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Melvin Edwards with Choghakate Kazarian
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6 November 2019

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

"What is Black art. Well, what is Black language. When we say Black, we really mean African, how many African languages are there."

Image: Portrait of Melvin Edwards, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

A major figure in African-American art, Melvin Edwards (b. 1937) started as a sculptor in the early 1960s in Los Angeles before moving to New York in 1967. Known for the welded steel "Lynch Fragments," an ongoing series that he started in 1963, Edwards's work addresses his personal or historical experiences. Homages to significant personalities of African-American history are often to be found in the titles of his abstract constructions elegantly displayed in space.

He is currently presented in two exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art (*Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art* and *Melvin Edwards: Crossroads*) in addition to his solo-show, *Painted Sculpture*, at Alexander Gray Associates, where this discussion took place.

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Ntrytry*, 1981. Painted welded steel and chain, 57 x 132 x 60 3/4 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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Mel Edwards So … your accent says you're from where?

Choghakate Kazarian (Rail): I was born in Armenia but my family went to France when I was eight, so I grew up in Paris.

Edwards: Lot of Armenians in the US…

Rail: Yea! specially in LA.

Edwards: I played football years ago and a very famous placekicker, Ben Agajanian, was Armenian. I lived in LA for eleven years. But in the art world Gorky is—you know.

Rail: Gorky is our Armenian hero! [*Laughter*]

Edwards: Exactly! And he was a close friend with one of my teachers, so we had a lot of information on him these years. Hans Burkhardt who was born in Switzerland. He, Gorky, and Willem de Kooning were three friends here in New York, immigrants studying art. Hans talked a lot about Gorky, in fact he brought paintings by Gorky to our classes. They weren't typical Gorky paintings, they were Gorky's studies of Cézanne or Picasso because in those days they studied a lot by copying the works of other artists. He expressed that he and de Kooning were more like students of Gorky's. They were friends but in terms of who knew things, Gorky was more advanced than them.

Rail: Currently your work is at the Baltimore Museum of Art where you have a solo exhibition, *Melvin Edwards: Crossroads*, and are included in the group show *Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art*. Can you tell us about this curious vicinity with Leonardo Drew (presented in the same room), who is from a younger generation?

Edwards: I know him well, he was a student of my friend Jack Whitten and they were close. In terms of the exhibition, that is the creation of whoever organized it. I had nothing to do with being paired with Leonardo. If I were putting us in the same situation I would have a work of mine that was as large as his, so the difference in scale is … well, I wouldn't have done it that way, but they don't have a big work of mine and they are only showing what's in their collection. Now, on an art dynamic level, my little "Lynch Fragments" carry with anybody's big painting if you go and stand in front of them because they're hung at eye level—that is 69 inches from the floor. And I use a logic of distance; a natural one; it's like the principles of the size of doors: they fit all human beings. In architecture, people definitely pay attention to that. As a sculptor, I pay attention to that kind of thing. There should be, if I were talking about those kinds of works of mine, at least three. So you get that principle of a natural arm's length, 36 inches from here to here and from here to here [extending his arms], so you can put three pieces at distance.

Rail: In the exhibition *Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–80* that took place at the Hammer museum in 2011, you were presented as a frontrunner…

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Mozambique*, c. 1974. Painted welded steel, 92 x 71 x 16 1/2 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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Edwards: That's because the exhibition began in 1960, and because Kellie Jones's primary focus was on the people who were part of the Brockman Gallery. And since I left Los Angeles in January 10th, 1967 (Brockman Gallery opened in July of 1967) I had nothing to do with them. There is a pre-history to that, which somewhat came out in *Soul of a Nation* but also in *Pacific Standard Time* (2010), an exhibition that the Getty sponsored of the history of art in southern California. Artists that are in *Soul of a Nation* from California like Daniel Johnson and Virginia Jaramillo, we were friends, David Hammons, or people like that. David for instance: I was teaching at the Chouinard Art school in 1965–'66 before I moved to New York; he went into art school at Los Angeles County Art Institute and was taught by Charles White, who is a generation before me. I'm five years older than David but we knew they were affected by our work, but there was no specific group movement among us, we had relationships. I was close with people like Marvin Harden and Ron Miyashiro, a Japanese artist. Miyashiro and Ed Bereal, an Afro American artist, were part of an exhibition called *War Babies* with Larry Bell and Joe Goode and there is a famous poster because they're four different ethnic groups in that photograph. It's before the stuff that shows up in *Soul of a Nation*. Miyashiro, from Hawaii, lived right next door to me in Los Angeles. We babysat for each other's families, that kind of thing, he and I were very close, discussing art and life.

