



William Buchina's disquieting, enigmatic, and prodigiously complex paintings are one artist's answer to the relentless media barrage that defines our visual culture, counteracting its torrent of images with a seemingly inexhaustible barrage of his own.

His paintings adopt their form directly from graphic novels and comic books, arranging the surface into gridded panels or large, busy, single compositions interrupted by pictorial inserts. Rendered in stark black-and-white with interludes of flat color, they simultaneously reassert and undermine the power of the image, with the discrete panels fusing into an implied, almost inchoate narrative that, in the majority of the works, allows no one element to stand out on its own. The individual image finds its strength only in its interdependence.

In *Time to Speak a Human Language*, Buchina's current show at Garis & Hahn on the Lower East Side, which includes twenty-one paintings on canvas and paper, there is an [installation](#) on the gallery's lower level that deliberately gives the game away: three sides of the room are covered floor-to-ceiling with the artist's reference materials — torn-out magazine photos, book illustrations and other commercially-derived images, along with small found objects displayed on tiny shelves that are all but lost in the visual clutter.

The gallery's press release states that "Buchina's practice lies as much in his sourcing and process as it does in his execution. [...] His scrupulous style leaves some source material roughly as it was found, and alters others beyond recognition. A single composition often features thirty or forty distinct sources."

The upshot is that Buchina's stream-of-consciousness artworks, where impenetrable devices are set against penetrated flesh, and figures stand stymied with sightless eyes and plugged mouths, are comprised of pictures of pictures, many of them vintage photographs, which positions his art as both a commentary on the mediated image and a plunge into the nightmare of history. The archival photos depict scenes the artist has not personally witnessed, but his often grotesque additions and revisions transform them into vividly realized hallucinations that double back on their source, resonating as psychologically charged meditations on the here-and-now.

In an [article](#) about the artist that appeared last month in *T*, the style magazine of *The New York Times*, Laura van Straaten cites Buchina's acknowledged influence of the Neo-Dada collagist Ray Johnson, in particular his "moticos," which were irregularly shaped cutouts "layered with imagery from every medium imaginable," and of "the artist Marcel Dzama's often Dadaist multidisciplinary work."

It would seem ill-advised, however, to locate Buchina's paintings under a Dada umbrella, given that they are, on their face, masterfully designed and executed art objects. But they do proceed from a disregard of painterly conventions, adhering to the methods of illustration and book design for their formal punch. In a further departure from standard-issue modernism, they also appear driven by their narrative intent, even if the narrative is submerged in the illogic of dreams

Accordingly, Buchina cites another major influence in David Lynch, whose *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Inland Empire* (2006) dispense with the customary cinematic devices separating dreams from reality, and present instead a free-floating series of illusions that are wholly foreign and instantly recognizable, transplanted directly from the subconscious to the screen. The sequences of images in Buchina's work would seem to follow a similar path, a crystallization of a dream's claustrophobic sense of confinement, its abrupt shifts in focus and perspective, and its monstrous confections of the animate and inanimate.



William Buchina, "Time To Speak a Human Language #14" (2015), acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 inches  
(click to enlarge)

While Buchina and Dzama employ similar tropes (historical or bizarre costumes, inexplicable poses, and an abundance of masks — often with the peaked caps that have proven irresistible to satirists from Goya to Guston), there is an essential distinction between them. Dzama's stylized drawings rarely venture beyond a whimsical gloss on history, an arbitrary strangeness seemingly for its own sake. In contrast, Buchina's multi-paneled grids and compacted compositions, all based on media sources, remain tethered to real events. Their incomprehensibility reflects the dizzying simultaneity of incidents within the stream of time, and their horror-show imagery drills down to the harsh bedrock of history beneath their ephemeral dreamscapes.

To look at these paintings, your eyes darting from a hand's severed fingertips (reattached with strands of wire) to a fatal car wreck, from a panic-stricken crowd to the locked lips of lovers with perforated faces — all contained within a precisely drawn grid ("Time To Speak a Human Language #1," 2014) — is to invite contemplation of the brutality visited upon humanity by the caprices of fate.

Buchina's richly rendered blacks and illuminations of color create an arresting and attractive surface, one that can be enjoyed abstractly if you don't care to investigate the irrational goings-on too carefully. But that is where the work really gets intriguing. Little thematic hints are scattered among the paintings — names like Adlai (presumably Adlai Stevenson, the liberal governor of Illinois who ran, and lost, twice for president against Dwight D. Eisenhower) as well as Colson and Haldeman, key figures in the Watergate scandal — festering reminders of what might have been and how wrong things have gone.

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In "Time To Speak a Human Language #14" (2015), the name Adlai appears, as if on a campaign button, beside a dove with what looks like a string slipped around its neck. This panel is positioned below a woman's dissected torso and above the hood of a black limo that could have been in JFK's Dallas motorcade. Elsewhere in the composition, the winged horse Pegasus seems poised to escape the crowded scenes of bondage beneath it, but its pose is also a reminder of its longtime service as the logo of the oil giant Mobil.

The works' political and cultural import, however, mostly lurks in the shadows as scene after scene relay the inability of one person to connect with another — a cold rush of pessimism that perhaps gave rise, with a heavy dose of irony, to the exhibition's title. What is most fascinating about these works is the way small gestures and motifs emerge from panel to panel and painting to painting — the crook of an elbow, the caress of a hand, the fragmentation of the body and its blunt intersections with cables and tubes.

These touches contribute to a novelistic, nonverbal framework for Buchina's freakishly metamorphosed photographic shards — one that seems capable of containing, and transforming, every picture in the world — and that surrenders to bleakness with an imaginative verve that's as bracing as it is euphoric.

[William Buchina: Time to Speak a Human Language](#) continues at *Garis & Hahn* (263 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 10.