

Finlay Mills

With This Breath

Exhibition and Publication
Michael Pennie Gallery
Bath School of Art, Film & Media
Locksbrook Campus, Bath Spa University

PRIVATE VIEW: 5.00 – 7.30, 20 October 2023
Exhibition continues: 20 October – 16 November

We are proud and honoured to be collaborating with Finlay Mills' family to create this exhibition and publication to celebrate his creative life.



Self-portrait, from the series *Alive*

With This Breath includes photographs that Finlay made during a period of turbulence and isolation for us all, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout this time, Finlay was also facing monumentally difficult personal health challenges, yet his creative drive was undiminished. His photographic work provided a space for him to experiment and to express the physical and emotional experience of his situation, with unique and extraordinary results.

Never half-hearted, he confronted questions of his own mortality and visualised his response to the medical interventions and care that he received with great courage and honesty. He used photography to channel these experiences and to connect them to other aspects of his photographic vision, through family archive, documentary narrative and self-representation.

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Finlay was a remarkable student. After completing an FdA Action Photography course at Plymouth College of Art, Finlay joined Bath Spa University as a second-year undergraduate in 2019 on the BA Photography course. He became a key member of his year group and made a huge contribution to the life and culture of the university, graduating in 2021 with a BA (Hons) Photography Degree. It was a privilege for us to have been part of his creative journey.



From the series *Chef*

Despite the turbulence of his personal health that he faced over a long period of time, Finlay approached his studies with dedication, energy, critical rigour and creative imagination. During the first Covid lockdown, he made the most extraordinary body of photographic work in an effort to describe the claustrophobia of the pandemic restrictions. By exposing his film multiple times throughout the period, he created an enormous panorama of layered, multiple exposures that is overwhelming in its immersive density.



Lockdown Panorama

1 x 7 metres (films exposed, reloaded, exposed, reloaded, exposed)



Lockdown Panorama (detail)

In the series *Alive* (his Major Project at the end of the Degree), Finlay documented the realities of his personal circumstances and his interactions with the medical processes and technologies that were involved in his treatment. He talked a lot about the nature of his condition and the photographic images that he was making to describe his own perspective on the medical and emotional challenges that he faced. It was an incredibly courageous and beautiful piece of work that was unflinchingly honest and deeply moving. As the Course Leader remarked in his feedback for the project:

"I was deeply moved not just by the outcome of your project but also, crucially, by your process of generating the material in the midst of such difficult and challenging circumstances with vision, clarity and unflinching honesty. Beauty is not just about aesthetics. There is beauty to be found in persistence, tenacity, truth and wisdom. Your art has emerged with all of those qualities and more."



From the series *Alive*

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It is with great pride that Bath Spa University has established **The Finlay Mills Memorial Award** for outstanding achievements in Photographic Practice, to be awarded annually to a final-year student on the BA Photography course.

For more information about the exhibition and publication please contact:

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Our Fin

Sandie Ash

It has taken me an age to write this short piece to try to talk about the essence of Fin. How could I possibly do that without it sounding inadequate - and naff? He'd be the first person to laugh and say, 'For goodness sake, just write something, Ma, naff or not!'. So, I'll go with that.

Fin flew into this world like a rocket. Less than two hours after the first noticeable contraction he had landed; vital, feisty, fearless. We had a sense that this would be quite a ride – and it was! I often hoped I'd escape the school playground pick-up without being called at to stay behind to 'talk about Fin'! That said, his perceived mischief was usually borne out of an attempt to right wrongs, or to defend the underdog; usually himself, until maturity showed him a more nuanced view.

It soon became clear that Fin was severely dyslexic – and dyspraxic - needing a scribe for exams. Fortunately, at age 13, a family trip across Canada lit the photographic fire in him and gave him a glimpse of an alternative way to communicate - visually. He photographed grizzly bears from a hide at Knights Inlet, orcas and dolphins on whale watching trips and was mesmerised by snowy peaks perfectly mirrored in crystal clear lakes. His passion for photography expanded to include a fascination for the camera and its workings.

'Can you poach an egg?', he was asked while working as a kitchen porter to finance an Action Photography course in Cornwall. Turned out he could - perfectly - again and again. He just naturally got the science of it all and unexpectedly became an exquisite chef and baker. For him, this was another way to talk from the heart – to feed, nurture, show his love. He retained a huge respect and admiration for those who do the same.

Fin grew things; food at his allotment, plants – and also people, instilling confidence and can-do in those he cared for. He wove people together too, in his own

understated way. He was a natural mediator / counsellor and our own family would be fractured without his help.

He loved music, film and TV, skateboarding, gaming, snowboarding, archery, chess, animals, all of nature.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Fin had a seizure in the spring of 2018 and was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He immediately underwent six hours of 'awake' surgery, emerging from it epileptic and barely able to speak. Undaunted, he carried on with his life and, after only five days in hospital, was up and cooking all the food for the six of us family members who'd come together to support him.

Fin joined Bath Spa University in 2019 and we feel so blessed that this was where he completed his creative journey. It is an extraordinary place, run by the most extraordinary people; a family who nurture and grow amazing, confident artists. How Fin produced his 'lockdown panorama' work on very basic equipment in his bedroom we'll never know but it's a testament to his sheer determination and strength and also to the encouragement and support he received. He was able to 'speak' his visual truth freely and his work reminds us that, even in the darkest moments, there are hints of light, hope, love.

The exhibition and book would mean the whole world to him.

Fin passed away on 25 March, 2022.

He donated his corneas to help restore the sight of two people. In his passing, he donated his work so we could all see through his eyes.

He was whip-smart, wickedly funny, irreverent – and tenacious and courageous beyond belief. No fame, fortune, 'celebrity', followers, flourish and noise, just Fin and the knowledge that less can be so much more. As the 'rocket fuel' burned away, we could see clearly that there remained only kindness, compassion and love.

He was the sweetest soul, our own braveheart, encouraging us to 'hold' no matter how painfully uncomfortable it feels, because there are always little glints of gold to be found in the stillness and silence.

He shot his arrow through this life quietly, heart to heart, straight and true.

He loved.

We are forever heartbroken by his passing, but forever grateful for the lessons and gifts he left us.