Rail: He also hangs his works, right? Some of them are very small.

Edwards: Many of them are small laminated and painted wood. But there are also big ones. Ron liked to play with the image of the vagina and so he literally had a horse colllar on his wall and he had it articulated so it looked like the center of the female. He was more expressive in that kind of way. Mine didn't have physically sexual direct implications. Some tried to talk about my work in relation to sexuality and I said, my approach in that respect is like the traditional African idea that men are men for the purpose of being men and initiating the procreation of the next generation and sexuality in women is for that as well—not that there is not the normal sexuality that isn't about that, but I'm more interested in our creativity and survival as human beings in progressive ways; sex is a part of it, but I don't put it in front of me or my work conceptually.
The work in small scale started because I was learning to weld in steel, I was primarily trained as a painter. Small scale proved functional to experiment and learn things about possibility. Hyper creative jazz musicians learned to condense their ideas into three minutes or so for recording time. So you get great masterpieces of music that are not very long in time.

Rail: The group show in Baltimore is about, like the title says, "Black Abstract Art." I think this idea of abstraction is quite an interesting one in this context because at that time there was some debate about whether Black art can be abstract or not. After seeing your exhibition of the barbed wire work at the Whitney Museum in 1970, David Hammons, who was very impressed, said, "I couldn't believe that piece when I saw it because I didn't think you could make abstract art with a message."

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Numanake*, 1993. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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Edwards: Most people think if they don't know what it is, it must be abstract. Abstraction is a concept. It's not a singular concept, it's pluralistic in its significance. Abstraction, in its most literal definition, means to take from what exists and create something from it, or with it. Well, Black artists—all artists in the world—have been figurative or abstract since the beginning of humankind. One of the things I did, and why I named that first group of small works " Lynch Fragments" was I didn't want the art world's journalistic and formalist philosophical limitations, which said things like "art for art's sake." It's nice rhetoric. Art doesn't make art, people make art. What is Black art? Well, what is Black language? When we say Black, we really mean African, how many African languages are there?

Rail: A lot. [*Laughter*]

Edwards: About five thousand, at least.

Rail: Wow.

Edwards: And a lot of times people see things in my work that moves them. That's fine but those things have nothing to do with what I was doing. All of those works of mine were improvisations, always experiments. I like the term "expression." Because that I know comes from me. I can be aware of the expressions of others. But I have to create my own expression. All of us have our own unique voice, all of our voices are valid, even though some people are great singers, or great speakers but those are our judgements. And every kind of art that's created is as valid as another. And I'm just trying to do the part that I've experienced and that I can best express. We go where we can go. And I hope to go more.

Rail: You participated in the collective Smokehouse in 1968. You did several murals, together in Harlem...

Edwards: We did wall painting, we didn't do murals.

Rail: Sorry, sorry!

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Agricole*, 2016. Installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2019. Photo: Mitro Hood.

Edwards: No, no, don't be sorry, just pay attention to the difference. Orozco, Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and John Biggers made beautiful murals. I saw murals by Orozco in person in Mexico. The group of us, which was formed by William T. Williams had no name at first, though we ultimately gave it a name, but the name came from Williams, and the idea of doing the walls came from him. He's the one who knew Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose, and the other people. He and I had just met, it was '68, I just started the works of mine that were more geometric, and in color, and in fact this exhibition here at the gallery [Alexander Gray Associates] references my departure formally into that kind of direction of exploration. I link that with the fact that I had been studying ideas of painting primarily, I didn't study sculpture much, I just learned to weld right at the end. And I was painting, up to the scale of six, seven, eight feet, when I stopped painting in 1963 and just concentrated on sculpture. The first thing primarily was small because I was learning and teaching myself processes, but some were larger, and handled space like the suspended pieces. In fact, one of the pieces which was shown here [at Alexander Gray Associates] is now in the museum in Baltimore. It's called *Agricole* and,

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you're from France so you'll know, that I got the word from a French-speaking African country, Senegal, and what is it, there is a bank or something in Paris...

