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## Melvin Way Holds the Keys to the Universe

Melvin Way's finely crafted, befuddling works demand to be understood on their own terms. But just what are they?

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Melvin Way, "AgN03" (2015), ballpoint pen on paper, with Scotch tape, 8.5 x 7 inches (all images courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery unless otherwise noted)

Sometimes, when searching for answers to those perennial questions about art (What does it *mean*? Why did an artist feel compelled to create *this*?), it can be easier and more productive, not to mention more rewarding, to simply give in and go with the flow.

To ride the current of an art-maker's impulses — that grab bag of hunches, risks, technical savvy, and all-around guesswork that fuels the creative process — certainly seems to be the most satisfying approach to take when encountering the elegant, perplexing, and, often, ravishing drawings of the artist Melvin Way, works that belie the modesty of the ballpoint-pen ink and tiny scraps of paper with which they are made.

Many of them can be found in *Melvin Way: The Cocaine Files Dossier (1989-2017)*, a mini-retrospective of the self-taught Way's unusual oeuvre, which is now on view at Andrew Edlin Gallery (through March 25). Curated by Way's longtime friend, the artist and School of Visual Arts instructor Andrew Castrucci, this survey traces the evolution of Way's finely crafted, befuddling works, many of which are simply stunning, and all of which demand to be apprehended on their own terms. But just what are they?



Melvin Way, "AADOWIS Series" (circa 2002), colored pencil on paper, each sheet 9 x 12 or 12 x 9 inches

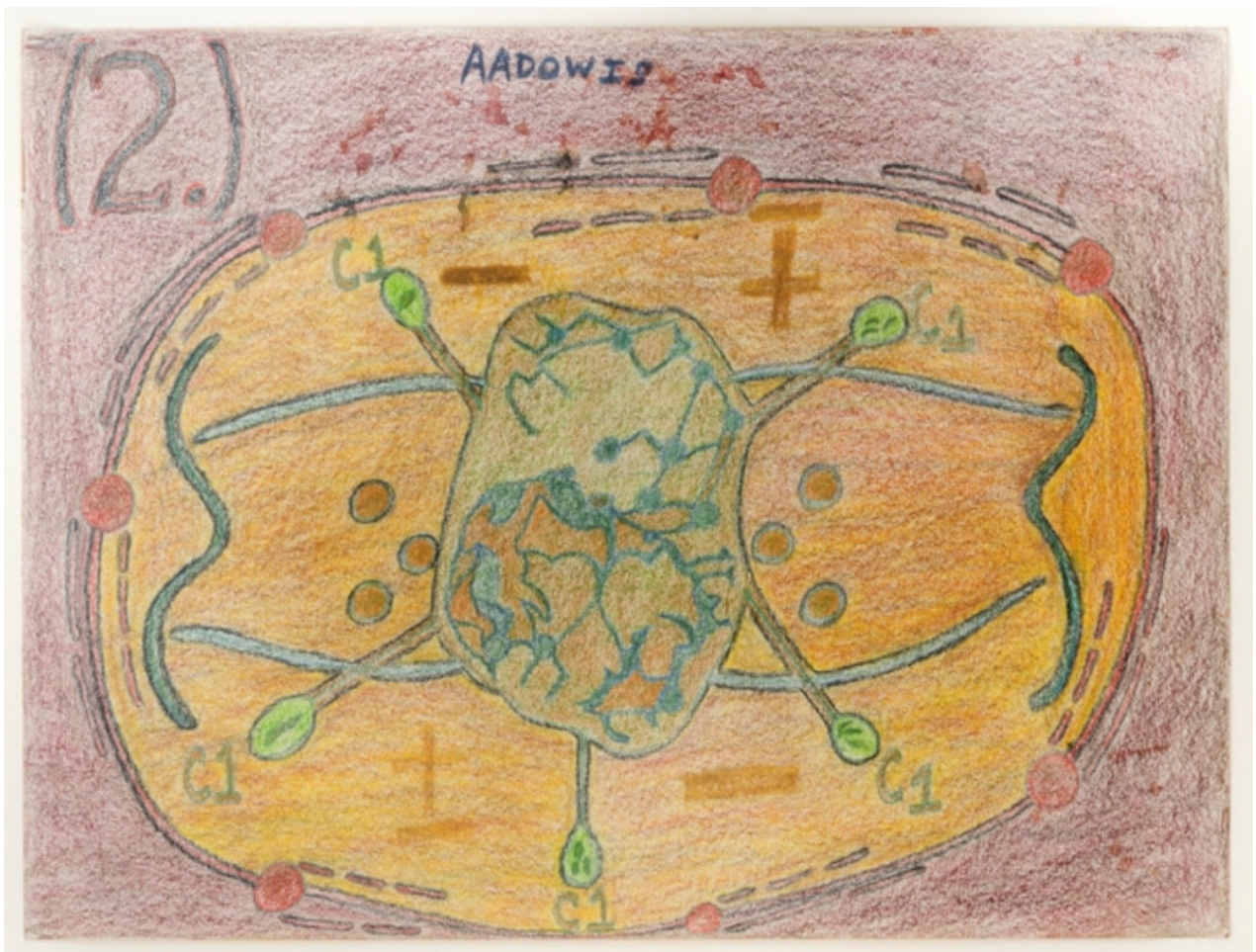
What are viewers to make of compositions consisting of what appear to be complex mathematical equations and chemical-compound diagrams, including one detailing the artist's own formula for cocaine? Way's peculiar pictures may portray quantitative information or theoretical knowledge in symbolic form, but they also tease viewers with their air of scientific authority while seducing them with their jewel-like charm.

