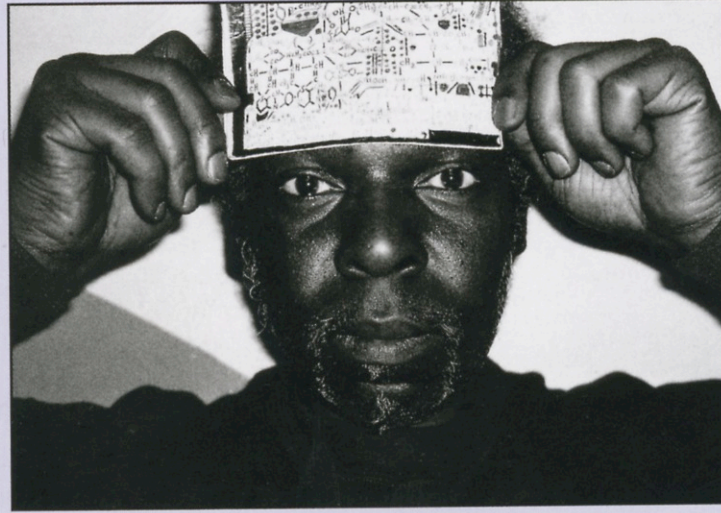
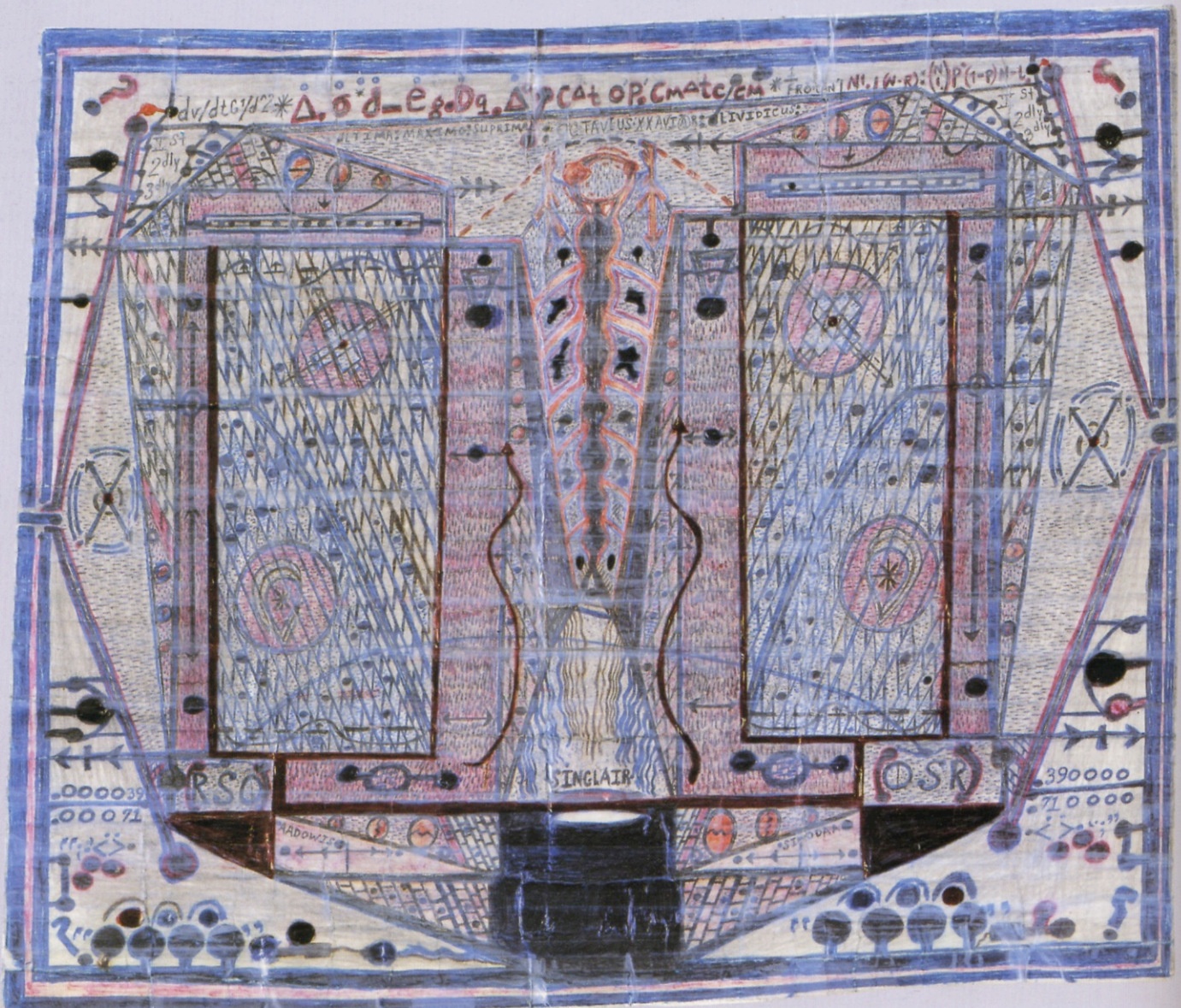


