

Chris Way



*Extruder*. 2012  
Pastels and chalk on charcoal paper  
12 x 18 in.

Interview by JESS BARNETT





*Manor Care  
Rec Room,  
Sunday Feb.  
20, 2011  
2012*  
Pastels and  
colored pencil  
on charcoal  
paper  
12 x 12.5 in.  
CHRIS WAY

Chris Way and I became pen pals sometime in 2008, exchanging mostly music and thoughts about our lives. Although we've never met in person, we have stayed in touch since, and Chris has participated in several mail art projects that I initiated. His excitement for art and music is apparent in this interview, as is his willingness to experiment with different genres and subject matter.

**Jess Barnett:** Tell me about your thought processes and how you began these pieces. Did you have something in mind beforehand, or did you just start sketching and flesh out the pieces from there?

**Chris Way:** Most of my visual work comes about from a blend of 1) a very specific scene or vision I'm trying to capture; 2) several rounds of sketchwork and improvisation; and 3) whatever ideas, feelings, obsessions I have at the time about myself, others, and the world. For example, *Extrudor* came from

waking up one morning with a dream image in my mind of a figure very close to what I ended up representing. Most of what I'm doing right now is in the *Extrudor* mold – me just trying to depict scenes and visions that, in the moment they hit me, make me feel “as if the top of my head were taken off,” to quote Emily Dickinson.

**JB:** *Chac Mool* and *Trinity with Maggots* share a family theme, although the ideas of family seem to oppose each other. Is either piece autobiographical?



*Trinity with Maggots.* 2012  
Pastels, Wite-Out, chalk on charcoal paper  
12 x 10.5 in.  
CHRIS WAY

**CW:** All five pieces have to do with my upbringing and family and therefore belong together. Some pieces deal with my recent history, like *Manor Care*, in which the figure in the chair is my father, who died last year. Others deal with my earlier childhood history, like *Chac Mool*. They belong together because of the way in which they deal with family: tensely. All five could be said to carry menace. The two you bring up are good examples. *Chac Mool* presents a child and ducklings near an open well, as well as a slaughtered pig and glass shards lining the top of a

decaying wall. In *Trinity* there's a child again, drawn to decay and disease. An alien purple presence presides over the scene – blank, maybe approving, maybe judging.

**JB:** *Extrudor* is an interesting piece. What purpose would the being serve if he/she/it were really alive and out in the world today?

**CW:** With *Extrudor*, I got him like I saw him: that sieve/grill that one limb ended in, the orb of the other, the colors. The key thing is the dream





At Buck Key. 2012  
Pastels and chalk on charcoal paper  
18 x 12 in.  
CHRIS WAY

being was able to press matter – flesh, mineral, plant, whatever – into his grill appendage and thereby absorb the pressed-through substance. But there was no implied threat in this. It was simply how he was built and what he did, like a Venus flytrap. His aura was mild, kind, almost meek.

**JB:** Do you consider yourself an outsider artist?

**CW:** No. This will unavoidably sound severe and imperial, but I reject the category, just as I reject “outsider music.” To me it seems that the construct of “outsider” art encourages gawker/ rubbernecker culture by highlighting

not so much the art but the often sensationalized narratives of the sadly, sometimes tragically, dysfunctional, suffering human beings (e.g., Henry Darger, Martin Ramirez) who make it. If you’re an artist, you make art, and either it’s good or it’s not, whether you’re self-taught, fucked up, obsessive, or what-have-you. I think sometimes the “outsider” community of critics and aesthetes who uphold the construct have good, humanitarian, compassionate intentions. But often there’s an ironic element to the way the drama, bizarreness, and dysfunction becomes the story, not the artistic output.



Chac Mool, El Pozo and Ana. 2012  
Pastels, chalk, and ink brush pen on charcoal paper  
13.25 x 12 in.  
CHRIS WAY

**JB:** What do you currently have in the works?

**CW:** Right now I’m on a bit of a making hiatus as I focus time and energy on my family and new seven-month-old, but I’m very eager to return to visual arts as soon as possible.

My plans include a series of improvisational pieces in ink brush pen, as well as more chalk and pastels work in the same vein as *Extruder* and *Trinity with Maggots*. I also have a mini record of folk music for children brewing.