Rail: Oh, Crédit Agricole! [*Laughter*]

Edwards: Yes, well... The piece features a plow, for farming, but I had made a piece of work in 1965 or '66, in Los Angeles, which features a plow, but it wasn't suspended, it was on the Earth and it was called *Earth Thing*, which is what a plow is generally for. A couple years ago I decided to play a bit more with the idea of suspension, and I did through the years at various times. The show Hammons saw, with the barbed wire, had two suspension-based pieces: *The Barbed Wire Curtain for William and Peter*—there's a version of it in the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition—and *Melvin Edwards "Look through minds mirror distance and measure time" – Jayne Cortez* [both 1969–70]. What I'm getting at is suspension. People like to say because I had said, "Lynch Fragments," that whenever my work is suspended, "it's hanging," like their idea of a lynching, and then I have to again correct people. Most lynchings were not hangings; that's a Hollywood, media, and metaphorical reality. Not that it didn't happen occasionally, but most people were simply murdered in all kinds of terrible, horrific ways. What became the symbol of lynching was hanging.

Rail: Because it's spectacular.

Image: Melvin Edwards, *"Lines" for John Coltrane and other Creative People*, 1974. Spray paint on newspaper in 5 parts, 22 1/2 x 29 1/8 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Edwards: Well, it was also the common way of executing criminals before the 20th century and the electric chair. Who's bothered by this? Not the person who's killed, but the intimidation of others by the display. I was invited to talk to some elementary school children about my work I said, "hey, they're not old enough to understand what I'm talking about." They haven't been in the world in a way... And I remember you know, I did a talk once at the Museum of Modern Art, they told me come, and I got there, there's a bunch of kids. Frankly, I was insulted. But I took care of the kids, but you know what I mean is they wouldn't ask Frank Stella, they wouldn't ask Richard Serra to talk to a bunch of kids. Who are we? I'm an experienced eighty-two year old man, and I learned from artists and writers who were experienced and mature.

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Rail: And about these wall paintings, that you did in the ’60s...

Edwards: Oh, right. [*Laughter*]

Rail: Now that time has passed, how do you see them? You think the reception has changed?

Edwards: Not so much the reception. It’s historic and it's known. You see when you said “mural,” and I objected... Murals are stories and things told and you declare what’s wrong or right or what should be. You’re usually telling people things should be changed. There’s an Orozco painting in Guadalajara which is an incredible painting, but the basic declaration visually of the work is: Every religious and political system has had its limits and all of them have failed us as human beings, and we still need to do better. And our notion was no, we will change a place, not tell them what system they should use. And what we saw, in one example, is there was a park, I think it’s 123rd street, in Harlem; truthfully it was a neighborhood park, but it wasn’t used by the people in the neighborhood anymore, because the drug world had taken over. And when we came, it was a corner and we painted the walls. Large color shapes. And we were there for maybe a week or two, people started coming back. When I say people I mean older people, the families, started to come back. There were benches in the park, the city had left them neglected, there were no seats. When they saw what was happening, they quickly came and replaced the seats. In other words, if you do urban planning, urban upkeep, then you have decent, humane urban situations for people to live in.

So you know different sections of Paris have problems because France as a society, it’s got a beautiful history, it’s got a shitty history too. It’s like the poet from French Guyana, Léon Damas. He came to this country in 1969, he became a good friend. One of the terms of rhetoric in that period, which paralleled Négritude, was “Black is beautiful.” And Damas said, “Yes, Black is beautiful. And ugly too.” In other words, Black is complete.

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas*, 1978-1981. Installation view, Baltimore Museum of Art. Photo: Mitro Hood.

Rail: I didn't know he said that.

Edwards: I know, cause it was personal. They were asking him questions about Négritude, because that’s more a topic in France or Europe, than in the United States. I mean we have American versions that would add up to that—Langston Hughes, Jayne Cortez, and others. But in concept, that was of Damas, Césaire, and Senghor. Damas was a sharper tongue than the other two.

