

An Introduction to the Language of Partial Seduction: Works by David Buchan



Curated by Sabrina Maher | Justina M. Barnicke Gallery | April 1 – May 3, 2014



ATTENUATION
PLEASE

What we'd like to sell
you here is an idea.
Tapered extremities and
inflated sensibilities.
Style without content,
form without function,
Art for Art's sake.
This lighter than air
apparel combines
volume and cutting
edges to create this
slice-of-life ensemble
designed with upward
mobility in mind. With
an eye to the eighties
and the shape of things
to come, we're
predicting big in the
middle and small at the
ends for that irresistible
silhouette that like
cream, rises to the top.

Atten(ua)tion, Please. 1976, black-and-white photograph. Courtesy of the Estate of David Buchan.

Front cover: *Fruit Cocktails: Masonic Temple, Toronto, September 8, 1978*, Project Performance Related Photographs, Box 4, File 17, David Buchan fonds. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

An Introduction to the Language of Partial Seduction: Works by David Buchan

What we'd like to sell you here is an idea. Tapered extremities and inflated sensibilities. Style without content, form without function. Art for Art's sake.

— David Buchan, *Atten(ua)tion Please...* (1976)

David Buchan was a central figure in the alternative art scene of Toronto, active from the 1970s until his untimely death in 1994 from AIDS-related causes. A vocal and vibrant member of Toronto's art and queer communities, Buchan's multidisciplinary practice defied categorization, merging the mediums of performance, photography, artist's publications, and video into his own unique practice that helped shape the Canadian contemporary art landscape. Despite his contributions, Buchan has fallen from public view into veiled anonymity since his early death. Bringing together many of his most important works for the first solo showcasing of his art since 1996, the exhibition aims at re-evaluating his body of work and presenting Buchan as a key contributor in the Canadian contemporary art world¹. The selection of works included in this exhibition attest to Buchan's fascination with the theme of performativity, a theme that became the guiding impulse for his artistic output with his focus on the body as a site of play and visual puns lending a wickedly intelligent critical edge to his work.

David Buchan was born into a blue-collar family in Grimsby, Ontario. His early years were not easy as a queer, quirky child amongst conservative family members in the predominantly white, Christian, rural town. He moved to Toronto to attend York University, graduating in 1972, and moving to Montreal the same

1 *David Buchan: Man-About-Town*, curated by Elizabeth Chitty, exhibited at the Grimsby Public Art Gallery from June 9 to July 7, 1996.

year. Daycare worker by day, in his off-time he moonlighted as a stylist working closely with a travelling stripper named Steve Adore. Buchan would scour the vintage shops of Montreal's east end for sartorial gems in which to costume the performer, amassing a huge collection of vintage pieces ranging from tailored 1940s men's suits to flamboyant disco outfits.² His love for fashion overran his home, with an entire room of his apartment dedicated to his wardrobe. At night he would spend time at gay clubs and drag fashion shows where he was exposed to queer,



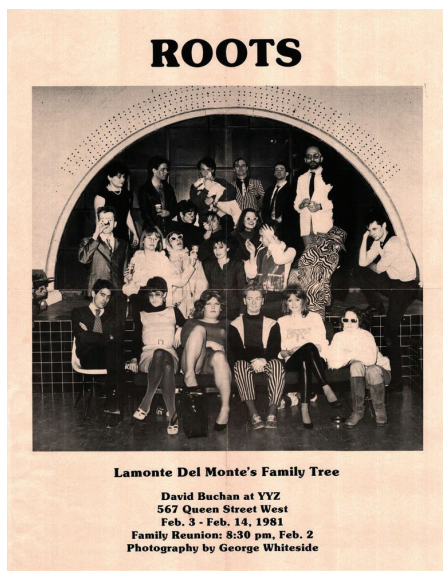
Geek/Chic series, 1977. Colour photographs. Courtesy of the Estate of David Buchan.

gender-bending performers using the mediums of the body and fashion to shape his personal artistic vision.

It was during this period that Buchan began experimenting with photographic self-portraiture, inhabiting different characters costumed in clothing culled from his personal closet. His initial efforts resulted in *Modern Fashions* (1976), a series of black-and-white photographs borrowing heavily from fashion magazines advertisements. The images play with the formal language of

2 Jane Buyers in conversation with the author, November 28, 2013.

pose and gesture to construct various personas using the signifiers and meanings woven into the clothing. His second series, *Geek/Chic* (1977), continued his previous investigations by focusing on counter-cultural figures and fashion. Championing the loser, the geek, the outcast, *Geek/Chic* saw Buchan appropriating outré stereotypes and infusing them with runway style. His wardrobe



Roots: Lamonte Del Monte's Family Tree, 1981, black-and-white poster, 55.8 x 43.2 cm, photography by George Whiteside, Courtesy of Andrew Zealley

became the source and inspiration for his art.

