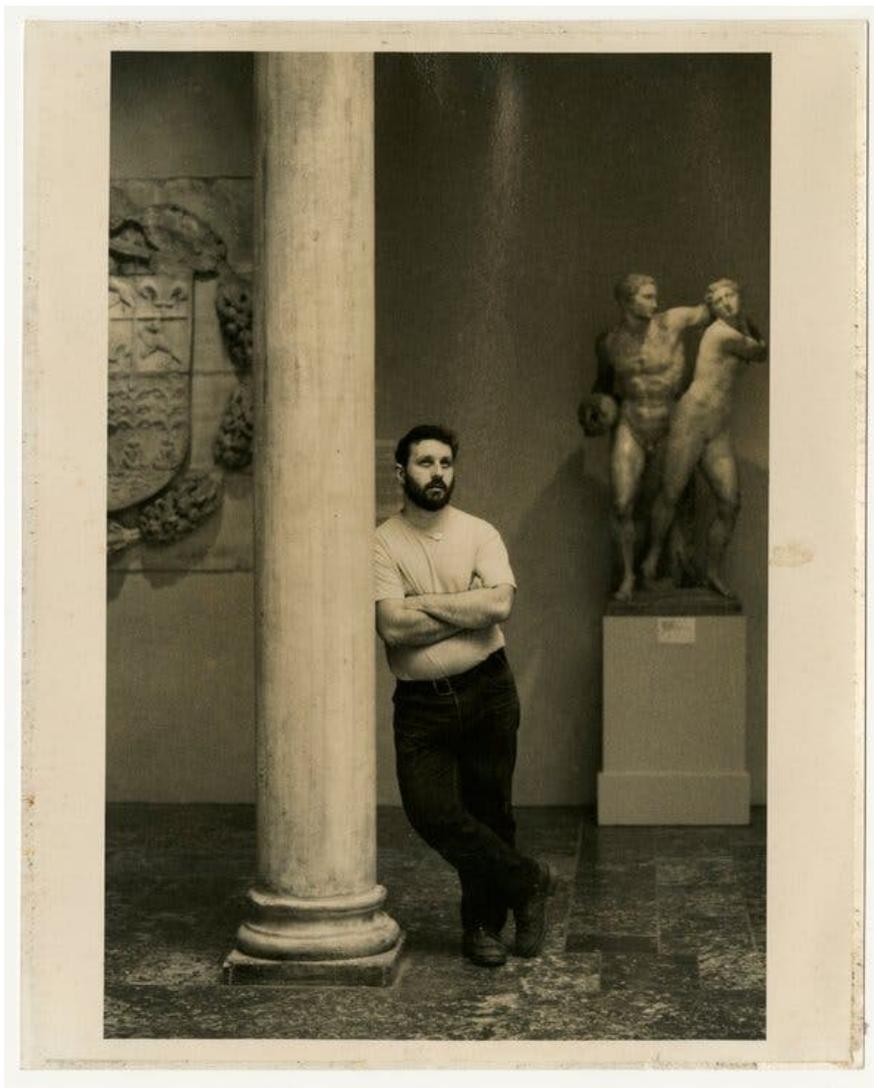


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Philip Glass's Musical Impression of an Artist Cut Down by AIDS

Glass's Fourth String Quartet, written after the death of the artist Brian Buczak, will be performed at the New York City AIDS Memorial.



The artist Brian Buczak, photographed in 1980 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Philip Glass's Fourth String Quartet, written after Buczak's death, will be performed this weekend. Geoffrey Hendricks Estate, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Ortzar Projects



By [Joshua Barone](#)

Oct. 25, 2024

The night Brian Buczak died, fireworks lit up the sky.

It was July 4, 1987, and his bed at New York University's hospital on the East River overlooked the holiday celebrations. Buczak's partner, the Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, a prolific painter of clouds, was struck by the beauty of what he saw outside the window: bursts of color, brightening a dark expanse.

Buczak was just 32, but he had already made more than 400 paintings, founded a small printing press for artists and settled down with Hendricks, the love of his life, with whom he had restored [a Federal-style house](#) on Greenwich Street. But all that was cut off when Buczak, like many thousands of New Yorkers before and since, died of complications from AIDS.

As Hendricks grieved, he turned to a friend, the composer Philip Glass, to write a tribute to Buczak. The result was Glass's [Fourth String Quartet](#), nicknamed Buczak, which he has described as "a musical impression." It premiered on the second anniversary of Buczak's death at the Hauser Gallery; now it is returning with [a free performance by the Mivos Quartet](#) on Sunday at the New York City AIDS Memorial in Greenwich Village.

This weekend's concert is the latest event in a resurgence of Buczak's story and work. Last winter, there was a solo exhibition of his art, "[Man Looks at the World](#)," at the Gordon Robichaux and Ortuzar Projects galleries, his first since 1989, the year Glass's quartet premiered. Hendricks, who died in 2018, has a show opening on Friday [at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery](#).

"It's such a relief," Bracken Hendricks, Hendricks's son and something like a stepson to Buczak, said of the fresh attention on Buczak. "It feels really earned by Brian's just really deep and thoughtful work. His creative output was well conceived and conceptualized, and beautifully realized, but it was also forged by the grief of knowing he was dying."