# N. F. Karlins enters the cryptic world of



## Melvin 'Milky' Way



Formulas are shorthand for complex mathematical or scientific interactions. We expect them to balance or add up; we think of them as intentional, clear and terse, yet dense with meaning. And then we see the inky drawings of Melvin 'Milky' Way.

Melvin Way makes cryptograms in which he embeds formulas and diagrams intricately woven from letters, words, phrases, numbers, and designs. There are many paths into Way's drawings and none out. They do not simplify but add mystery to his already dense messages. They are untitled – as if to name them would limit their encyclopedic grasp. They are chemistry and psychology, life and art, but above all poetry.

There is no way to sum up these drawings. They are direct, accessible, and inviting. They are subtle, inexplicable, and frustrating. And they are always wonderful to look at.

Way's drawings are created on small pieces of paper – tattered sheets, old, discarded stationery, occasional scraps of colored paper. Most are executed in ballpoint pen, usually blue, black, or a combination of the two, sometimes in other colors. (1)

A drawing can take Way weeks or months to complete, but he carries some around in his pocket or between pages of a book and they continue to evolve for over a year or more. Often he executes drawings in series, working on two or three at once. During any period, he may be adding large or small areas in pen to different pieces, wrapping them with horizontal bands of cellophane tape, then 'updating' them with more pen markings over the tape.

These incremental additions have little to do with the 'exquisite corpse' method of

drawing practiced by the Surrealists or other contemporary artists such as Reed Anderson. When deciding to add more marks, Way examines the entire surface. He often embellishes the back as he works on the front, and most of his small works are therefore double-sided.

He balances areas of dark and light in a trippy, asymmetrical manner. Hundreds of abstract forms – darkened circles, parallel lines, diagonals, hexagons – surround, interrupt, and generally embroider the letters, words, phrases and numbers, formulas and diagrams, which fluctuate between being symbols (or abstractions taking the place of other things) and abstractions as abstractions.

Each drawing is a highly charged space where collisions and interactions are recorded, even celebrated, yet strictly ordered by the artist. Because of the authority he brings to it, his art is totally persuasive and absolutely compelling.

A rectangular piece, with 'MelQart' written at the top is a typical puzzler: 'Mel' is for Melvin, maybe? 'Art, yes, but 'MelQart?' And what about 'kool?' It is cool, but how is that connected with the word 'tangere' 'touchstone' above? And what about 'awe.owe?' 'Deep.seated inner.directed?' The puns and misspellings or just-missed spellings, depending on your point-of-view, surely all relate to one another.