Returning to Toronto in 1975, Buchan quickly befriended the artist group General Idea (active 1969-1994), and became one of the first employees at the group's artist-run centre, Art Metropole. Then located on Yonge Street, a countercultural

gathering spot for artists, punks, queers, misfits, and miscreants, Art Metropole was established as an archive of artist-generated activity, a publishing house, and a distribution centre for artist books, video works, multiples, mail art, and other media predisposed to circulation and sharing. Through his friendship with General Idea and his role as bookshop manager at Art

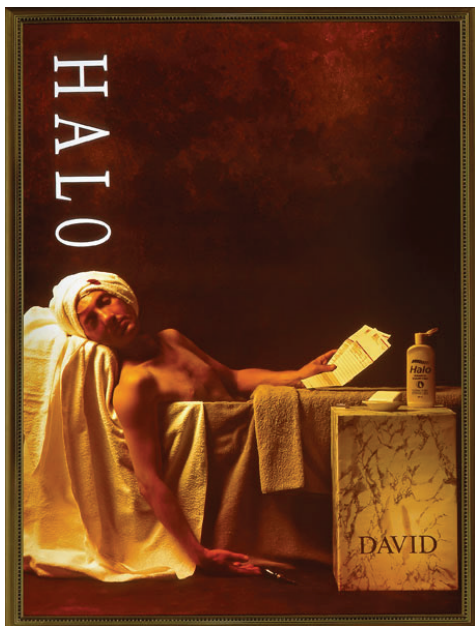


Beautiful Black and Blue, 1987, colour photograph. Courtesy of the Estate of David Buchan

Metropole, Buchan quickly became friends with artists and musicians, many of whom also became collaborators in his art projects such as the *Fruit Cocktails* tele-performance (1978), *Modern Love* (with Colin Campbell, 1978), and *Roots* (1981).

A key consideration of Buchan's work is the fluidity with which he approached his materials, allowing for its manipulation and re-articulation into new formats. For example, *Modern Fashions*, which grew out of his initial documentation in Montreal, evolved

from a photographic series to an artist's publication to being part of a performance. This shift from photography to performance is vital to understanding his work. Appearing first in collaborative projects such as performances in Margaret Dragu's *Pick-Up*



Halo, 1990, colour cibachrome, 179.2 x 136 cm. Courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

(1976) and General Idea's *High Profile* (1978), Buchan began experimenting with performance by turning his photographic series into scripted slide presentations. The format of slide-and-lecture performances became one that he would return to often throughout his career, starting with *Geek/Chic* (1977), *The Lamonte*

Del Monte Story (1978), *Dear Diary* (1979), and *Roots: The Lamonte Del Monte Family Tree* (1981).

It was through the adoption of his alter ego Lamonte Del Monte that Buchan came into his own as an artist and performer. Monte was a culmination of his fetish for fashion, a mind geared for new media, and his involvement with drag performance and nightclub lifestyle. Through his alter-ego Buchan could use himself as a means to investigate the methodology of identity construction while also taking control of his own destiny. This act of fictional interpolation became the primary thrust in his career for nearly fifteen years as Monte turned Buchan's body into a space of transformation, experimentation, and investigation. Through Monte, Buchan's slide-and-lecture performances grew into full-stage productions, hybrid spectacles that married fashion with drag, and punk with showman sleaze, in such works as *Fruit Cocktails* (1978) and *Monte's Bedroom* (1980).

Collaboration became a central tenet of his works, as David cast friends and colleagues as members of the Del Monte family, and invited performers and musicians to take to the stage during his glitzy productions. He worked closely with photographers George Whiteside and Paul Orenstein to create many of his later photographic works, which became a conduit for his performativity. Works such as *Canadian Youth* (1988), *Halo* (1990), *Nytol: The Big Sleep* (1990), and *Eno* (1992) clearly show his persisting concern with performance through the focus on the body and gesture. A man ahead of his time, Buchan was a visionary whose art exists as a testament to his lasting influence on subsequent generations of artists and queer activists alike.



Nytol (The Big Sleep), 1990, colour cibachrome, 188 x 137 cm. Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank

Biography

David Buchan (born February 11, 1950, Grimsby, Ontario; died January 5, 1994, Toronto, Ontario) was an artist and graphic designer. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree from York University in 1972. He lived in Montreal, Quebec between 1972 and 1975 working as a daycare worker, before settling permanently in Toronto in 1975. Beginning in 1975, he worked for Art Metropole in the capacity of Bookstore Manager, and helped develop the institution's archive and collection. In 1982, he was awarded a Canada Council Artist Studio in Paris, France. David's work and performances have been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Canada, the United States, and Europe, including: Alte Oper (Frankfurt), Artists Space (NYC), Glenbow Museum (Calgary), Hallwalls Gallery (Buffalo), Mercer Union (Toronto), Museum of the 20th Century (Vienna), The Power Plant (Toronto), Vancouver Art Gallery (Vancouver), Western Front (Vancouver), and YYY (Toronto). Works by David Buchan are in the collections of The National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Canada Council Art Bank, Winnipeg Art Gallery, as well as private collections.



Eno, 1991, colour cibachrome. 244 x 122 cm. Courtesy of AA Bronson

Back cover: *Canadian Youth*, 1989, colour cibachrome, 58 x 73.5 cm. Courtesy of the Estate of David Buchan



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