

ARTFORUM

Ian Hamilton Finlay

GALERIE HUBERT WINTER

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These works about the French Revolution by the late Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay have subtle and eerie resonance with our time. Finlay's main concern was to grasp the historical transition from idealism and excitement to catastrophe, the instant just before the rupture (in this case, the Reign of Terror). A tense moment to be sure, yet Finlay's graceful humor never allows the works to be didactic or lugubrious.

This apprehension is captured particularly well in *Both the Garden Style . . .*, 1987, a modest and elegant lithograph that shows a guillotine covered with flowers. The caption under the picture reads: "Both the garden style called 'sentimental,' and the French Revolution, grew from Rousseau. The garden trellis, and the guillotine, are alike entwined with the honeysuckle of the new 'sensitivity.'" The juxtaposition of Arcadian tranquility and political violence forces the viewer to contemplate the multiplicity of symbols and how lofty ideas contain the possibility of becoming an excuse for persecution—as in this instance, where democratic principles were used to denounce and execute "the enemies of the people" by Robespierre and others. Here, as well as in another image of a guillotine (*Liberty Equality Fraternity*, 1990), the blade is still raised and yet to be used. The works are rich with the potentiality of violence, but the brutality is yet to occur.

The strength of Finlay's works lies in their fertile ambiguity. Too sophisticated and witty to be political slogans yet too aware of sociohistorical complexities to be mere aestheticism, they reverberate now, in a world that increasingly feels like it is on the cusp of another disaster.



Ian Hamilton Finlay with Gary Hincks, *Both the Garden Style . . .*, 1987, lithograph, 19 x 12".

— Yuki Higashino