The specifics of Way's biography are sketchy at best, and as he recounted his own story in an interview at the gallery as he and Castrucci were setting up the exhibition,



typically, he tended to alter some of its details. What is known is this: Way was born in 1954 in Ruffin County, South Carolina (where he resides today). During his youth, he began traveling back and forth between the South and New York, where, eventually, he stayed long enough to complete high school in Brooklyn. He later enrolled in a technical school and worked as a machinist, and also, he says, performed in bands. As a young man, he took drugs and began to show signs of the onset of mental illness, ultimately ending up in homeless shelters and bouncing between such facilities and social-service programs.

In 1989, in New York, Castrucci led a weekly art-making workshop at a men's shelter on Wards Island, in the East River. Way was a resident in that institution's psychiatric ward and attended Castrucci's class. However, instead of expressing interest in then-popular graffiti art, he slowly revealed that he was up to something quite different.



Melvin Way, "AADOWIS #2" (circa 2002), colored pencil on paper, 9 x 12 inches

Castrucci told me, "Melvin was very paranoid but he began showing me secret formulas he had devised and had not shown to anyone else. Sensing his interests, later I brought him a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, along with books of maps and medieval diagrams, and he was fascinated by such material. On his own, too, he already

was interested in alchemy, chemistry, cosmology, and other subjects he had been exploring and bringing together in his thinking and his art.”

Castrucci and Way began what would become a decades-long friendship and creative dialog marked by ongoing conversations about science, art, history, and nature. They discussed Einsteinian physics and the power of the human brain, with Way dismissing the popular myth claiming that most people use only ten percent of their mental capacities and asserting that, in his case, he felt sure that he employed up to 40 percent of his own.



The artist Melvin Way at Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, with a work-in-progress that represents what he called “the life force” (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

I first met Way, who sometimes signs his works “Melvin Milky Way,” a few years ago. During our more recent chat, he referred to the stew of ideas and information he pours into his drawings as “my own personal cooking.” The floodgates were open, and he was off and running with a cascade of insights, observations, and recollections.

Way told me that, before the late 1980s, when he first showed Castrucci his drawings, he had studied books about medicine, including *Physicians’ Desk Reference*, the medical industry’s standard compendium of prescription drugs. Over the years, he explained, he had written music, served as the governor of South Carolina (where he created cocaine), and purchased the territory of Alaska. He said, “I became a little boy again when I was governor. My ego fell out, and I became Melvin Jakes and also

Admiral Jones.” At one point, he noted, the head doctor for the US military’s Joint Chiefs of Staff had served as his personal physician. He spoke about reverting to the age of 16 even while remaining a man in his early 60s, and discussed the relative ease of time travel — that is, if one knows how to go about it. “I learned about it by reading the *Encyclopedia Britannica*,” he advised, adding that, when it comes to voyaging through the space-time continuum, the roles of certain subatomic particles are worth keeping in mind, including those of the neutron, the positron, and the “lipton” (as in “Lipton Tea”).



