

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

, , *Tim Johnson*, , , ,

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.

FOR AD AND BP

The word cairn derives from the Celtic *carn*, and refers to an arrangement of stones. In early usage, the word could also refer to a hoof and sometimes a horn, probably in the sense of peak or tip. The human practice of heaping stones in deliberate construction begins in prehistory, with various surviving mythologies related to each regional variant, and continues to the present.

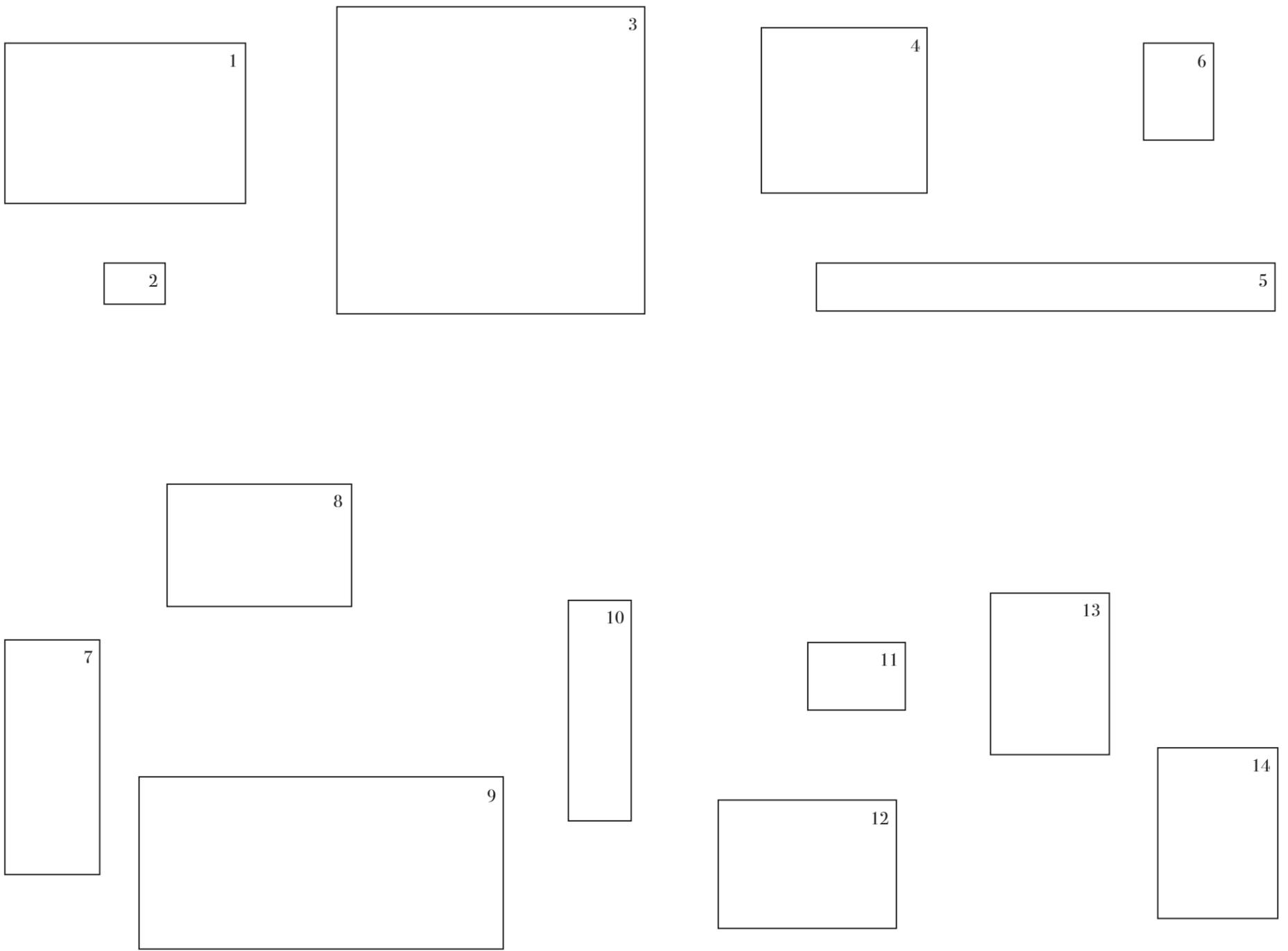
In a popular version, the first cairn dates to a dispute between Hermes and Hera concerning the murder of Argus the All-Seeing and the disappearance of Hera’s heifer, Io. Versions of the story abound, but most agree that Hermes killed, or at least temporarily subdued, Argus, whom Hera had hired to watch Io, in order to set the heifer free. He may have done so as a favor to Zeus, or purely for the pleasure of mischief, a practice with which Hermes is closely associated. Consequently Hera, the wife of Zeus, brought Hermes before a council of judges to demand punishment for the acts. Both Hera and Hermes were given the opportunity to speak and each of the council to determine which speaker provided the most compelling argument by casting a single stone in the direction of the winner.