They are, of course, all there, courtesy of the artist and his vision. The viewer is enticed by the deliberate placement of phrases, formulas, and other elements to try to winkle out the connections. What makes these conundrums seem even more irrefutably meaningful, if ultimately undecipherable, is

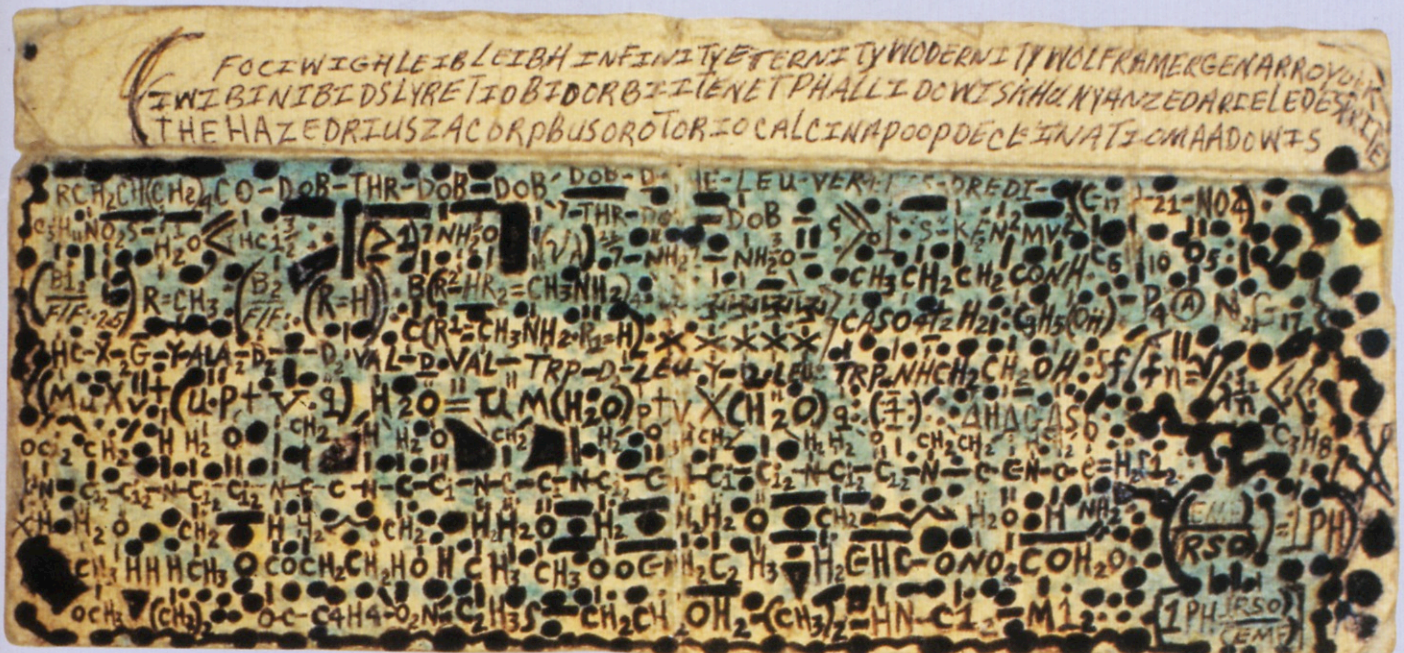
N. F. Karlins writes for artnet.com and is the art critic for *The Westsider* and *Chelsea Clinton News*. She has written and lectured widely on art of all kinds, although her first love is self-taught art.

1. Way's early work includes experiments in several other media, a couple of figurative drawings, and a few larger pieces. He also collaborated with Andrew Castrucci on a piece.

**opposite page above**  
Melvin Way,  
photo courtesy: Andrew Castrucci.

**opposite page below**  
*Untitled*,  
1998, 12.5 x 14 inches,  
pencil, colored pen and  
scotch tape on paper,  
Private collection.

**below**  
*Untitled*,  
c. 1995,  
6 x 10.25 inches,  
ink on paper,  
Private collection.



2. Way's formal education stopped before finishing high school, but he has studied for an equivalency degree. Currently he is taking a computer course.

3. Way described living on a farm in South Carolina = raising animals, hunting, fishing, horse-back riding and, as he got older, 'chasing girls.'

the abstract framework in which each exists.

