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Truthfully, Nancy Buchanan, a Retrospective

by Jody Zellen

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Nancy Buchanan, Installation view, 2025

I first encountered Nancy Buchanan's work in 1985 in "The Family as Subject Matter," a group exhibition curated for The Washington Project for the Arts in Washington, DC by its then-director, Jock Reynolds. Buchanan exhibited work about her father, the nuclear physicist Louis N. Ridenour who passed away in 1959 when Buchanan was just 13. After inheriting the family archives she investigated both the public and private life of her father and created the multi-volume work, "Fallout from the Nuclear Family" (1980). Through redacted texts from FBI files and personal documents, Buchanan elucidated the complicated and contradictory aspects of the life of a nuclear scientist during the Cold War.

Text, image, history, personal artifacts, narrative, storytelling and collage have continued to be at the root of Buchanan's nuanced career, and in this retrospective exhibition "Truthfully," we experience the full breadth of her practice. Refusing to be pigeon-holed as this or that kind of artist, Buchanan has never been wedded to a single medium. Throughout her six-decade career she has worked in performance, video, digital art, and installation, in addition to creating collages, drawings and paintings. She has also collaborated with numerous artists, including Ulysses Jenkins, Barbara T. Smith, Chris Burden, and Paul McCarthy earlier in her career, and more with Carolyn Potter, Cynthia Maughan, and Laura Owens. Owens co-curated this survey together with The Brick's Catherine Taft.

The disparate subjects that Buchanan has explored are often culled topically from what was happening locally and globally at the time. She was not only involved early on with the women's movement, but also was (and still is) politically active in the anti-war movement, as well as in Black Lives Matter. Aesthetics and political concerns intermingle throughout her different projects and are almost always filtered through a personal lens. A statement on her website makes this explicit: "Buchanan uses various media to bring social realities into view, while grounded in the observation of a lived history."

Given that, an atmosphere of celebration surrounds the diverse aspects of her practice. With over 100 pieces created since the late 1960s, the show is loosely divided into sections: early years, hair, interiors, bestiary, consumption, development & ruins, the state & the self. It also includes a reading room. Early works are presented in vitrines as ephemera and documentation, when the young artist explored themes of intimacy and sexuality.

Buchanan's skills as a draftsman are apparent in pieces like "Hair portrait white on black" (2013), a close-cropped delicate white pencil on black paper drawing that focuses on strands of flowing hair on the back of a faceless head. This work is presented alongside "Untitled (Hair Room)" (1973/2025), a work first conceived in 1973 but presented here for the first time. It consists of a closet-sized room from which strands of synthetic hair dangle from the ceiling. Buchanan delights in the sensations evoked when the faux strands touch one's skin.

What is most satisfying about the exhibition is how the different materials and processes of working come together to define her as a complex individual, not just a complex artist. Her drawings of dog toys (something of an homage to Mike Kelley) and her portraits of endangered species become a meditation on loss. Collages like "Saving Time" (2017) or "Time Out" (2017) are about excess. Drawings and paintings such as "Art in the Park 2" (2024) and "Gaza" (2025) speak to the urgency of destruction and ruin.

Buchanan looks to the past as well as the present. Her pieces investigate dreams, disasters, nature, and the changing urban environment. She is dead serious about the current political climate, whatever it happens to be, as in "American Dream #6 Media Nightmare" (1987). Yet her works also display a keen wit. It is hard not to smile at the toy lips and teeth that appear in the "Mouthpiece" photos of 1985. "Security" and the aforementioned "Fallout From the Nuclear Family" are installations from the 1980s that juxtapose the personal and political, as Buchanan confronts her ancestry and the work of her father in these pieces.

There is a reading room and a video room to further engage some viewers. But, despite her reputation as a "new media" artist, they are not the main focus of the exhibition. Rather, it is the works made by hand — Buchanan's many drawings, paintings, sculptures and collages — that are not only a surprise but also a clear testament to the depth of her conceptual thinking, her artistic skills, and love of the process of making.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com