

Andrew Edlin GALLERY

CO₂ Blues: The Art of Melvin Way (1989-2024)

Curated by Andrew Castrucci

April 13 – May 25, 2024

CO₂ Blues, scheduled since mid-2023, is the first exhibition of the enigmatic art of Melvin Way (1954-2024) since his passing, and the third solo show of his work with the gallery. It serves as a retrospective for a visionary who was one of the most admired self-taught artists in the contemporary art arena. Way's mostly small-scale drawings are strange and alluring concoctions of science and art that seem intent on revealing the secrets of the universe. They contain chemical and mathematical formulae, musical notes, abstract designs, and cryptic words and phrases. It is hard to look at one without becoming entangled in trying to figure out what it means. "I felt like I was seeing another kind of infinity, thought made visible, wild nerves, optical barnacles coming to hermetic life, delirium legible," wrote *New York Magazine's* senior art critic Jerry Saltz in a 2015 review in *Vulture*.

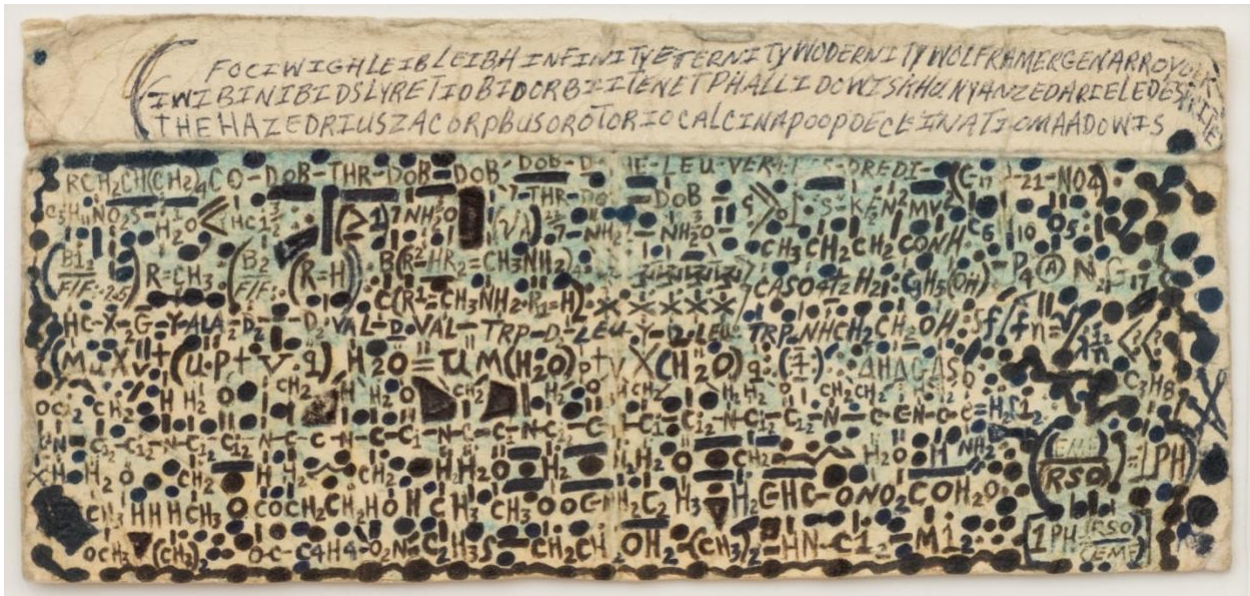
The exhibition includes some of Way's most memorable creations including forays outside of his better-known ballpoint pen drawings, especially a small body of pastel-hued colored ink and pencil works with mystical phrases made while medicated during a hospitalization. Also included are examples of the artist's xerography—he routinely carried his original ink drawings on his person for months at a time and was reluctant to release them for sale because they functioned as protective amulets. His raincoat pockets might be filled with as many as two hundred drawings. At times, his sweat, or a hard rainfall, would cause the ink to bleed, adding complexity to the already dense works. Andrew Castrucci, his lifelong advocate, has likened this process to a kind of baptism, a rite of passage before the works headed off into the world. Before the artist did surrender his works, he often made Xerox copies of them which inspired a new approach—Way then added blue and/or black ink to the copies. These xerographies comprise a small but significant portion of his oeuvre.

Way, who excelled in science in high school, based his works in part on educational textbooks. He executed them on found scraps of paper, in various colors of ballpoint pen, and then swathed them in Scotch tape. Way developed each drawing over weeks or months, adding layers and more tape as he deemed necessary. His compositions are formally built on balances between light and dark, between areas of one color and heavily worked patterns, between divisions on a single paper or among several fragments taped together.

Before becoming a full-time artist, Way came to NYC from his small hometown of Smoaks, South Carolina and enrolled in an IT training course, for which he received a certificate when he was about twenty. He played bass in a funk band and cut a record, which was never released. Around the same time, Way developed what was diagnosed

as schizophrenia. His life started to fall apart, and he ended up homeless and using drugs. He cycled through various rehab and shelter programs, and in 1989 participated in an art workshop with Hospital Audiences Inc., where he was fortunate to gain the attention of a volunteer leader, artist, and curator Andrew Castrucci, who became his friend and advocate. Way's schizophrenia never abated, precipitating various mental and physical challenges, but he became a dedicated artist nevertheless. He was proud of his unique works but could provide few insights into how he made them that others could understand. He worked from his mid-thirties until the end of his life. "Melvin was making metaphysical music out of numbers, chemical formulas, and biological amoebas, a sort of hybrid of Kandinsky and the Big-Bang theory," opined Castrucci.

Several of the artist's most important works have been loaned by private collections including *Hazedrius* (1989), a horizontal composition crammed with his trademark chemical formulae that dance across the sheet with surprising intensity, softened by pools of faded blue-green ink. Three lines of block letters are scrawled across the top sector in an incoherent string, possibly as a caption for the jazzy algorithm below it. Yet none of it makes sense, at least to the rational mind.



Hazedrius (c.1989), 3.5 x 7.5 inches, Ballpoint pen and Scotch tape on paper

The artist's final drawing - and one of his most colorful and elaborate - was found in his pocket after he suffered a stroke in January 2024. Composed of eight sections arranged vertically, the syncopation of dark, light, color, text, non-text, formulae, and abstract symbols creates a scroll-like vision that is both upbeat and enigmatic. With its off-hand beauty, it offers the viewer a hypnotic declaration of coded insights.



D'SAIREN COPOTE (2023-2024), 12 x 4 inches, Ballpoint pen and Scotch tape on paper

Melvin Way's works are held in public collections including the American Folk Art Museum (New York), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Collection de l' Art Brut (Lausanne), the Smithsonian Museum of American Art (Washington DC), and the Centre Pompidou (Paris). His art has been featured in many group exhibitions including *Schema: World as Diagram* at Marlborough Gallery, New York (2023), *Self-Taught Genius* at the American Folk Art Museum (2014), and *Alternative Guide to the Universe* at the Hayward Gallery (London, 2013). Other venues that have exhibited Way's work include La maison rouge (Paris), Galerie Christian Berst Art Brut (Paris and New York), and White Columns (New York).