Because the pieces are layered, they are figuratively and literally, dense. In this, they resemble African charms or amulets where what is seen is only part of the object, and hidden substances or spells are buried inside. The most that the exterior can do is to suggest rather than define its substance and powers.

An exceptionally large piece by Way, (almost 13.5' x 9') has 'Kronos, Rhea' written in the upper right hand

and almost anything else that tweaks his interest.

Although Melvin Way has influenced many other artists, he did not start out to become an artist himself. He remembers, drawing as a child and making art in high school, but he only emerged as a professional artist during the last fifteen or sixteen years.

Way was discovered to be a talented draughtsman by the artist and curator Andrew Castrucci, who ran workshops for Hospital Audiences, Inc., or HAI, on Ward's Island in the mid-1980s.

Castrucci recalls that Way did not join in the workshop at first but after some time he brought in work he had made on his own. He did sit down



4. According to a series of interviews with the artist during 1999, he returned to Smoaks for 8th and 9th grade, attended the Junior High #296 Annex, returned to Ruffin County, came back to Junior High #271, attended high school in Ruffin County for a time, and then James Madison High School in Brooklyn.

5. Way says that he has never been married.

6. These shows include 'Resistance of Memory, April 20-June 2, 1996, and 'a continuation of something else, part of a series of events, July 31-Sept. 21 1997, both at Bullet Space, 292 East 3rd St., New York, NY.

corner of one side.

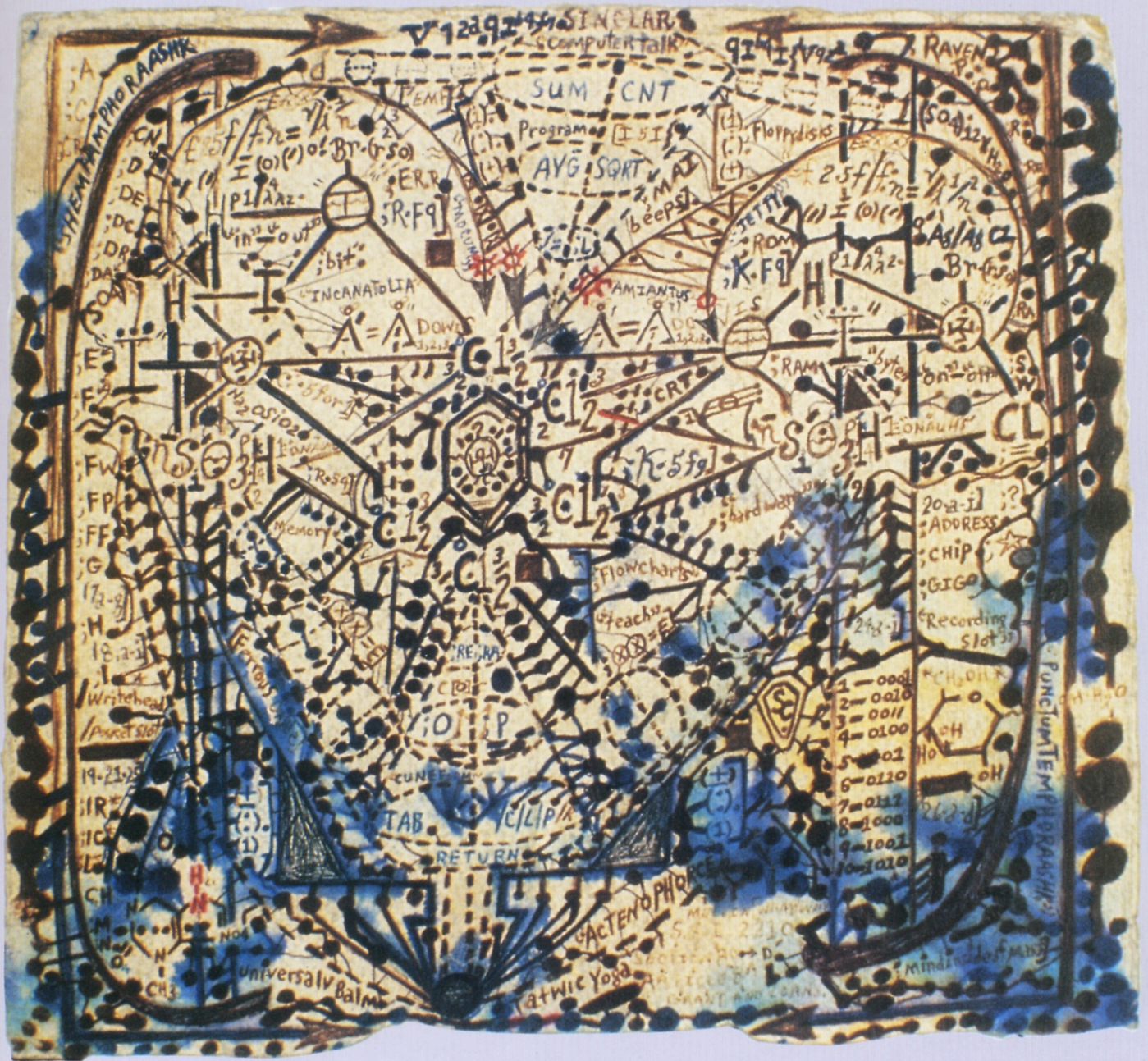
It also contains such teasers as 'swoon, hoodoo, genie, caribbean affair, 9th degree, homicide real' and 'rattles, cads, singletons, quadratics' and 'Melvin Whey Way' along with strings of equations, mathematical symbols, geometric patterns. And that's just the front. The back has more unmarked areas but is equally rich in words, including 'eustuche, 'emaccutante conception, 'haloperidol, 'quintin, time around, its all right, from us to you. which make it equally enigmatic.