Cairn is but one word, still the most common in English, for the diverse practice that can be found in many parts of the world. Their purposes are correspondingly diverse. They mark pathways and boundaries and precincts. They designate significant topographical features, such as a mountain or the site of a storehouse, or may themselves become significant topographical features. They house spirits and provide tombs, memorializing the dead. In some cultures, they are the earliest form of anthropomorphic sculpture, with figurative qualities that suggest aspects of personhood, externalized. In some instances, they may provide shelter or even defensive bearing against neighbors or foreigners. And they may signify nothing more than the human desire to arrange and recombine. Many of the oldest and some of the most beautiful trouble interpretation, seeming to involve multiple purposes or purposes too mysterious to decipher or judge. For some, the stories have simply disappeared.

Hermes was the god of strategies and boundaries, and though not quite the god of music, his status in that world is secure. Curiously, as the god of commerce and the god of mischief, he is aligned with two distinct aspects of economy: property and theft. He is commonly located between things, the god of the door. Most heroes travel to the underworld one time; Hermes traveled back and forth. Perhaps his two principle abilities are to conceal and reveal, and his greatest gift to deploy them both at once. In the debate between Hera and Hermes the outcome was unanimous. Despite the overwhelming evidence of his guilt, Hermes made a different kind of case, requiring skill as an orator and many musical twists and turns. Perhaps he woke his audience to a new idea, while closing a door on an old one. Though we cannot remember the words, we can certainly access the pleasure. The council members cast their stones in one direction. They piled on him, in a great and unquestioning demonstration of joy.

Tim Johnson, 2012

Tim Johnson lives in Marfa, Texas, where he owns and operates the Marfa Book Company. With Caitlin Murray, he curated *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Selection of Printed Works* and edited *The Present Order: Writings On The Work Of Ian Hamilton Finlay*, which appeared in 2011. Tim was eagerly selected because his book and exhibition serve as a model for how a long term appreciator could publicly square up to a difficult subject, ignore the shovel and muscle of exegesis, and allow the reader something with a changing character. Maybe we’ve made it sound like the book is just unsure of its editorial footing. It isn’t. Its editorial footing could be summed up, we suppose, by an email Johnson wrote us: “WORK LOAD. OH MAN, am I ever over doing it. I keep thinking of Finlay. What to send and say? One small truth: while I have lived with the works for many years, I constantly discover new significance, new trouble. Most days, I think I have Finlay wrong.”



IAN HAMILTON FINLAY PRINTS on show

Case 1

- 1 The great piece of turf, 1975
- 2 Blue Lemon, 1998
- 3 Singer, 1971
- 4 Copyright, 1973
- 5 BP, 1997
- 6 Gil Sans, 1995

Case 2

- 7 He Loves Her, 1992
- 8 Estuary, 1970
- 9 Azure & Son, 1970
- 10 Evolution, 1994
- 11 Arcadia: W.D. Property, 1996
- 12 Heraclitean Variations, 1993
- 13 O'Erlikon, 1973
- 14 Henry Vaughan, 1999

Wall

- 15 A cheque from Graham Rich, 1998