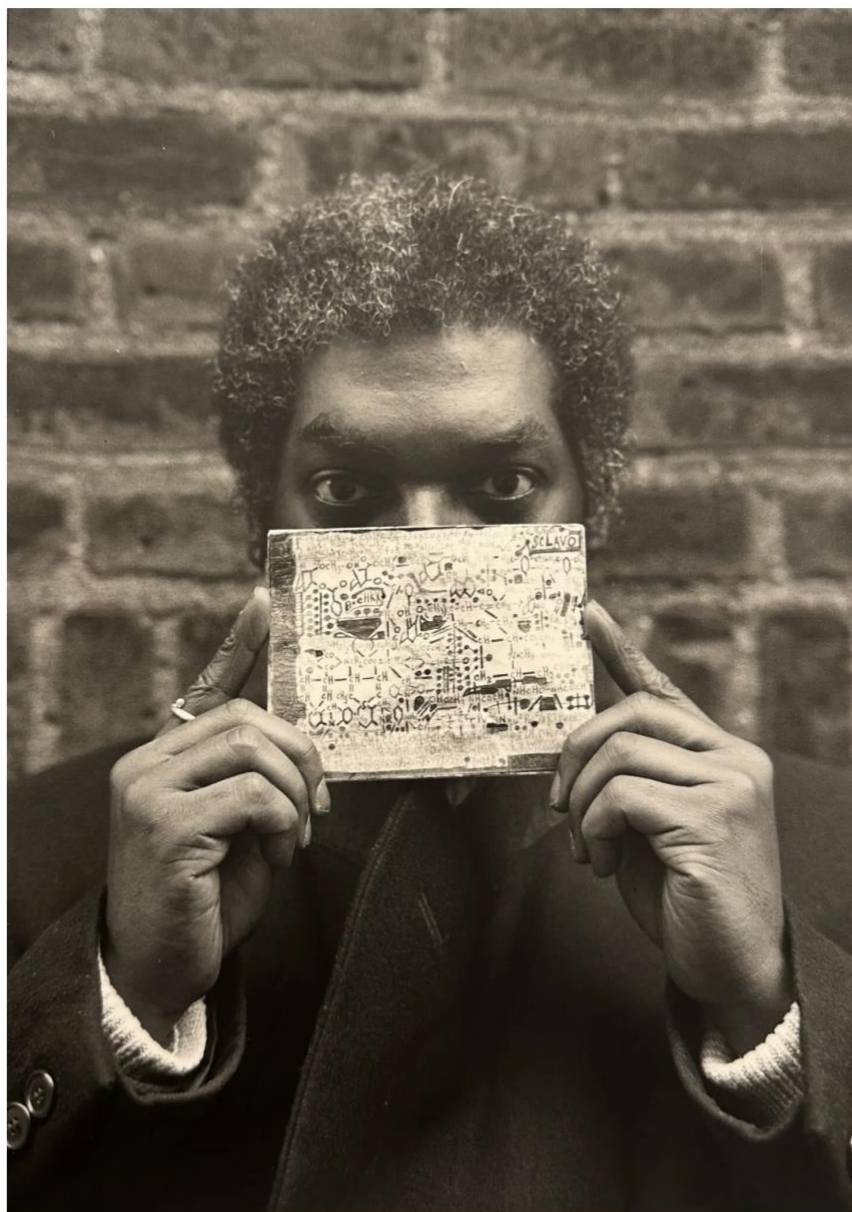


The New York Times

Melvin Way, Outsider Artist Who Depicted Inner Mysteries, Dies at 70

He struggled with schizophrenia, but he drew praise for the intricate diagrams he drew on scraps of paper while living in New York City homeless shelters.



The outsider artist Melvin Way with one of his works in 1994. Some of his pieces have sold for more than \$10,000. Andrew Castrucci, via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York



By **Michael S. Rosenwald**

Feb. 27, 2024

Melvin Way, whose hallucinatory diagrams, composed with ballpoint pens and markers on scraps of paper in New York City homeless shelters, were collected by prominent art museums around the world, died on Feb. 4 in a hospital near his family's home in Smoaks, S.C., a rural town northwest of Charleston. He was 70.

