

► CRITICISM

Friday, June 21st, 2013

## The Sea, the Sea: Ian Hamilton Finlay at David Nolan

by Lucy Li

*Ian Hamilton Finlay: Ring of Waves*

May 8 to June 22, 2013

David Nolan Gallery  
527 West 29th Street  
New York City, (212) 925-6190



Ian Hamilton Finlay, Wave Rock, ca. 1975, 105 ceramic tiles, 29 1/2 x 200 3/4 x 5/8 inches. IF4627. Image courtesy of David Nolan Gallery.

There is something magical about opposing energies ignited by a focused comparison. The simultaneous acknowledgement of two unlike objects, sensations or concepts sets off an endless search for similarities and differences, as well as a burst of curiosity that sustains engagement and triggers vibrant imagination. (The effect is most potent when “but” and “yet” can be appropriately placed; press releases and auction catalogue notes unabashedly embrace this advantage: “[work title]” is at once [version of ‘magisterial and aggressive’] and [synonym for ‘quaint pensiveness’].”)

The Scottish sculptor and poet Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006) addresses the tension between seemingly dissimilar concepts and words. His exhibition at David Nolan Gallery, *Ring of Waves*, featuring work spanning the late 1960s to mid-2000s, is about the sea – a perfectly vast and untamed companion for Finlay’s terse, cryptic objects. The installation of sculptures and “poem objects” form, although resistant to interpretation at first, a brilliantly paced exposition on the relationship between nature, society and human communication.

At its core, Finlay’s art explores meanings that spring from metaphors, as well as the implication of translating the natural world into language. When a word becomes assigned to an object, a metaphor and its accompanying ambiguity are triggered. For example, the title of his sculpture of a trapped but winged propeller, *Chrysalis* (1996), immediately evokes a potential for fleshly metamorphosis and cathartic rupture, establishing a parallel between soaring flight and developing life. The dialectic between the work’s title and its presence transports the propeller and absent chrysalis into the artificial universe of culture, albeit at the risk of temporarily belying the work’s physical reality: a lifeless, lonely mechanical device trapped in a “wooden” crate which is actually welded in stiff bronze.

Finlay came to prominence in the 1960s as a practitioner of Concrete Poetry, and his most successful pieces in this exhibition engage directly with words as raw material. His “poem objects” are extraordinarily sensitive to the politics of reading and viewing and exert a fully controlled execution of the dimension of time. An almost total absence of

## DAVID NOLAN NEW YORK

adjectives forces each word to independently embody the full spectrum of its definition, and typography is always guided by mechanical fonts rather than organic handwriting, thus severing ties with subjective sentiments and demarking an abstract landscape entirely constructed from language and visual tropes. *Cloud Barge* (1968) illustrates this quite literally, with the words “cloud” and “barge” arranged in mirroring patterns of blue and green on two layers of Plexiglas, suspended above a kaleidoscopic field of their own refracted shadows.



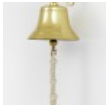
Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Chrysalis*, 1996, bronze, 6.3 x 21.65 x 20.08 inches, edition unique, IF0556.

Image courtesy of David Nolan

In *Wave Rock* (1974-75), the word “wave” is repeatedly inscribed in undulating lines from the left edge of a field of ceramic tiles, and a bundle of “rock” resides on the opposite end, steadfastly emulating the solidity and earthiness of the surface material. “Wave” and “rock” collide midway, and the poem becomes momentarily inarticulate. Here, physical properties of written language emerge to the forefront: amidst a frenzy of arcs and stems, the word “wrack” (living seaweed) flickers about like a cluster of unexpected growth. Finlay conducts the spiritual, stirring waves of the earth’s shores entirely within the jurisdiction of language in a decidedly tangible presentation, without invoking the impossibly complex physical appearance of the ocean and land. In a way, this work cleverly escapes the curse of what Jean-Paul Sartre terms the “essential poverty” of images conjured by the imagination: always flatter, more inert and less vivid and powerful than sights from real nature.

Another memorable work is *Ring of Waves* (1968), a simple poem of eight lines inscribed in black Plexiglas, positioned over a searing white background. A diminutive gap between the black glass and the background allows each word an elusive, voluminous physicality. Each line presents two nouns joined by “of”: row of nets, string of lights, row of fish; they tenderly transform the black “ring of waves” in the first line into a final “ring of light.” The first words of each line form a ring of their own – an ABCB rhyme scheme achieved by a clockwise journey through the words “ring, row, string, row” arranged in a circle (or square). The last line, however, begins with “ring” rather than

“row” to rush the completion of two full loops, forgoing structural discipline for incandescence, a singular “light” which instantly unifies and sublimates the verse. A luminous string of the word “of,” a tenuous repetition of the immaterial preposition, drapes down the center. Its precarious presence here is almost brighter than light itself.



[click to enlarge](#)



[click to enlarge](#)

## DAVID NOLAN NEW YORK

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001 Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139 [info@davidnolangallery.com](mailto:info@davidnolangallery.com) [www.davidnolangallery.com](http://www.davidnolangallery.com)