

# CODED MESSAGES

• JOYCE WELLMAN •



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State University of New York, Geneseo

# JOYCE WELLMAN: Inheritor of Dreams

by Adrienne L. Childs, PhD

Hattie Wellman—dreamer, mystic, and diviner of numbers—left a powerful inheritance to her daughter Joyce. Hattie was a seer, born with the veil over her eyes. With a passion for playing the daily numbers game, Hattie developed an idiosyncratic personal system for choosing her numbers. Joyce recalls that her mother's process was often born of an eclectic combination of dreams, personal histories, books, and intuition. Hattie's "figurings" and "decipherings" were a way of life for her and her Brooklyn, New York, family, and they indelibly shaped Joyce's world view. "The playing of numbers represents for me remembrances of a time and place, my mother, the universal character of humans to gamble on hunches, and ultimately a history of women in mathematics," the artist affirms. Hattie's numbers notebooks and reveries remain vibrant in Joyce's consciousness, and they continue to ebb, flow, and punctuate the artist's powerful abstract paintings.



*Yellow Mystic*, 2017, 12X12in.

In the exhibition, *Coded Messages*, Joyce Wellman presents recent paintings from two series: *Hidden Hands* and *Number Works*. These paintings map the world through codes, symbols, signs, and abstract forms informed by the memory of her mother's passion for numbers and her own philosophical views of humanity.

When Wellman began her career as a New York City artist in 1974, her medium of choice was printmaking. Her early prints were a blend of stylized figurations and abstraction. During those years, Wellman created works that were vehicles by which viewers could journey through contemplative space. By the mid-eighties, Wellman had settled in Washington, DC, and her focus turned to painting, drawing, and mixed media. Her work became increasingly abstract and expressive, yet continued to explore the intuitive and contemplative.

Coded Messages features recent mixed-media paintings and drawings by Wellman, most of which were created between 2012 and 2017. Though largely abstract and gestural, these works feature geometric shapes such as spirals, circles, squares, triangles, and trapezoids. Letters, words, and numbers suggest meanings and messages that are linked to Wellman's memories of her mother as well as her own musings about human interactions and the spiritual self. For instance, Wellman's use of the ubiquitous word "They" in works such as *R U They?, 2015* invites viewers to think about who "They" are in society and the power that unnamed forces wield. As Wellman often ponders: "We are always talking about 'them,' but who are 'they'?"

Wellman, who was once a math teacher, finds philosophical meaning and visual energy in geometry. Her studies of sacred geometry emerge in her frequent use of the five-sided pentagon. In works such as the 5, *R U 4...1, 2017* and *Balance Master 1 and 2, 2006*, for example, the pentagon symbolizes humankind and cognition and takes on an almost anthropomorphic sensibility.

Wellman's aesthetic practice draws upon sources far and wide, from ancient mathematics to contemporary politics, yet it remains deeply rooted in her emotional connection to her mother and their shared passion for numbers. She recalls, for example, that her mother and friends worked intuitively on complex systems of manipulating numbers, creating a lively and distinctive community around the process. Dream analysis and even tea-leaf reading influenced her mother's



*Code Eight, 2017, 36x60in.*

intuitive and creative system of identifying numbers. In the painting, *Yellow Mystic, 2017*, Wellman collaged fragments of pages from the "dream books" her mother used to interpret dreams and associate them with the numbers she played daily. She also collaged some of her mother's actual computations into the painting. Those worn pieces of paper, with their neat columns and rows of handwritten numbers, retain the intimate traces of Hattie's mystical diving

process.

Coded Messages invites us to enter Joyce Wellman's universe of abstractions, where meaning is formed through an intuitive process and continues to evolve long after the work is completed. Animated by an exuberant use of color and emotional gestures and markings, the codes, hues, and shapes we encounter in Coded Messages are never really random. They are embedded and organized in Wellman's DNA, filtered through her spiritual and aesthetic consciousness, and nurtured by an enduring inheritance.

# WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

**They: Everybody's Talking About  
'EM**  
2015  
Panels  
**Acrylic on Wood**

**From Head to Hand**  
2014  
30X30 in.  
**Acrylic/Graphite on Canvas**

**Hidden Hands 2**  
2014  
30X30 in.  
**Acrylic /Graphite on Canvas**

**Hidden Hand Walking**  
2013-2016  
30X30 in.  
**Acrylic/Mixed Media on Canvas**

**Looking for 0's & 1's**  
2015  
30X30 in.  
**Acrylic/Graphite on Canvas**

**Words UnBoxed**  
2014  
40X30 in.  
**Acrylic/Graphite on Canvas**

**Momma's Number Board # R 2**  
2017  
12x12 in.  
**Mixed Media Drawing On Wood**

**R U U?**  
2017  
30x40 in.  
**Acrylic/Mixed Media on Canvas**

**8's Spiral**  
2016  
30X40 in.  
**Oil Paint Stick on Paper**

**Walkin Da' Tight Rope**  
2016  
22X30 in.  
**Acrylic/Oil Paintstick on Paper**

**Looking For Da Number**  
2016  
22X30 in.  
**Drawing on Paper**

**5, R U 4...1?**  
2017  
38X24 in.  
**Oil Paint Stick/Acrylic on Paper**

**Madi Gras Indian Masquerader**  
2011  
30X22 in.  
**Mixed Media SilkScreen**

**Balance Master I**  
2006  
30X22 in.  
**Mixed Media Drawing on Paper**

**Balance Master II**  
2006  
30X22 in.  
**Mixed Media Drawing on Paper**

**Blue Mystic**  
2014  
30X24 in.  
**Acrylic on Canvas**

**S.O.S. Sooo Y U 2?**  
2017  
12x12 in.  
**Mixed Media on Wood**

**Mom's Number Board #1**  
2017  
12X12 in.  
**Mixed Media Drawing on  
Wood**

**EZZZ, I C U 2**  
2017  
12x12 in.  
**Oil Paint Stick on Wood**

**Hash Tag #1**  
2012  
12X12 in.  
**Acrylic/Oil Paint Stick on  
Wood**

**Code Eight**  
2017  
36X60 in.  
**Mixed Media on Wood Panel**

**Free Styler #5**  
2016  
30X30 in.  
**Acrylic/Mixed Media**

**Yellow Mystic**  
2017  
12X12in.  
**Acrylic/Mixed Media**

**They vs. They**  
2016  
40X30  
**Acrylic/Graphite on Canvas**

**#489 World of Mystery Numbers**  
2016  
27X40 in.  
**Oil Paint Stick/Acrylic on Board**