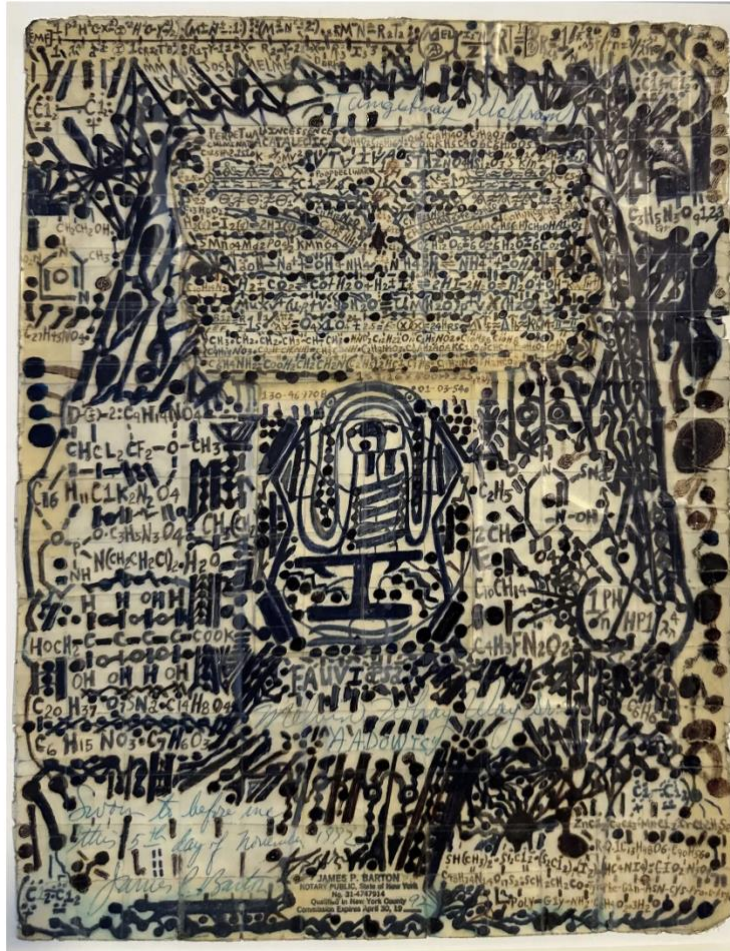
His mother, Flossie Lee Hubbard, said the cause was complications of a stroke.

Mr. Way, who was found to be schizophrenic in his 20s, emerged in the world of outsider art — a label for works originating beyond the boundaries of the mainstream — from the basement of a notorious and violent homeless shelter on Wards Island.

There, in 1989, he began working with an instructor from a nonprofit that taught art in jails and homeless shelters.

“When I first met him, he had over 200 drawings on him,” the instructor, Andrew Castrucci, said in an interview. “He would always buy clothes that had pockets. So he is carrying around 200, 300 drawings all wrapped up in rubber bands in his pockets. They're small, they're all covered with Scotch tape for protection. You had to see it.”

The works defied explanation — especially by Mr. Way, who was on and off schizophrenia medication and also struggled with cocaine abuse. Some drawings, he said, depicted the prevention of cancer. Others were recipes for cocaine, LSD and caffeine. There were even cures for herpes, rabies, pneumonia and scabies.



A Melvin Way work from 1989. Some of Mr. Way's drawings depicted cures for various ailments. Others were recipes for cocaine, LSD and caffeine. Melvin Way Estate/ARS, New York, via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

One day, Mr. Castrucci showed some of Mr. Way's enigmas to the New York magazine art critic Jerry Saltz. "I felt," Mr. Saltz wrote in 2015, "like I was seeing another kind of infinity, thought made visible, wild nerves, optical barnacles coming to hermetic life, delirium legible."

To Mr. Saltz, whether Mr. Way's works depicted anything remotely logical or grounded in science was beside the point. "It doesn't matter to me if Way is copying these formulas or grabbing them from his involuting memory, or even if they're mad," he wrote.

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic of The New York Times, wrote in 2022 that Mr. Way's drawings "seem to chart the energy of thought itself."

In 1991, Mr. Way's drawings began appearing in solo and group exhibitions, at first in small New York galleries and later in Paris, London and Prague. His works are now in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington and the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Because of Mr. Way's mental illness, introductions to journalists and potential buyers could be challenging, Mr. Castrucci said. In interviews, Mr. Way would sometimes say he had previously served as "governor of Rockefeller" and mayor of New York. The longer the interviews went on, the stranger they became.

