

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Wonderland

Melvin Edwards' Sculptures Of Barbed Wire, Chains And Old Tools Speak To Black Struggle And Success

Greg Cook

8 February 2018

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There's a fierceness to Melvin Edwards' sculptures that isn't always apparent in photographs. For more than five decades, the New York artist has turned chains and barbed wire, wrenches and spikes and other recognizable steel parts into abstract assemblages. His efforts occupy an in-between place, both abstract and charged with social concern about racism and colonialism in the United States and abroad. They are about honor and bondage and liberation, rendered in barbed wire and steel that can be both alluring and a threat.

"I just didn't want them stuck in formalist criticism; I wanted to make you think about why I made the work," Edwards told Bomb magazine in 2014.

His exhibition "Melvin Edwards: Festivals, Funerals, and New Life" at Brown University's Bell Gallery through Feb. 11, is a pointed sampler of works from throughout his career.

Edwards grew up in the home of his father's mother, Coco, in Houston and then McNair in racially segregated Texas, before a move to Dayton, Ohio, where he attended integrated schools. His father's work difficulties brought them back to Texas, where he played basketball and football in high school in Houston.

Edwards arrived in Los Angeles in 1955 to study—and play football—at Los Angeles City College and the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. He kept something of the smashing, kinetic dynamism of the game in his head as he began studying abstract sculpture. He became interested in working with steel, with welding and hammering, with heating and bending, the raw physicality of it. He used steel he found at scrap yards and on the streets.



Melvin Edwards "Homage to Almamy Samory 'Keletigui' Toure" 2016, welded steel. (Greg Cook)

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In LA, he began his now decades-long series of “Lynch Fragments”—a series of wall-mounted assemblages welded together out of brown and black steel—in 1963 with a sculpture called “Some Bright Morning.” It featured (what appeared to be) a knife point and a chain with a lump on the end (that could bring to mind a head or a handgrenade) emerging from a sort of pot hung on the wall.

That sculpture was “an epiphany moment,” Edwards told The New York Times in 2012. “I realized I had come onto something rooted in what I was interested in, politically and aesthetically.”

The “Lynch Fragments” were about the size of human heads and often hung on walls around eye-level. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement as well as a fascination with Africa, the wall reliefs bring to mind bondage and industrialization, trophies and monuments, masks and shields. In the Brown exhibit, recent variations on this formal theme honor black leaders from around the world.

“The metaphor that turned into the functional and practical was: if the metaphor for lynching was hanging—and lynchings didn’t always involve hanging; most times they didn’t—but if the metaphor was hanging, and hanging was an aspect of the idea of suspension, then that led me to start working with suspension as a principle in the work.” Edwards told Catherine Craft of Dallas’s Nasher Sculpture Center in a series of interviews between 2013 and ’15.

“The series contextualizes the police brutality that was rampant in the city within the large American history of violence against African-Americans of which lynching was emblematic,” Kellie Jones wrote in the catalogue to the 2012 exhibition “Now Dig This! Art & Black Los Angeles 1960-1980.”



Melvin Edwards “Corner for Ana (Scales of Injustice)” 1970/2017, welded steel, barbed wire, and chain. (Greg Cook)

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Barbed Wire

Black artists under the banner of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition were beginning to picket at the Metropolitan Museum and Whitney Museum calling for greater recognition of African-American artists. This was the environment Edwards entered, when he moved to New York City in 1967.

“The Whitney was trying to figure out how to act like it was normal to have black artists show there, but of course it wasn’t, because they hadn’t done anything, since one time in 1936 (laughter),” Edwards told Catherine Craft. “But 1969, in the fall, they decided to use a small room downstairs for individual artist shows of younger artists, and not just black artists.”

Edwards already had a number of museum shows to his credit—including shows in California and at the Studio Museum in Harlem. He was invited to be the first African-American sculptor to present a solo exhibition at the Whitney with a show there in March 1970. He featured artworks made from chain and barbed wire—intrigued by the idea of drawing with line in space, as well as with the connotations of the materials.



Melvin Edwards “Look through minds mirror distance and measure time” 2017, barbed wire. (Greg Cook)

“Using barbed wire, you have to be aware that it was a way to keep the cows at home,” he told Catherine Craft. “But then people turned it into concentration camps. Before it happened with Jewish people in World War II, it happened in Namibia. Those contradictions, or contradistinctions are things that have occupied me in visual art.”

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In the catalogue to his Whitney exhibition, he said, "I have always understood the brutalist connotations inherent in materials like barbed wire and links of chain and my creative thoughts have always anticipated the beauty in utilizing that necessary complexity which arises from the use of these materials in what could be called a straight formalist style. ... Wire like most linear materials has a history as both an obstacle and enclosure but barbed wire has the added capacity of painfully dynamic and aggressive resistance if contacted unintelligently. To use this chain with all its kinetic parts crisscrossing the line as invader and potent container."

The Brown exhibition includes a recreation of his 1970 piece that takes as its title a line from civil rights activist and poet Jayne Cortez (who later became his wife): "Look through minds mirror distance and measure time." Lines of barbed wire suspended from a square on the ceiling outline (almost) a cradle or cave-like space, vaguely welcoming, but ominously prickly.



Melvin Edwards "Agricole" 2016, welded steel and chains. (Greg Cook)

Africa's Influence

The 1960s and '70s were when Edwards developed many of the motifs that he's spent the rest of his career exploring. He continued to make steel assemblages—interested in how implements could go from being farm tools to weapons and back to tools again. He began making large outdoor sculptures. He was part of a mural-painting collective called the Smokehouse Painters, organized by William T. Williams, that painted hard-edged geometric murals in Manhattan for two years beginning in 1968.

Edwards exhibited his 1970 "Homage to Coco" in the Whitney's annual sculpture showcase. It was named for his grandmother and the first of his series of "Rockers"—large letter Us cut out of steel and connected by a pair of beams so that they could rock like the runners of a

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rocking chair. That first one had chains suspended in between that rocked in syncopation with the steel runners. The Brown show includes a 2017 variation with barbed wire strung across the top like a giant disconcerting cheese grater.

Edwards began visiting Africa in the summer of 1970 as well—beginning with a trip to Ghana, Nigeria and Togo. His journeys to the continent would help expand his awareness of the accomplishments and setbacks, the commonalities and the possibilities of Africans and the diaspora. He would later keep a home there. “I realized Africa was going to influence me,” he told Bomb magazine in 2014, “not in terms of the ‘see something, get something visual’ that will influence your work, as much as a corroboration of generations feeling a similar need to create something new and different.”