

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

, , , *Caitlin Murray*, , ,

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.

Annotations for Finlay’s piece, *Illustrations**

“Studying a fleet of cards, booklets, bookmarks, prints, and three-dimensional constructions of this poet’s obsession, it seems impossible to identify any chronology. His language and imagery of vessels spans more than a quarter of a century.”¹

The question is one of navigation. Chronology is only a path. In this work, we move from May to November back to May and from September to March. It is a model of order. As Karl Capek wrote in *The Gardener’s Year*, “There are a number of ways of laying out a garden.”

In this work, flowers and modern warships initiate an “attack on the expected.”²

***Borage in May* p. 18**

Borage, (*Borago officinalis*), also known as a starflower, is an annual herb originating in Syria, but naturalized throughout the Mediterranean region, as well as Asia Minor, Europe, North Africa, and South America.

In 1946, the Flower-class corvettes *Bellwort*, *Borage*, and *Oxlip* were purchased from the Royal Navy and renamed *Clione*, *Macha*, and *Maeu*.

***Aubretia in November* p. 20**

Aubretia is a genus of about 12 species of flowering plants in the cabbage family *Brassicaceae*. The genus is named after Claude Aubriet, a French flower-painter. It originates from southern Europe east to central Asia but is now a common garden escape throughout Europe.

In May, *Aubretia* carried out an operation, which would help to lead the German Navy down the “Primrose” (as the operation was rather aptly called) path to destruction.

***Woodruff in May* p. 22**

Galium odoratum is a perennial plant in the family *Rubiaceae*, native to Europe, North Africa and Western Asia. An herbaceous plant, it grows to 30-50 cm (12-20 ins.) long, often lying flat on the ground or supported by other plants. Its vernacular names include woodruff, sweet woodruff, and wild baby’s breath; master of the woods would be a literal translation of the German *Waldmeister*.

WOODRUFF Corvette, ‘Flower’ class. Simons 28.2.1941. Sold 1947, = *Southern Lupin*.

***Asphodel in March* p. 22**

Asphodelus is a genus of mainly perennial plants native to western, central and southern Europe, but now spread worldwide. Asphodels are popular garden plants, which grow in well-drained soils with abundant natural light.

The second lesson from *Asphodel*, as from escorts like *Gladiolus* and *Polyanthus* before her, was that warships, singly on the surface, had only a 50% change of survival against submarines.

***Clarkia in October* p. 23**

A piquant and graceful little flower is the *Clarkia*, a friendly wayside flower of the spring and summer months. No other native bloom can claim so strange a combination of varying shades of red, pink and purple colors; in some instances these bright hues predominate even in the foliage and seed vessels, consequently, as one writer humorously expresses it, “suggests a blushing disposition.” I was taken out of my trawler and sent across the Atlantic to Bermuda to take over my third command—a corvette, H.M.S. *Clarkia* on loan to the USA. *Clarkia* was one of the first of the Flower Class corvettes to be launched and was, and still is, the oldest in commission.

***Primula in September* p. 41**

Per (8; 3) has already constructed three classes: yellow primulas, primulas, and flowers. “Can one put a primula in the box of flowers (without changing the label)?—*Yes, a primula is also a flower.*”

[1940] *Primula* (arrived at Harwich and placed in Category B reserve on 24 June; placed in Category C reserve on 28 February. Sold on 22 July 1946 into commercial service.

***Loosestrife in April* p. 41**

A purple loosestrife flower spike shows sequential zonation. At the bottom, flowers have disappeared and the seed is settling. Flowers bloom in the middle. At the top, flower buds wait to open. Many other flowers occurring on spikes show a similar sequence.

1942
TWO
FLOWERS
TO
GETHER
LOOSESTRIFE
PINK

***Alisma in July* p. 46**

Alisma is a genus of flowering plants in the family *Alismataceae*, members of which are commonly known as water-plantains. The

genus consists of aquatic plants with leaves either floating or submerged, found in a variety of still water habitats around the world (nearly worldwide).

Many ugly-ducklings like HMS *Alisma* served the Royal, Royal Canadian and US navies in the long fight against the German U-boat. *Alisma* in 1942, has the original short forecastle and forward mounted mast. Note the radar antenna hidden in its ‘lantern’.

