HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

The Musical Science of Melvin Way's Enigmatic Art

Way's drawings are not messages to be decoded but instead are renderings of our yearning to comprehend.



Albert Mobilio 19 hours ago



Melvin Way, "Ruler of the Universe" (c. 1996), ballpoint pen on paper, 5.5 x 7 inches (all images courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery)

Sometimes recognition comes too late: Melvin Way passed away this past February at the age of 70, just months before this solo exhibition. The artist's densely composed

drawings featuring mathematical and scientific notations have been exhibited in many group shows in recent years. However, the extensive <u>CO2 Blues</u> at Andrew Edlin Gallery offers the fullest view to date of his quixotic pursuit: to convey messages from an elusive realm of knowledge.

Born in South Carolina in 1954, Way came to New York in the early 1970s to study information technology. After being diagnosed with schizophrenia, he developed a drug problem, and eventually ended up unhoused. Despite his many difficulties, Way persisted in making art, and while involved in an art workshop in 1989 organized by a nonprofit, his work caught the attention of artist and curator Andrew Castrucci. His small drawings, made on scraps of paper, sometimes taped together, are exercises in intense focus. Using different colored ballpoint pens, Way inscribed dozens of diminutive lines of physics, chemistry, and mathematics formulae. Robert Walser's microscripts come immediately to mind, not to mention unnerving dreams one might have had in school the night before a chemistry exam.



Melvin Way, "Purple Haze" (c. 2008), pen on found paper, 7.5 x 8.25 inches

The numbers and molecular notations arrayed in "Ruler of the Universe" (c. 1996) don't make scientific sense — Way, who excelled in science in high school, has borrowed these evocative figures from various textbooks — but they make pictorial sense: The script appears to dance across the paper as if activated by trance-like music. The viewer is drawn into this hypnotic rhythm, the numbers and letters almost resounding as incantation. The blacked-out portions and underlining seem to perform an almost contrapuntal function, lending the movement moments of emphasis and pause.

A similar dynamism animates the drawing "Hazedrius" (c. 1989). The three lines of text that fill a band across the top seem to drift in and out of legibility. Words and phrases ("INFINITYETERNITYMODERNITY," "LYRE," "ARIEL," and the comic inclusion of "POOPDECK") are discernible alongside the less intelligible but wonderfully sonic "ZACORPBUSTOROTORIO." All of the text appears to be bracketed within parenthesis, as if it serves as some kind of gloss on the concatenation of formulae below.



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Melvin Way, "Hazedrius" (c. 1989), ballpoint pen and Scotch tape on paper, 3.5 x 7.5 inches
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Way's carefully formed handwriting might be thought of as a type of calligraphy or cuneiform. More likely it falls under the heading of asemic writing: text or text-seeming marks intended to be understood as imagery rather than verbal conveyance. To the uninitiated (which probably includes everyone but Way), meaning is suggested yet obscured. These drawings are not messages to be decoded but instead are renderings of our yearning to comprehend. In a 2017 documentary directed by the French filmmaker Bruno Decharme, Way makes a series of outlandish claims — for example, that he traveled to Jupiter, Mars, and Pluto, and named those planets. But he also speaks about his artistic intentions. As he pens the letter "S" on paper, he elaborates on its import: "It means … all things equal. It also means untouchable. My 'S' is also one-fifth a second in time. It's also the solar system, the universe." Indeed, the letter signifies everything and nothing; it is both sign and anti-sign. Its true meaning hidden by its multivalence. Way's cryptic divinations conjure an intoxicating, even frightening beauty. His is the language of a most personal, everfleeting self.



Melvin Way, "Fauvi" (c. 1989), ballpoint pen and Scotch tape on paper, 10.75 x 8.5 inches