Rail: His poetry is incredible.

Edwards: Oh yeah?

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Rail: Very sharp.

Edwards: Very sharp, he was the sharp one—he had the razor—of the three, if you noticed. Glad to hear that somebody has read it. They were asking, because there was some intellectual argument, well, who's the real father of Négritude, is it Senghor, is it Césaire, well actually the first of them to publish was Damas. His book *Pigments*.

Rail: Beautiful.

Edwards: His first, the year I was born, that's the year it was published, 1937. But anyways he was asked—

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Tan Ton Dyminns*, 1974. Painted welded steel in 2 parts, part 1: 84 1/2 x 36 x 37 inches, part 2: 66 3/8 x 78 1/2 x 34 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Rail: The father...

Edwards: Who is the father of Négritude, he said, "No, the origin of négritude, the mother of négritude, is Africa, and there are many fathers." So you see, all of these things, they're fun, but they're philosophically sound. And Damas was that way. And I was very lucky to know him. I met Césaire, and I did meet Senghor, but not in any intimate way. But I'm glad to know somebody is reading them because I find that they were very profound persons, and a lot of people related to them. Like Édouard Glissant and Frantz Fanon.

Rail: Speaking of African culture, you nourished your fascination for that culture with multiple trips to the African continent since 1970. Can you explain your attraction to Africa and what kind of inspiration you found there, or "corroboration," as you say, of what you were already doing, because often they say you were influenced by that, but you were already doing this.

Edwards: Well I didn't go for influence, I went to go home. African Americans are African, they are Africans in America. My family always knew that. The people who were brought here, millions of people transported from Africa to America didn't stop being Africans. They stopped being born in Africa, they stopped growing up in Africa, but the Africanity within them continued. And the reality is we mixed with whoever was here and all of those things, with all of the languages. Your people didn't start out speaking French.

Rail: No actually, I was speaking Armenian, and Russian because it was part of the Soviet Union so...

Edwards: Yes exactly. That didn't stop you from being Armenian, you know, so it's the same thing. I always wanted to go to Africa, I didn't have the resources, and generations wanted to go, but the possibility wasn't there. I actually went the first time in 1970, it was an educators' trip. I was a professor at the University of

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Connecticut and I tried to get a grant to go, and they turned me down. And then I found out by accident that they, the University, which didn't know what another part of the university was doing, was cosponsoring a six week trip to Africa. [*Laughter*] And when I found that out I went back to them and said, "Look you turned me down for my money for travel, but you're sponsoring this." So they gave me the trip, and for six weeks this group was called "Educators to Africa." Of the group of about 130 people at least 110 or so were Black. And so for us, no matter what the formal reason, the deeper reason to know: we're going to Africa is, like I was saying to Muslim friends of mine, about how important going to Mecca is for them, I said look man, when I touched the ground in Africa I went "my God." [*Laughter*] I'm not Christian, I'm not Muslim, I'm not, but I know where I'm from.

Rail: What was your first project there?

Edwards: Well, the first artist project in Senegal was with an artist friend of mine there, Souleymane Keita, he was in Dakar, and Souleymane and I met many years before and we promised if we ever got a little better off financially we would do something together in Africa. And coming through in 1997, '98, my wife and I were saying we're going to go beyond symbols and tourism and get a place, and we went to Ghana because it was English speaking, but we stopped in Senegal on the way to Ghana, and passed back through Senegal. In meeting with Keita again, he said, "I've just gotten involved in a farm project outside of Dakar, and I got seven hectares, and it costs this much money, and there's seven more adjoining it that's available, and possibly would you be interested?" And so we got the other acreage, and I built a house there, this is about thirty miles outside Dakar, and that was around the year 2000.

I had been going in '99, '98, regularly to Senegal, to Isle of Gorée, to do a printmaking project, which also was initiated by Souleymane Keita. What we were trying to do was set up a situation of printmaking that young African artists could be trained in print making and at the same time interact with artists coming from other places in the world. And so we did the first, you could say project, we produced a portfolio of prints, it included Souleymane Keita, myself, and the writer, artist from South Africa Breyton Breytenbach. It was called "Kawral", not in the sense of the English word, "corral" but "K-A-W-R-A-L" which is a Fulani word but means, very similar to kral in Dutch and Afrikaans or corral in English, but it has nothing to do with it.