***Lotus in September* p. 46**

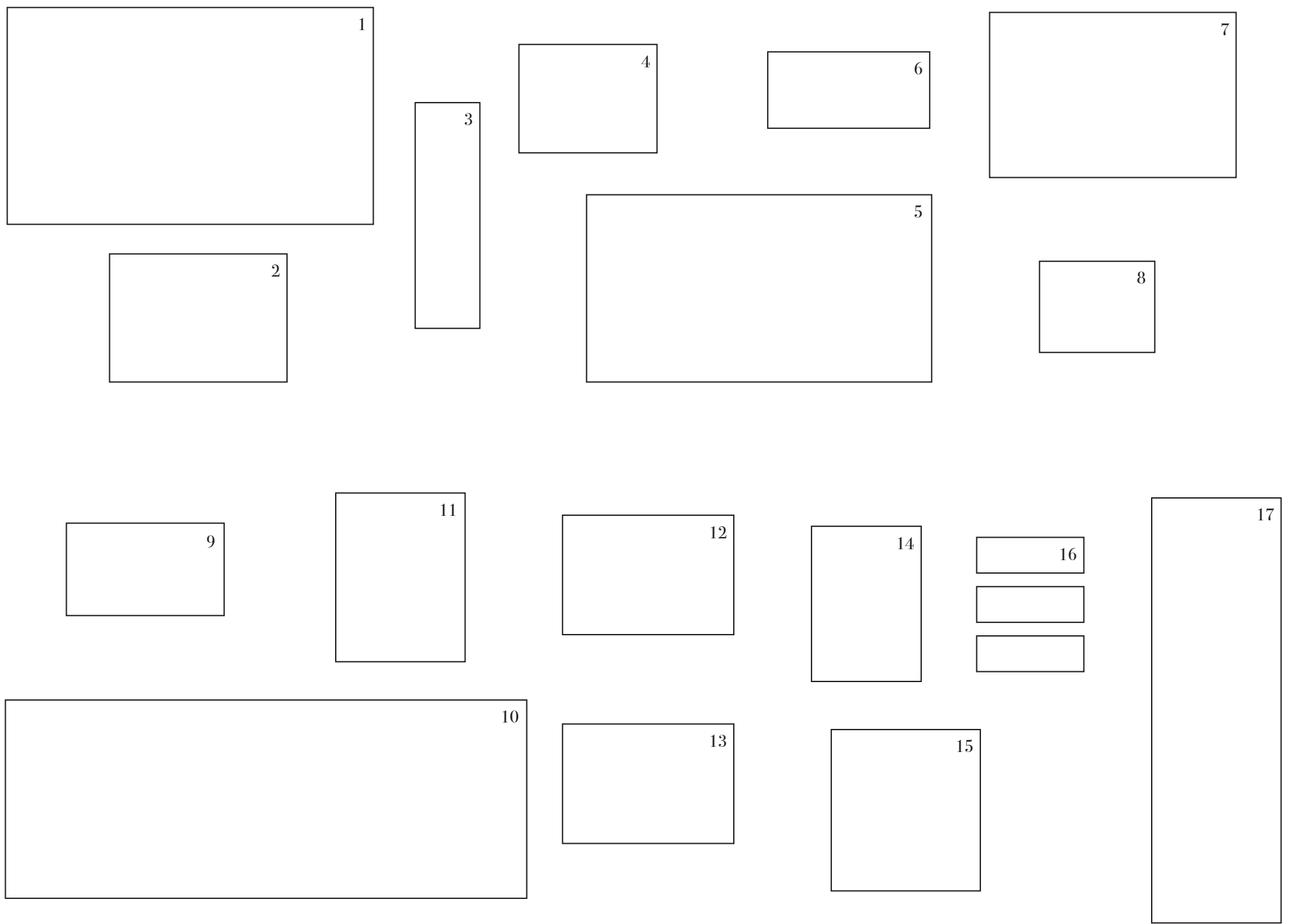
Nelumbo nucifera, known by a number of names including Indian Lotus, Sacred Lotus, Bean of India, or simply Lotus, is a plant in the monotypic family *Nelumbonaceae*. The Linnaean binomial *Nelumbo nucifera* (Gaertn.) is the currently recognized name for this species, which has been classified under the former names, *Nelumbium speciosum* (Willd.) and *Nymphaea nelumbo*, among others. Names other than *Nelumbo nucifera* (Gaertn.) are obsolete synonyms and should not be used in current works. Plant taxonomy systems agree that this flower is in the *Nelumbo* genus, but disagree as to which family *Nelumbo* is in, or whether it should be part of its own unique family and order tree.

After many emergency transmissions were received, the corvette *Lotus* turned west to search for survivors. Eighty-five were found. The survivors, who had expected an almost certain death on the icy ocean, felt an immense relief at the sight of the stem of a British Flower-class corvette.

*** *Preston and Raven, Flower Class Corvettes***

- 1 Stephen, Ian, “An Appreciation of Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Fleet,” *Wood Notes Wild: Essays on the Poetry and Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (Edinburgh: Polygon), 48.
- 2 Ibid., 47.

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IAN HAMILTON FINLAY PRINTS on show

Case 1

- 1 Boats d'Amour
- 2 Bees! Boats!
- 3 Flower Stem
- 4 Illustrations
- 5 The Olsen Excerpts
- 6 Bluebell: Flower Class Corvette, July 1940
- 7 Painting by Numbers, A Homage to Christopher Wood
- 8 Emblem: First and Last

Case 2

- 9 An Appreciation of the RN Flowers
- 10 Dzaezl
- 11 Found Eclogue
- 12 Oak, bark, boat
- 13 A Drift of Alysse
- 14 Kennst du
- 15 Echoes Series: After LZ
- 16 Homage to Reznikoff...
- 17 Fishing News News