

Spike Island

PRESS RELEASE

Beverly Buchanan
Weathering

Saturday 26 September 2026 to Sunday 31 January 2027



Beverly Buchanan, *Shack South: Inside Out* (1990). Installation view at 49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine, Metz. Courtesy The Estate of Beverly Buchanan and Tubman African American Museum. Photograph by Fred Dott

Spike Island presents the largest European survey exhibition of the work of Beverly Buchanan (b.1940; d.2015), bringing together five decades of sculpture, painting, drawing, earthworks, artists' books and rarely-seen archival material. Rooted in the landscapes and histories of the American Southeast, Buchanan developed a singular practice shaped by memory, materiality and place, exploring the enduring legacies of slavery through the histories embedded in architecture, landscape and everyday materials.

Throughout her career, Buchanan returned to structures as repositories of lived experience and historical memory. She began her artistic career in New York City in the early 1970s, studying with Norman Lewis at The Art Student's League, while working with communities as a public health educator in the Bronx and East Orange, New Jersey. Abstraction became her first visual language, inspired by the weathered surfaces of derelict buildings in the city. What Buchanan described as the 'aesthetic qualities of decay' informed her early series of *Wall* paintings (c.1975–77), first vividly coloured and later almost exclusively black. Like the site-specific environmental works she would later realise upon her return to the South, these paintings responded to the landscapes they inhabited and the histories they held.

Buchanan embraced impermanence as both a material process and a political proposition. Constructed from concrete blocks or tabby and left exposed to the elements, her sculptural earthworks, such as *Marsh Ruins* (1981), slowly weather and recede into their surroundings. Quietly imposing rather than visibly commemorative, they honour African American lives and histories through persistence and contemplation rather than spectacle. Her sustained attention to material vulnerability and transformation reveals a profound engagement with both a personal and historical consciousness of survival and resilience, legibility and concealment.

Equally central are Buchanan's celebrated shack sculptures (c.1985–2005), inspired by the vernacular architecture of the American South. Assembled variously from cardboard, foam core, recycled wood, steel and a multitude of other found materials, these intimate yet powerful works draw on the kinds of structures she first encountered during childhood journeys with her adoptive father, then the Dean of Agriculture at South Carolina State College, when he visited the homes of Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Buchanan not only studied these hand-built homes, shanties and shotgun houses, but also their builders and occupants. By the early 1990s, she understood her shack sculptures as forms of portraiture; many are accompanied by short stories, which she referred to as 'legends', that give voice to a cast of characters both real and imagined. As Buchanan elaborated, 'I want to give people who can neither read nor write but made all the measurements and built their own barns and shacks a different way of looking at themselves.' The exhibition also includes many drawn and photographed depictions of shacks, which similarly detail the precarity and ingenuity of these vernacular forms while pointing to the contours of structural violence and inequality that continue to shape the South.

Buchanan's practice was crucially sustained by networks of care and solidarity. As a Black queer woman living with chronic illness, she cultivated communities of friendship and mutual support that were integral to both her life and artistic practice. These relationships shaped not only the conditions under which she worked, but also the generosity and openness that characterise much of her output.

This exhibition foregrounds the intimate forms through which Buchanan nurtured these relationships, alongside major works spanning the 1970s to the 2010s. Artists' books, manifestos, small sculptures and her witty, affectionate Christmas cards reveal a practice that moved fluidly between the monumental and the personal. Buchanan's writing—by turns incisive, humorous and deeply reflective—runs throughout the exhibition, offering insight into her artistic thinking as well as her daily life, ambitions and struggles.

Buchanan's influence on younger generations of artists has long exceeded the institutional recognition her work received during her lifetime. Acknowledging this legacy, the exhibition includes a new commission by London-based artist Phoebe Collings-James (b.1987), whose practice has been shaped by a longstanding engagement with Buchanan's work. Developed in dialogue with the exhibition,

the commission extends Buchanan's influence into the present, highlighting the continued resonance of her ideas across generations and geographies.

The exhibition at Spike Island is curated by Clémentine Proby and Nicole Yip. It was developed in collaboration with Haus am Waldsee (Berlin) and 49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine (Metz), and will tour to Vleeshal (Middelburg) from 14 March to 27 June 2027.

The exhibition is generously supported by Art Fund, the Henry Moore Foundation, the Terra Foundation for American Art, and the Beverly Buchanan Exhibition Circle.

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ABOUT SPIKE ISLAND

- Spike Island supports, produces and presents contemporary art and culture across an 80,000 square foot former industrial building in Bristol. Its diverse artistic programme includes free major exhibitions, events and engagement activities taking place on-site and online. Championing outstanding work by emerging and underrepresented local, national and international artists, the programme enhances access to contemporary art for audiences from all backgrounds.
- Alongside its public offer, Spike Island directly supports artists through new commissions, over 70 subsidised studios, and sector leading artist development opportunities that widen access to its programme and facilities. Its Exhibition Services business supports the bespoke production and installation of artists' film and video throughout the UK and internationally. Spike Island is home to a dynamic community of hundreds of artists and creative businesses, working in flexible, affordable workspaces, alongside UWE Bristol's Fine Art department, Spike Print Studio, and café bar Emmeline. www.spikeisland.org.uk

IMAGE CAPTION

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