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Felton*, 1974. Painted welded steel in 2 partsPart 1: 23 x 95 x 80 inches, Part 2: 59 3/4 x 68 x 64 1/2 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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So anyway, we got the place and I would try to go once a year, or twice a year, for a month and usually because I was still teaching at university, it would either be December January or May June. I wouldn't stay any longer because the rainy season would kick in and that wasn't comfortable, and I had work to do here.

Rail: As you said, it was like Mecca for you when you went there for the first time. Do you think that your sentiment was nourished by nostalgia, or... what was the feeling?

Edwards: Absolutely, nostalgia and all its cousins. It was a very positive feeling. Those are my family's feelings. We're African. We're part of it. And you know, it's like the Independence struggles in the ’50s and ’60s in Africa paralleled our civil rights movement here. The human exploitation has not stopped one day in the lives of human beings. The hopeful creation of something like the United Nations, you know, like the hopeful creation of any number of governmental ideas, but then they get modified by the human behavior that controls them. I'm just saying it's all that human beings will not behave in a humane manner to each other. Meanwhile, I've got some pieces of steel, some machinery, you know, welding equipment, and a bunch of ideas bouncing around, and children and grandchildren. The things it takes for a human being to be human and hopefully working toward the creative humane. I know that's a bit flowery and rhetorical, but it's true. I would like for the world to be better.

Rail: Have your artist preferences changed over time?

Edwards: There's so many artists... There are sculptor friends from all over the world. I like art from China, Japan. I've been drawing with Japanese brushes since 1956 because I went to Los Angeles in '55 and the influx of Japanese people in southern California was large and artists were already influenced, so I took a class in watercolor, one of the options was Japanese brushes. And I liked the Samurai movies in the late ’50s. I got into calligraphy. I still buy those brushes. I went to China in 1995. I had been invited to do a lecture to the Academy of Art. The culture of China was very impressive to me.

Rail: I know many people talk about David Smith and Anthony Caro, but I think more about Richard Stankiewicz. I think you saw his work in Los Angeles. He was fifteen years older than you...

Edwards: Here's the difference between now and then. It was a long way across the country then. If you go by our age, well, that's one thing, but I never met David Smith. I did see his work somewhere, but I wasn't interested in sculpture in my school years. And Smith wasn't in the books then.

Rail: And Stankiewicz?

Edwards: No, they were not yet. Because they were too young.

Rail: And later?

Edwards: Later I was already my own sculptor. Stankiewicz, I probably saw a reproduction in some magazine. There was one exhibition that came to the Los Angeles County Museum about 1960, ’61, ’62 and it was about contemporary sculpture and there were several that were welded, but I was already welding and I’d seen other examples of that. After I learned the technique of welding I was in my car driving one day and in front of me was a garbage truck. You know those big trucks that collect the garbage, you ever looked at the back end of them? They will lift up and come down, but it's like geometric relief sculpture. That was what I saw. There are so many things in the world that are welded. We don't call them sculpture. You don't have to be influenced by other art and other artists, you know. And I remember my father when he heard me singing in the bathroom, he said, “why don't you try and sing like yourself for a change.” [*Laughter*] But he also understood that everybody has something, but you have to find what's yours. As for my mother, she just turned 100 years of age in August.

Rail: Oh wow, that's good.

Edwards: Oh yes, Momma's fine.

Rail: So you have, still, many years.

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Edwards: I hope so, but here's what we say about that, "The women evidently have good jeans, we all have good jeans, but the men wear their jeans out." [*Laughter*]

Rail: Do you think about death?

Edwards: Why?

Rail: Never did?

