

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Time Out
Melvin Edwards
Rosemary Waugh
7 February 2020

TimeOut

Melvin Edwards

Time Out says 4 out of 5 stars ★★★★★



Image: Copyright Melvin Edwards. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Melvin Edwards's art is heavy-duty. The African-American artist, born in 1937 and still very much practising, morphs the accoutrements of industry – clamps, pegs, crowbars, screwdrivers, metal plates – into twisted, layered sculptures, arranging the rough, weighty materials with the intricacy of a lace pattern.

Examples of his most famous series, 'Lynch Fragments' (made 1963-present), are shown in this career-spanning exhibition, along with some clean-lined, modernist sculptures, two large (and brilliant) pieces inspired by his grandma's rocking chair and some recent wall-based works where silhouettes of work tools are seared into pigmented fabric.

The first piece in the 'Lynch Fragment' series was made in response to the police shooting an unarmed black man, Ronald Stokes, during a raid on an LA mosque in 1962 (it's not on display here). The ones that followed similarly reference individual or mass acts of racism and violence, including memories from a childhood in the segregated American South.

Chains and padlocks reoccur, along with horseshoes that make the head-sized compositions look slightly like talismans. The sharp edges of blades, teeth of a rake and point of a fat nail jut out dangerously. All these cold, clanging objects are heavy with the weight of oppression and brutality – tools to make things and items to break things (and people) with.

The true surprise is how delicate they also look. Clunky chains dangle like strings of jewellery, hefty chunks of metalwork seem to float without attachment to other objects.

In turn, the craftwork of the original materials also emerges, in 'Lynch Fragments' and the other sculptures. The diagonal non-slip tread of a metal panel, usually forgotten underfoot, looks unexpectedly pretty and the robust metal handle of a tool looks artful in its own right.

These endless mirrorball sides to Edwards's work – trauma and beauty, rough steel and elegant curves, suppressed history and a trundling-on present – are what make it so interesting. It's industrial-strength art, the world welded together.