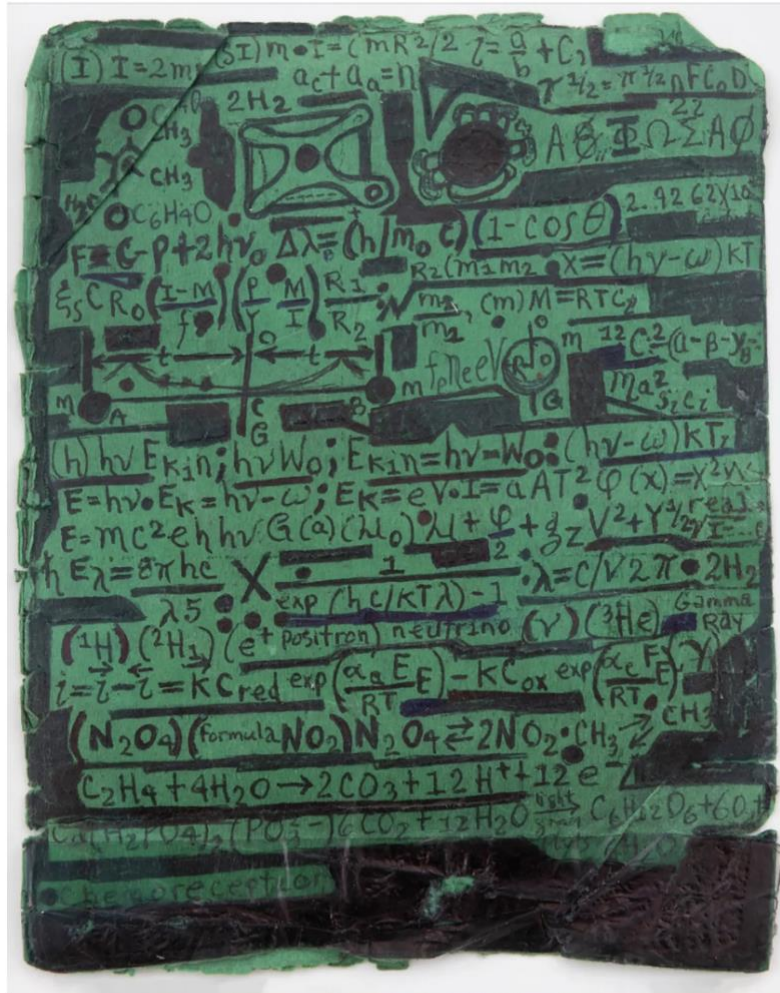
Asked by Art et al., a global advocacy organization, to explain his imagery, Mr. Way replied: "It is inside the looking glass, the mirror. Like 22-7th is a large number in the universe. If they find out that I went inside the looking glass through the computer and did this, it's called physical science, OK?"

Mr. Castrucci would often serve as a kind of translator. "Some people found him a little scary," he said. "And I'd say: 'No, no. Don't worry about what he's saying. Look at this work. He's a genius.'"

Melvin Way was born on Jan. 3, 1954, in Smoaks. His mother was a sharecropper. His father, Wilford Way Sr., was a machinist.

When Mr. Way was 4, he moved to Brooklyn with his family. He excelled in school, especially in art, science and music. After high school, he worked as a machinist and a musician, playing bass in New York funk bands.

Mr. Way was an enthusiastic participant in the hazy LSD days of the 1960s and '70s, family members said. They suspect that a spiked drink preceded the psychiatric troubles that began in his 20s. He disappeared into the streets of New York, bouncing between homeless shelters, psychiatric wards and jail.



Mr. Way's "Green Door," from around 2021. He often covered his drawings with Scotch tape for protection. Melvin Way Estate/ARS New York, via Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

More than two decades went by without anyone in his family hearing from him.

Mr. Castrucci was looking after him, though. To keep him out of trouble at shelters, Mr. Castrucci brought him supplies and books, including several on Leonardo da Vinci, whose notebooks of intricate formulas fascinated Mr. Way.

Mr. Castrucci had to plead with social services workers not to place Mr. Way in psychiatric hospitals.

“I’d be constantly telling them that the guy isn’t crazy, he’s a great artist,” Mr. Castrucci said. “He was very charming if you just got to know him. He was a really a sensitive, beautiful guy.”



Mr. Way at a men’s shelter in Manhattan around 1994. “These drawings,” a friend said, “were his therapy.” Andrew Castrucci ARS artists rights society NY

Mr. Way’s family eventually tracked him down on Facebook. In 2015 he moved to South Carolina, where he lived with his mother until his death.

Along with his mother, his survivors include his siblings, Izell, Wilford, Carl, Jared and Stephanie Way and Landy and Gregory Jones.

Mr. Way’s pieces are sold by the Andrew Edlin Gallery in the Bowery, with the proceeds distributed to Mr. Way’s family.

Mr. Edlin, the gallery’s owner, said that “some of the highest-profile collectors key in on his work. Some of them are board members from major museums.”

He added that some of Mr. Way's pieces have sold for more than \$10,000.

Looked at another way, their real value was keeping Mr. Way alive.

"These drawings were his therapy," Mr. Castrucci said.

They also kept him safe.

"In the shelter system, people admired him," Mr. Castrucci said. "His friends flocked to him and protected him because he was an artist."