Edwards: Well, I mean, friends of mine died, and I think of them, the sadness and the loss of people. I lost my wife of 40 years, you know, to see a person go away. But I don't have a fear. “It will come when it will come,” I think that's Shakespeare. "Cowards die a thousand times before they’re dead, but the valiant never think of death but once, of all the wonders I've seen or heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear death, a necessary end will come when it will come." So people have figured that out. Like my grandmother said, "everybody has got to go that way sometime." So, philosophically, no. But on a personal level I'm sad. There’s a politician who I like in Baltimore, Elijah Cummings, who just died yesterday. I'm more apt to be sensitive that way, that people have possibility and life and such is cut off. We come into the world, and we go out of the world, and we don't control it either way.

Rail: I wanted to ask you something about color, it's a good occasion because this exhibition is about color. You said once said that you were tempted by it when you met George Sugarman in 1965, but you usually keep simply the patina of the metal. You rarely go there, except maybe for public sculptures...

Edwards: Even not the public ones, maybe there's one, but uh... Well, I'll just say the way I evolved was as a painter. My first actual sculpture class at Los Angeles County Art Institute, the teacher was an Italian man named Renzo Fenci. And then I went back to the University of Southern California, I had a very good sculpture teacher. There’s a model, and you make variants on the model. I wasn’t bad but it wasn’t anything special to me. I even have somewhere some photographs, because in fact my job—I had a scholarship and my job was to document the work of sculpture class students with the school’s camera. That was how the teacher looked at work outside of class.

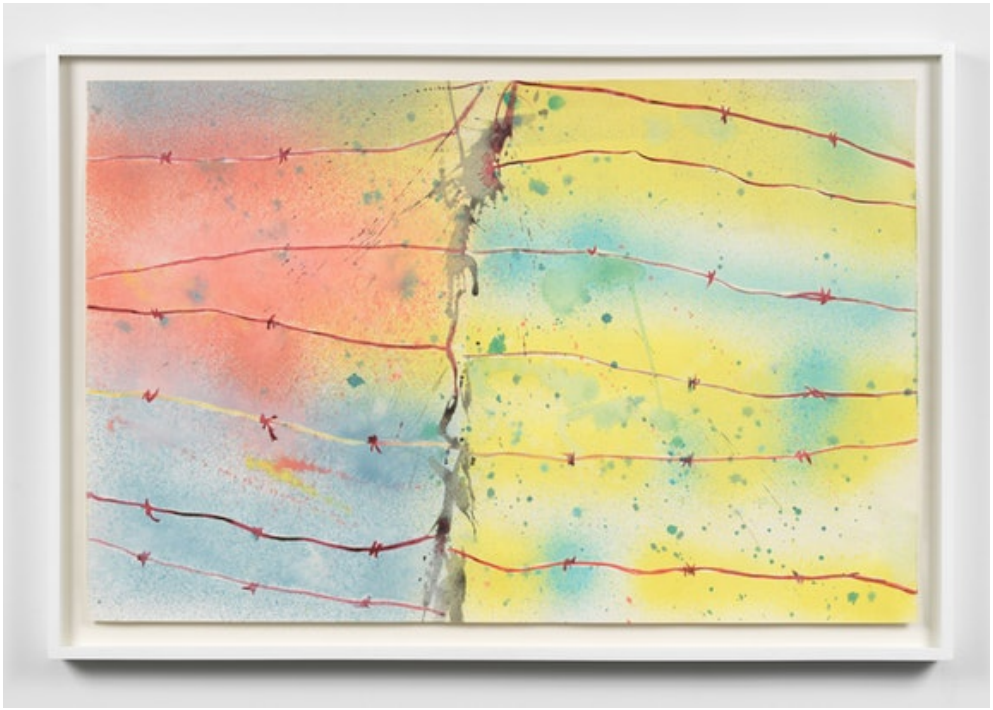

Image: Melvin Edwards, *Untitled*, c. 1974. Watercolor on paper, 23 x 35 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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So I got to look at a lot of sculpture, and I got to see that there were a couple of people in there who were brilliant. I was not and I wasn't trying to be. I was learning something. Looking back, it was good for me because I began to sort out what felt significant about sculpture and what didn't, but the truth is when I got interested in sculpture I was painting. When I met Sugarman, by 1965, I was already a young artist who had found somewhat his own direction. I met Sugarman because he was doing prints at the Tamarind Printmaking Workshop in LA. They brought people from the East to the West Coast, and I had a job nearby, so I would go there for lunch just to hang out and meet artists. I met Richard Hunt, Leon Golub, Louise Nevelson, Gabriel Kohn. I'd say if you were mentioning Smith and Caro, you're talking about people who weld. Sugarman worked with laminated wood, Gabriel Kohn worked wtih laminated wood, and they were strong and abstract. In terms of form, which was what sculpture was about, they're better, Henry Moore is better.