Way uses books of all sorts in his work - science magazines, physics manuals, the *Physicians' Desk Reference*, encyclopedias, works on the occult, psychology, mythology,

with others on occasion, but mostly executed the bulk of his drawings alone.

Castrucci brought in a variety of supplies and encouraged Way to experiment with a variety of media and subjects. He gravitated immediately to ballpoint pens on paper and Castrucci realized that Way had a natural, untaught excellence. He exposed the developing artist to reproductions of many kinds of art, providing him with a mini-art education. In interviews, Mr. Way told me that he had been introduced to art earlier, when painting and making ceramics in high school.(2)

Melvin Way was born on January 3, 1954, in Ruffin County, South Carolina.(3) He moved North to live in Brooklyn when he was three or four and was raised with three step-brothers by his a relative, Flossie Way. He started elementary school in Smoaks,



South Carolina, but spent most of grade school at PS #106 and #151 in Brooklyn. He progressed part-way through high school at institutions in Brooklyn and South Carolina, (4) studying both science and music, and playing a variety of instruments in the school orchestra and bands.

Way started taking classes at the R.C.A. Tech (now Technical Career Institute) on the West side of Manhattan and playing bass guitar and singing in bands. He also worked at the Opportunity Industrial Center in Waterbury, Connecticut, from which he says he graduated to become a power press operator and machinist. He also recorded for the Encounter label, but felt that he was not paid properly. In his early twenties, he began having periods of forgetfulness and could no

longer concentrate as mental health problems began to affect his life. During that period, he was living with a woman heavily into drugs. He returned to Bushwick in Brooklyn, playing music and living with several women. (5) Eventually, homeless, Way found himself on Ward's Island and moved to several places over the course of the next few years.

In the late 1980s, Way and Castrucci met again at another workshop, and the two men became friends. Castrucci claims to have learned as much from Way as Way learned from him. He kept the artist supplied with materials and included him in the shows he curated in the East Village. (6) In 1999 he and Castrucci created a mural at the Fort Washington Men's Shelter in the Bronx.

**opposite page**

*Untitled (Key to Good Health)*, early 1990s, 5 x 4 inches, ink and scotch tape on paper, courtesy: Margaret Bodell Gallery, New York.

**above**

*Untitled*, 1990, 8.5 x 7.5 inches, ink on paper, Private collection.