Melvin Way, “Seaweed” (2013), ballpoint pen on paper, with Scotch tape, 3 x 3.5 inches

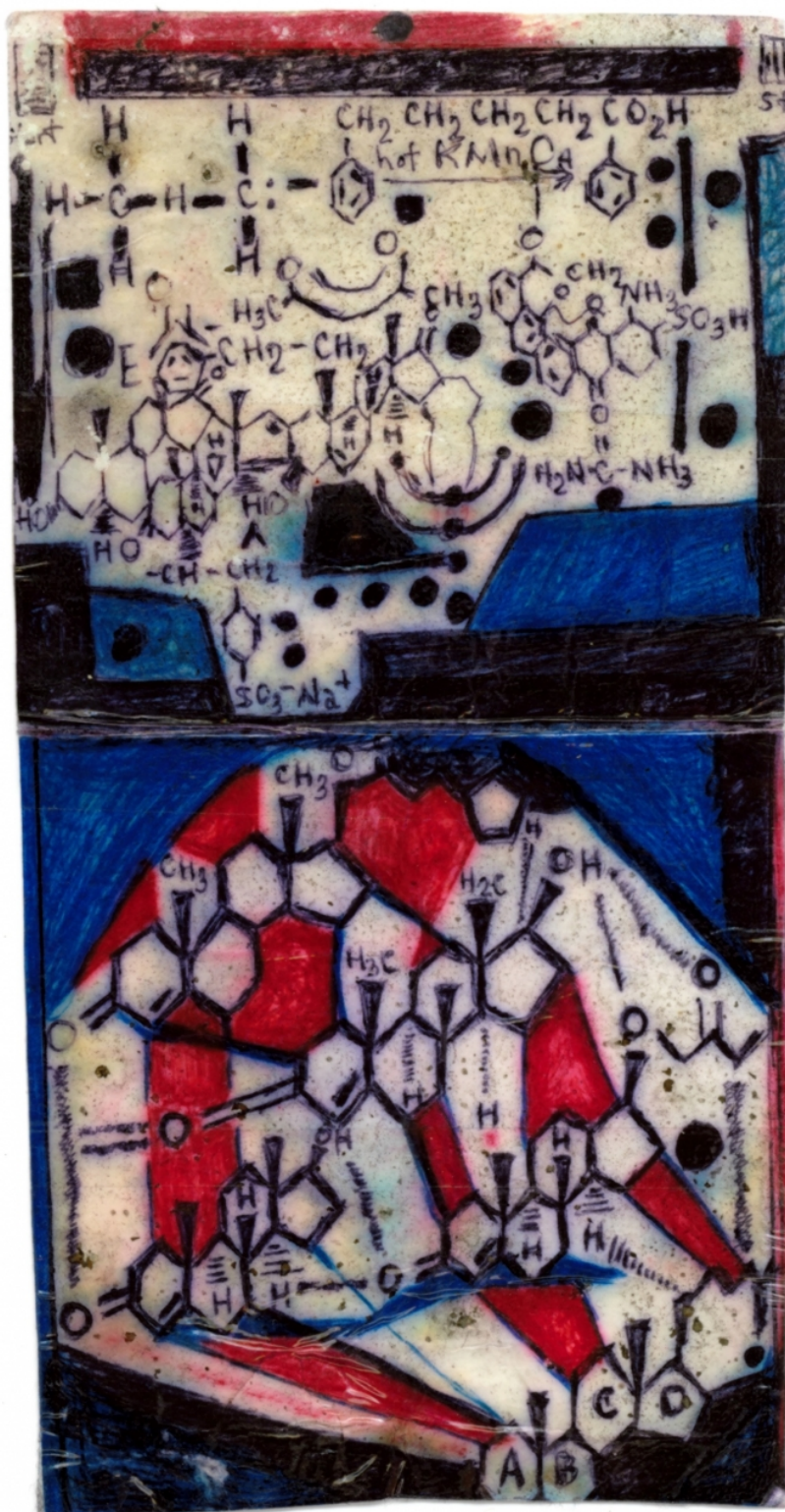
To listen attentively and absorb Way’s comments is to gain some clue to understanding — if “understanding” is even the right word — the messages and meanings of his art. Or maybe not. What might count more, perhaps, is its spirit — and precisely because, beyond what his drawings purport to represent, their meanings remain mysterious; formalists, in particular, may be hard pressed to extract some kind of cogent, recognizable sense out of Way’s colors and random patterns, even if their maker so obviously can. (At one point, Way pulled a tiny drawing out of his jacket’s inside pocket, where he stores his works-in-progress for months or even years, like protective talismans, as he routinely revises them, often covering them with clear tape, until he is ready to show them publicly. “This one here,” he said, holding up a small piece of