I'll tell you a difference that maybe will help you: Smith was an industrial quality welder, he learned industrial welding. I'm a schoolboy welder and I learned just a basic little bit of how to weld some stuff together and everything else I am self taught in. The one lesson I learned from all of it is if you make it, it can't fall apart. That's kind of a Constructivist thought idiom on my part. So but as far as interesting work of the modern sculptors you know Giacometti or, again, Henry Moore, you know. Fine. There is a, say, Swedish? No he's Danish: Rodger Jacobsen, who was a welder. I saw a couple of books on his work in the early '60s and I thought, "Oh, this man." But I saw little reproductions about this, I don't know what the work is really like. Something very important could happen and you won't hear about for five years in Los Angeles. That was the way it was. You didn't know. I didn't know what was going on in New York.

Rail: Do you think that the reception of your work has changed over time?

Edwards: If you're an African American artist in the United States you have no gallery presence from 1940 to 1990.

Rail: But you had the museum exhibitions.

Edward: Yeah, but you have to know that's an aberration. In 1965, my first one man show was at Santa Barbara Museum. See I know why it came about, how it came about. I was 27, 28 years of age. I didn't have a gallery show until I was 50. The Civil Rights struggle has made things gradually change. In '65 the reason I had that exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum, there was a director named Thomas Leavitt, there were a couple of artist friends of mine: Arthur Secunda, who was a painter in Los Angeles, and Richards Ruben who was a very fine abstract painter in Los Angeles (I didn't know him in Los Angeles but he taught a lot of the people I mentioned earlier, Danny Johnson and those at Chouinard Art School [Institute] which became CalArts. Then he moved in the early '60s east to New York). But in the summer of '64 he came to California to spend the summer and he personally knew Thomas Leavitt, the director of the museum, and so did Secunda. And Secunda saw me and the "Lynch Fragments" and said, "You know there's somebody who ought to see your work." And I said, well, "A lot of people should see my work, nobody sees it." But anyway, he says, "Come to Santa Barbara this weekend and bring a couple of pieces and Tom Leavitt should see your work." So we went and I figured he'd say, "Nice work, kid. Keep it up." And after about half an hour we started talking about an exhibition for the following year in March, a museum show. It was a big deal, very big. You know people like Romare Bearden and other Afro Americans, they had no one man shows in museums. And they were already, you could say, at least a name. So anyway, that March my show opened at the Santa Barbara Museum. It was a good exhibition. The daughter of Tom Leavitt, who was a teenager, she walked around the "Lynch Fragments," and says, "I counted 27 horseshoes." [*Laughs*]

And of course, in the last ten years, once they realized they could play the auction road with Basquiat, you know, then when the auction aspect opened up, that part of the business opened up. But also it happened because politically the force of African Americans has changed.

In August of that same year, the rebellion in Los Angeles hit and burned up a significant part of the city. In two days I got two job offers in universities and art schools to teach. I took the one nearest at the Chouinard Art School and that started my life of university teaching which is what financed my life, family, and things through the years. The first gallery I had was in 1990 and was CDS, Clara Diament Sujo from Venezuela and Argentina. When you mentioned Smith or Caro, you didn't mention Richard Hunt. But I knew Richard Hunt, and I knew his work was in the MoMA's collection when I met him in '64. He was one of those who came to Tamarind with

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Melvin Edwards with Choghakate Kazarian
Choghakate Kazarian
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Leon Golub in that period. So we've been friends since 1964. He's a welder, but they don't talk about him. Shit, he was there way before Caro or anybody. Smith died in '65, and you didn't see his work all the way in Los Angeles until that year. Because he just died, they worked out a thing and a major show of his was there. I took my students to see it.