

**Melvin Way: Recent Work and Drawings from H.A.I.**

December 5, 2020 – February 7, 2021

Andrew Edlin Gallery is pleased to present the gallery's second solo show for Melvin Way featuring over 70 drawings, of which about half were made recently. A trove of drawings recovered from the disbanded HAI (Hospital Audiences Inc.), where the artist had been affiliated since 1989, will also be on display.

Melvin "Milky" Way is a diviner of the universe's secrets. His densely rendered, graphically elegant ballpoint pen drawings lay them all out in the open, in the form of peculiar melanges of mathematical and chemical formulas, tangled in webs of jittery circuit board traces or boxed in by thick clouds of ink. The only problem is decoding them—and unless you are Way himself, you probably won't have much luck.

Born in South Carolina in 1954, Way beat a path to New York in the 1970s, where he attended a technical school and worked as a machinist. In his off hours he gigged as a bassist, recorded a never released solo record, and dabbled in drugs. Perhaps spurred on by this latter indulgence, Way began to show signs of schizophrenia, whose worsening effects eventually pushed him out on the streets.

In 1989, Way crossed paths with the artist Andrew Castrucci, who was leading a weekly art workshop at a men's shelter on Wards Island. Initially wary, Way warmed to Castrucci's enthusiasm for the jewel-like little drawings that he kept tucked away in the pockets of his jackets and nestled between the pages of his books, working them over for months or even years before allowing them to see the light of day. Finding Way already deeply interested in a wide range subjects, from cosmology to chemistry, mathematics to ancient alchemy, Castrucci furnished Way with books of maps and medieval diagrams, and a copy of DaVinci's notebooks, which he devoured with gusto. A decades-long friendship ensued, during the course of which Castrucci introduced Way's work to the art world.

Despite its apparent indecipherability, Way's work fits comfortably into a tradition of visionaries, philosophers, and mystics who sought to render hidden realms of reality into legible systems, often in ways that teeter on a knife's edge between what passes for sanity, and what is thought to be madness. That Way's drawings could be equally said to resemble the lunatic music that

embellishes the works of Adolf Wölfli, the schizophrenic genius who sparked Jean Dubuffet's love of *Art Brut*, and the blackboard drawings made by the esteemed polymath Rudolph Steiner to accompany his still-influential Anthroposophical lectures is surely telling in this regard. Other artists like the eccentric cosmologist Paul Laffoley and renegade painter Alfred Jensen share aspects of Way's ambiguous position between the putatively real and the wholly idiosyncratic.

But the most accurate analog for Way's work can be found in that of another troubled seer, the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. Like Way, Dick also struggled with mental illness and received flashes of insight into the fundamental nature of reality, for which he sought to build elaborate proofs in books like *VALIS* (1981) and in his sprawling journal writings. As in Way's obsessive, evocative drawings, there may have been kernels of truth and insight contained in Dick's conjectures and cosmologies. However, both men's work seems to serve a more poignant purpose: to attempt to grasp the deep mysteries of a mind, like all minds, which evades full comprehension.

Accessible at [edlingallery.com](http://edlingallery.com), the exhibition also features the documentary film *Melvin Way* (2017), directed by Bruno Decharme, produced by Barbara Safarova for abcd.

Melvin Way's drawings are held in prestigious private and public collections including the American Folk Art Museum (New York), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Collection de L'Art Brut (Lausanne) and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art (Wash DC). His art has been featured in many group exhibitions including *Alternative Guide to the Universe* at the Hayward Gallery (London, 2013), *Approaching Abstraction* (2008), *Self-Taught Genius* (2014) and *Once Something Has Lived It Can Never Really Die* (2016), all at the American Folk Art Museum. His work has also been exhibited at White Columns (New York) and Christian Berst Art Brut (Paris).