paper covered with round shapes and symbols for hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and the methyl and phenyl groups, “this one is all about the life force.”)

Works in the current exhibition include, among others, “CL23H” (1989). One of the earliest ballpoint-pen pieces among the first group of drawings Way showed Castrucci years ago, it depicts an expansive blob covered with a maze of chemical-compound structures whose taped and inky surface brings to mind the milky luster of ancient, blue-and-white porcelain. “Seaweed” (2013), despite its tiny size (three by three-and-a-half inches), feels monumental in scale; its purple-pink circular form, which is decorated with a kind of patterned web, resembles a shield, an eye, or perhaps an alien spacecraft.

Way plays around with depictions of compounds in the methyl group in “Floride” (2013), whose bold primary colors spill across two small panels, and in “AgN03” (2015), he brings together several black-and-white or multicolored pieces in a patchwork whose title refers to silver nitrate (a favorite of ancient alchemists, for whom silver was linked to the moon), and whose composition features a blurred-out face.



Melvin Way, "Florida" (2013), ballpoint pen and marker on paper, with Scotch tape, 3.5 x 7 inches (photo courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery)

In “Cocktails (6-Part Piece)” (2017), the artist explained, “the formula for cocaine shows up in everything — ginger, cranberry, peppermint, tobacco.” In the seven colored-pencil-on-paper drawings in his *AADOWIS* series of the early 2000s, which look very different from his usual works, Way provided a written key indicating that one of these images is meant to depict a “sense of unity, of identity with all things,” while another portrays a “sensation of timelessness and spacelessness.”

For all its air of mystery, there is nothing mystical about Way’s art, and it does both the artist and his work a disservice to romanticize one or the other — or both. To the contrary, to hear Way describe his research, outlook, and intentions is to grasp that he genuinely tries to bring a scientific approach to his art-making. In various ways, his work may be seen to share certain affinities with that of notable *art brut*, outsider, or self-taught image-makers whose art is similarly diagrammatic, or features real or imaginary mathematical elements.

Among them are the Swiss artist Robert Gie (1869- ? ), whose drawings, which sometimes feature numbers, appear to depict psychic-energy or perhaps electrical-pulse networks between humans, and George Widener (b. 1962), an American autistic savant whose compositions give graphic form to complex calculations based on the dates of natural and unnatural disasters. For me, Way’s use of numerals and symbols graphically and semantically recalls the manner in which the legendary Swiss *art brut* master Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) employed long series of written numbers to create the content of whole sections of his 45-volume, illustrated magnum opus, whose parts bore various titles. It is believed that those numbers were meant to be read aloud, producing sonorous, musical rhythms that, for Wölfli, may have held some special meaning.





cannot be pinned down and neatly labeled, never mind “decoded” or “deciphered,” as Castrucci says, using terms that often pop up in his comments about his friend’s work. With a gentle Wittgensteinian flourish, Way’s art seems to say, “If you can’t figure it out, that’s okay. Just hush up and let it *be*.”

Still, the artist himself did offer a *souçon* of a hint of a clue to understanding what his art is all about. “Human life is all of my equations,” he said. “I am all energy.”

In other words (I think): Just go with the flow.

Melvin Way: The Cocaine Files Dossier (1989-2017) continues at Andrew Edlin Gallery (212 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 25.