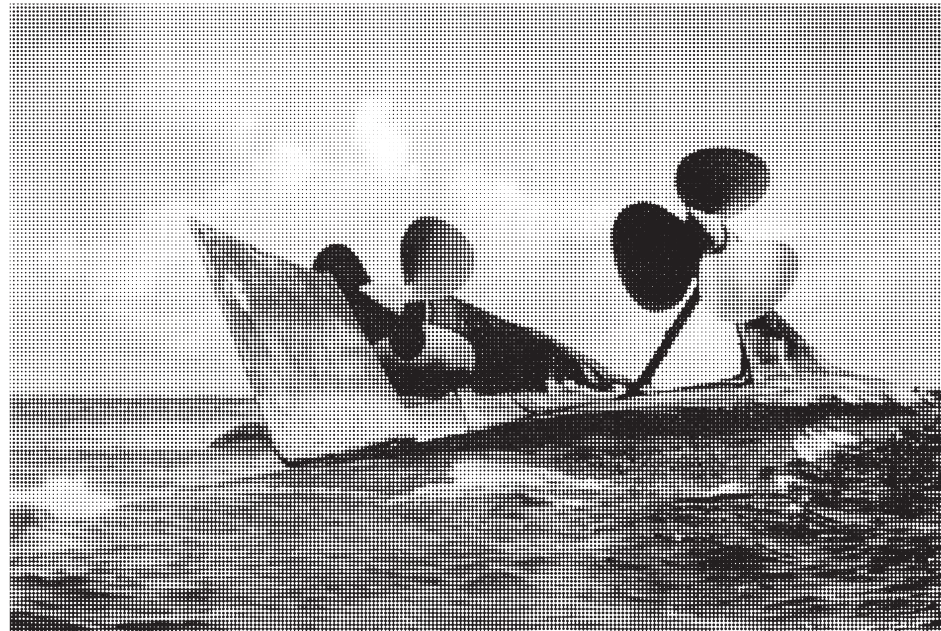
Why the elliptical?

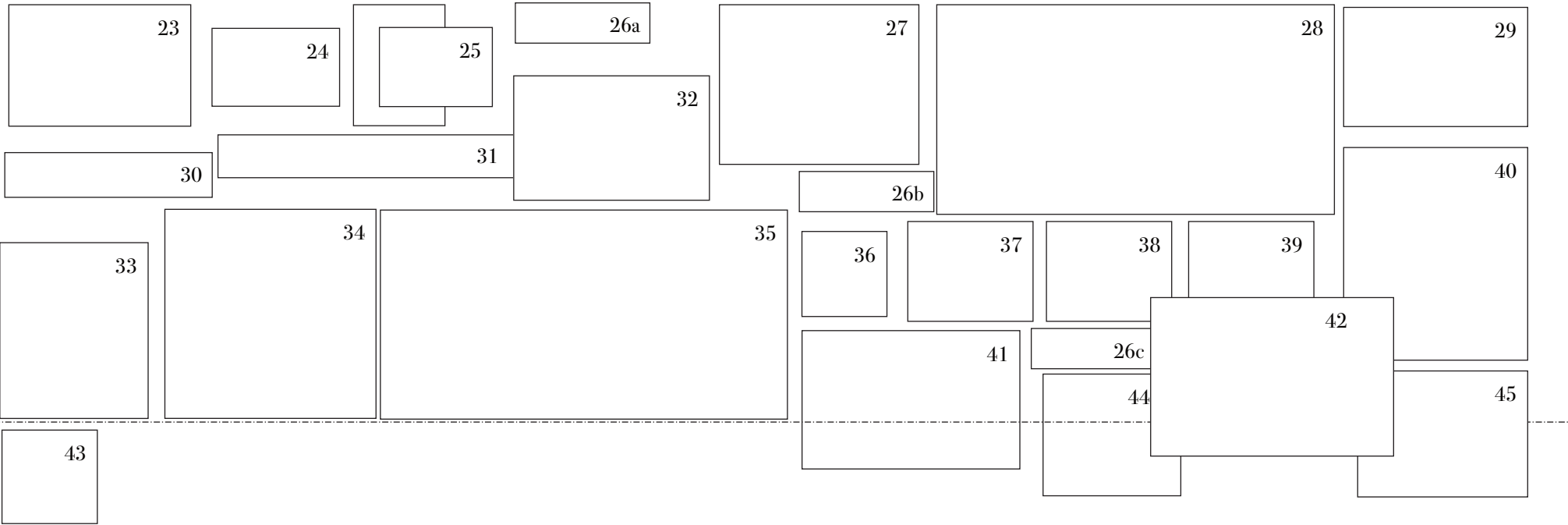
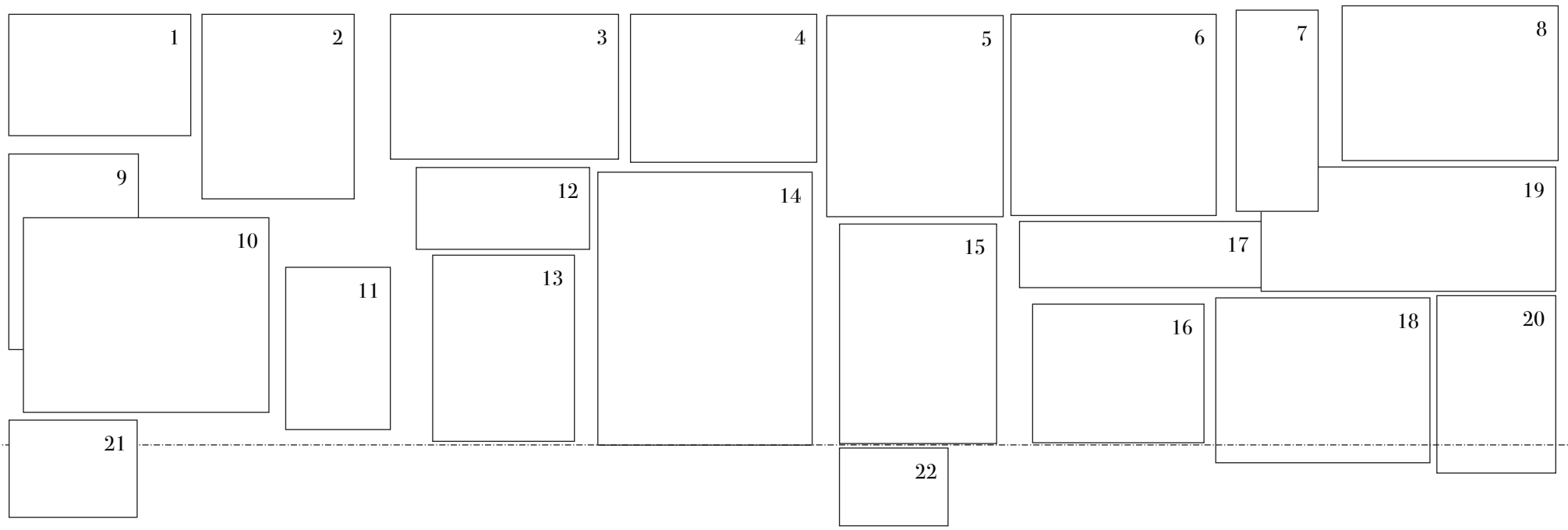
Finlay is a great artist. But many artists are called “great.” The word is industrially farmed. In his case it meant greatly prolific, greatly contested, greatly provoked and greatly provoking. Finlay depends on who weighs the scales and how those scales are weighted. Something like that, sure. He was a stamina merchant. He was a concrete poet, and then he wasn’t. He was a printmaker, a sculptor, a gardener, and above all, he was a publisher, founding The Wild Hawthorn Press in 1961.

