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Melvin Way's fantasy formulas meet Andrew Castrucci's diagrams of dysfunction



Left to right: Melvin Way, *Sawodaa Windowe* (2001), ballpoint pen on paper, 3.5 x 3 inches; *Gaga City* (2002), ballpoint pen on paper, Scotch tape, 3.13 x 4.25 inches; *Octavius* (2002), ballpoint pen on paper, 4.5 x 4.25 inches. Photos courtesy of Christian Berst Art Brut and Bullet Space.



NEW YORK — Last night I dreamed that I was traveling on some kind of very swift, almost invisible public-transportation system in a futuristic city, whose streets were laid out on a neat grid. Even as I was being carried along inside the carriage of a high-speed train, I also seemed to have an aerial view of this transportation network and the cityscape around it. I could see the heat-generated color trails of moving vehicles clearly indicating where they were zipping along through the weave of an ephemeral urban fabric. The place or space in which I found myself was more psychic than physical. Was I journeying through the unmapped territories of the subconscious and the soul?

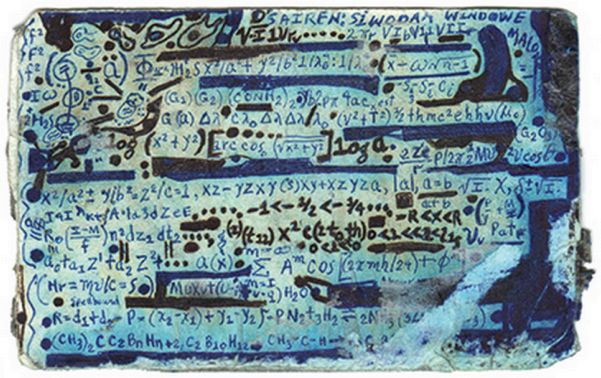
Perhaps, in the mysterious manner of the dream world, such imagery had been inspired by the ambiguous and the inexplicable in what I had just seen in “Gaga City,” a new exhibition of drawings on paper made by **Melvin Way**. It opened yesterday at **Christian Berst Art Brut**, at 95 Rivington Street in Manhattan’s Lower East Side gallery district. Could it be that something in the subconscious was helping me to make sense of Way’s beautifully complex drawings, whose dense, small-format compositions — many are more diminutive than playing cards — are filled with numerals and symbols, and resemble a theoretical mathematician’s elaborate equations?

Way’s written formulas are as real or as imaginary as you want them to be. Born in 1954, Way is a black, American, self-taught artist who for many years has traveled back and forth between South Carolina and New York. In the past he attended technical school, played in a band and experimented with drugs; in New York, over the years he has found support and refuge in city-sponsored shelters and social-service programs.

Like the Jamaican outsider artist **Ras Dizzy** (1932-2008), when it comes to recalling his own life's story, Way is a teller of tall tales. Phillip March Jones, Christian Berst Art Brut's director, notes that Way has claimed to have invented the Dell computer; to have written songs for the Supremes; and to have graduated from high school more than a dozen times. Way makes his drawings in ballpoint pen on little scraps of paper that he covers with strips of Scotch tape and carries around in his coat pockets for long periods of time before he is ready to display them.



Left: Andrew Castrucci, *America Berserk* (2015), pencil, ink and airbrush on paper, 45.5 x 37.5 inches; right: Melvin Way, *O'Sairen* (2004), ballpoint pen on paper, Scotch tape, 3.5 x 5.5 inches. Photos courtesy of Christian Berst Art Brut and Bullet Space.



In its Workshop space, Christian Berst Art Brut is also presenting a selection of works by Way's friend and sometime collaborator, the New York-based artist and art teacher **Andrew Castrucci**. A veteran of the East Village art-scene explosion of the early 1980s, Castrucci has developed a body of work that proposes a worldview in which the real and symbolic meanings of darkness and light (his show's title is "Seeing in the Dark") are central themes. Castrucci offers images of light bulbs, pills, graffiti-covered city walls and a big, black, fuzzy circle or dot, which just might represent a locus of all sorts of ominous energies, or a void, or a target, or maybe, recalling the subject of an old Temptations song, an inescapable "ball of confusion."

In fact, the full title of that funky tune from the 1970s was "Ball of Confusion (That's What the World is Today)." With that theme in mind, Castrucci's art strives to capture the spirit of all the mischief-making (that's a euphemism for trouble-making, including war) and mishegas, corruption and corporate chicanery, and deal-making and dystopia that characterize Uncle Sam's bungling empire at the beginning of the 21st century. Castrucci is big on diagrammatic drawings, too; in his panoramas of social-political-economic dysfunction, look for his references to "perpetual war," "environmental racism," "heavy metal with [the] volume off" and the "Halliburton loophole," and then try to connect the thematic dots.

Both Way's and Castrucci's works are intriguing. To me, they bring to mind the title of the medieval, Sephardic-Jewish philosopher Maimonides's influential treatise, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Way's unusual drawings, in particular, are steeped in uncertainty, and that's okay. Ambiguity is the very essence of poetry, after all, and if ever any clues to any work of art's meaning might be wished for or needed, there is always understanding to be found in the peculiar "clarity" of a dream.

Melvin Way's and Andrew Carlucci's exhibitions are on view at Christian Berst Art Brut through July 19, 2015 (95 Rivington Street, Manhattan; subway: F line, Second Avenue station; telephone: 917-525-5939).