Glass was a seasonal neighbor of Geoffrey Hendricks, Buczak's lover, in Nova Scotia. Hendricks turned to Glass to write a tribute to Buczak after his death. Danny Clinch

Buczak was born in Detroit in 1954 and studied there at the Society of Arts and Crafts. But in 1976, on the advice of a friend, the artist Ray Johnson, he moved to New York, where he quickly met Hendricks at a party thrown by the composer and filmmaker Phill Niblock in SoHo. Bracken Hendricks said they had an “instantaneous spark”; they simply started dancing, then continued all night. It wasn't long before they lived together at the house on Greenwich Street.

They renovated the dilapidated house, leaning into its 1820s style with the dedication of historical re-enactors. It became the base of their work, as well as their project Money for Food Press. Buczak's patterned, painted walls and floors survive, along with his art, which is being cataloged and cared for by the artists Andrea Evans and Brad Melamed.

Buczak's interests were broad; he seemed to be inspired by childhood imagery, historical schools of painting, pop culture and mysticism. Even before he learned that he was H.I.V. positive, Melamed said, he was obsessed with “mortality and what comes after.”

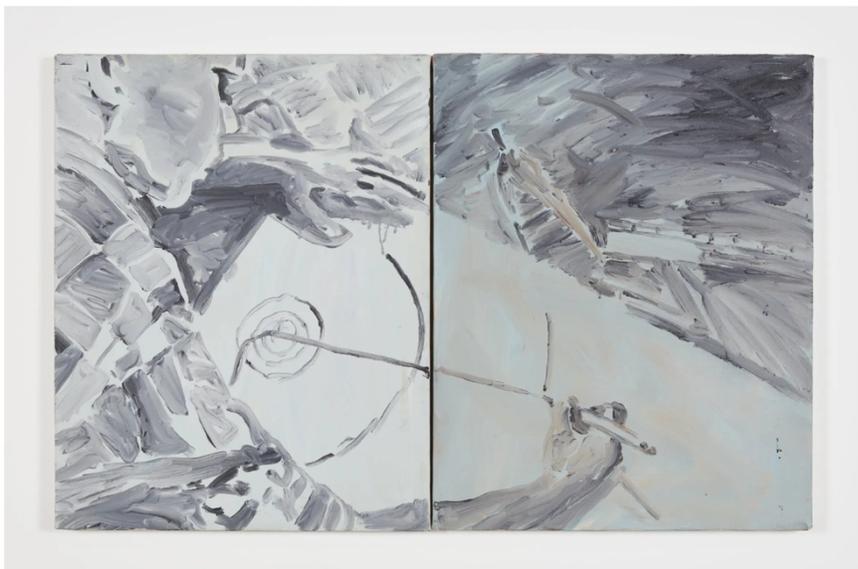
“It was this prescient thing,” Melamed added, “that he knew his life was going to be short.”

Evans pointed to a series of death mask paintings that are “just astounding.” Among the subjects of those works are composers; Buczak had a broad love for music, but particularly appreciated Mahler.

He was also surrounded by the music of Glass, who, now 87, was not available for an interview. Buczak painted the composer, and was close to Glass’s wife, the artist Candy Jernigan, who died in 1991. They would all get together on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, Canada, where Hendricks and Glass were seasonal neighbors.



Buczak’s painting of Glass, “PHIL,” from 1986. Geoffrey Hendricks Estate/Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Ortuzar Projects



A 1987 Buczak acrylic painting, “Drawing the Universe.” Geoffrey Hendricks Estate, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Ortuzar Projects

The Fourth String Quartet evokes a profound sense of loss with lush expression, unusual for Glass's earlier minimalist style built from repetitive structures. The first movement's harmonic language has the sad beauty of Schubert, which gives way to a middle movement of tense suspension and a finale that achieves a state of rest more than resolution.

Melamed sees Buczak's Romantic soul in the score's lyricism; Bracken Hendricks sees a shared sensibility between painter and composer.

"Brian was a fascinating mix of very modern and very classical," Hendricks said. "He did a lot of really rigorous artistic training, which you see in his trompe l'oeil paintings, but he was also very much of New York in the '80s. When you translate that to Philip's music, it has the formalist structures of a Glass piece, but it is also touching on that deeper tradition of the string quartet."

Above all, Hendricks added, the music captures his father's relationship with Buczak: their intense connection, and the gutting absence that followed Buczak's death. "It's also about the grieving process," he said. "It's a very sad, contemplative piece, not just a celebration."

Nick Hallett, a composer and researcher of AIDS-era music who organized the concert at the memorial, said that when he first heard the piece, on a recording by the Kronos Quartet in the mid-1990s, he didn't know the context of its creation; he doesn't remember there even being liner notes in his copy of the album.

But, he said, "any listener can feel its weight: It tells a story of life and memory and humanity, communicated through sound." Once he learned more about the Fourth String Quartet, Hallett had what he described as an "aha moment" in which the piece made even more sense, especially the way the music layers the past and present in the spirit of Buczak's paintings.

Dave Harper, the New York City AIDS Memorial's executive director, said the Fourth String Quartet was being performed Sunday as part of an effort to "make the memorial live and breathe." Last year, he presented a rare performance of [Arthur Russell's "City Park."](#) Glass's quartet, he added, now has an opportunity to be heard in a new context.



Buczak, left, and Hendricks. Bracken Hendricks said his father and Buczak had an “instantaneous spark.” Geoffrey Hendricks Estate, Gordon Robichaux, NY, and Ortuzar Projects