‘Difficult,’ is the word that people usually stick to him. Maybe the incline comes from the work’s quiet amplitude, or the way it says both less than you think it ought to and then suddenly more than you think you could ever be responsible for. No doubt, the work can impose linguistic and aesthetic distance, but if it does, it never seeks to do less than bring a particular person as close as possible. Over the course of the Press’s run, Finlay produced epic volubility in intimate ways; and handing it all over in one big go, just cold, feels clumsy. There are some artist’s whose work can be displayed in a smooth fashion, and then there are artists who bay in the box. Quantity limps his work, but if you get it gradually, well spaced, larded with silence, then the work is overpowering. You gotta wait, you know, and wait, and wait, and wait, and we just don’t do that sort of thing much—the world turns—who has time to wait between two exhibitions for just a little shade of aesthetic revelation?

We’re lucky. With some six hundred printed works and artist books, Reed College’s Ian Hamilton Finlay collection begins with the first Wild Hawthorn Press edition, *Canal Series 3* (1964), and ends with work from the tail of his life. The collection was acquired in 2006 through the efforts of Gerri Ondrizek and Gay Walker, without whose appreciation* this work would be out of reach.

*As much as the word appreciate is typically taken to mean to esteem, to find worth or excellence in, its foremost meaning, says the O.E.D., is to form an estimate of worth or quality, and, in so doing, to feel the full force of the thing before us. Such appreciation then demands scrutiny, compassion, and sometimes unflinching ruthlessness.





----- Plimsoll Line

IAN HAMILTON FINLAY PRINTS on show†

Case 1†

- 1 National Flags Series: Utopia, 1975
- 2 1794, 1993
- 3 An Early Picasso, 1994
- 4 The Annunciation (after Fra Angelico), 1995
- 5 Charm, 1984
- 6 Cascade, 1993
- 7 Chain, 1996
- 8 A Wild Hawthorn Re-reader, 1999
- 9 A Sail in Plato, 1995
- 10 Interpolations in Hegel, 1984
- 11 Sanding a Rudder, 1998
- 12 Echoes Series: In Preaching/In Walking, 1999
- 13 Sail Plan, 1995
- 14 Patch, n., 1999
- 15 5 x 1, 1999
- 16 Illustrations, 1999
- 17 3 Constructions, 1995
- 18 The Wanderings of Ulysses, 1997
- 19 Camouflaged Flowers, 1998
- 20 Longing, 1995

- † 21 Emblem: Variety in Unity, 1999
 22 Emblem: Luke 9:62*, 1999

Case 2††

- 23 National Flags Series: Cythera, 1974
- 24 Thing Poems, 1995
- 25 A Valentine: Heartsease K15, 1998
- 26 Homage to Reznikoff, 1997
- 27 Iron Ship, 1972
- 28 The Olsen Excerpts, 1971
- 29 Perservere, 1978
- 30 Bouleau/Birch, 1991
- 31 BP, 1997
- 32 Boats, 1998
- 33 Composition, 1995
- 34 Lights, 1995
- 35 Estuary, 1997
- 36 Model, 1999
- 37 Echoes Series, 1995
- 38 Thought For The Day [Luke 9:62 (again) *], 1999
- 39 East Coast Gaff Sloop, 1999
- 40 Glasgow Beasts an a Burd, 1965
- 41 The Aeronaut Prinz Eugen, 1996
- 42 Inside every..., 1999

- †† 43 Emblem: Modesty, 1998
 44 Emblem: Obstinate... 1999
 45 Emblem: for Pia, 1995

* ("No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.")