

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Melvin Edwards: Continuities

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“We must make works that use our lives and feelings as their basis for existence.”¹

Melvin Edwards wrote the above statement in his now seminal 1971 essay ‘Notes on Black Art’, a personal response and collective call to African American artists to “take ideas from Guyana, Brazil, Jamaica, Cuba...” and other cultures of the world, and make them their own.² Indeed, speaking with Edwards and looking at his sculpture, the artist’s notion of the “continuity of culture” is ever-present, reflecting a synthesis of personal experiences, cultural references, and historical events that he derives from the world around him and reworks masterfully into his sculptural forms.³ Spanning over 45 years of the artist’s body of work, the 23 sculptures and works on paper included in this exhibition articulate Edwards’s expansive practice, one defined by his revelatory engagement in the social possibilities of abstraction.

Born in 1937 in segregated Houston, Texas, Edwards developed an appreciation for abstract art from an early age. The artist often credits his high-school teacher, Ethel Ladner, for introducing him to the concept of abstraction through music. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, jazz would become a key touchstone for many African American artists who were developing a visual language that they could call their own. More readily accessible than visual art at the time, jazz was a non-literal, modern form of creative expression.⁴ The experimental and improvisatory nature of compositions by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Jackie McLean and others, provided a liberatory potential for African American artists. Edwards continued to forge his path into art by earning a place as one of six students from three black high schools to attend art classes at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1954. James Thomas, another of Edwards’s teachers who taught mechanical drawing and architecture, instilled in Edwards an understanding of space, which would ultimately inform the artist’s intentions for the relationship between his sculptures and the architectural environment in the years to come.⁵

In 1955, at the invitation of his aunt and uncle, Edwards moved from Houston to Los Angeles to attend college. Over the next ten years, he would study art between Los Angeles City College, Otis College of Art and Design (then the Los Angeles County Art Institute), and the University of Southern California (USC), where he eventually earned his BFA in 1965. Throughout this period, Edwards became immersed in a burgeoning Los Angeles art world, studying under key figures like the Hungarian-American painter Francis de Erdely, and developing a community with such artists as George Sugarman, Marvin Harden, Daniel LaRue Johnson and Gabriel Kohn.⁶ Edwards had been painting throughout college, but his interest in sculpture was solidified in 1960 when he took a welding class with the artist George Baker, who demonstrated how to marry pieces of steel with ease. It was this primary introduction to this technique that led Edwards to approach welding intuitively, not pursuing formal training, but rather by approaching each work with what he needed to do in that moment.⁷

Art Historian Kellie Jones notes that welding seems to have brought art and life together for Edwards,⁸ on which the artist comments “Once I started to weld, I realized much of the world was welded.”⁹ Welding provided him with a means to fuse disparate parts into a whole, forging lyrical abstractions from fragments both found and made. In 1962, an unarmed member of the Nation of Islam, Roland Stokes, was shot and killed by the police during a raid on a local mosque. The event exemplified the racially tense climate of Los Angeles in the early 1960s

¹ Melvin Edwards, ‘Notes on Black Art’, in Melvin Edwards: Sculptor (New York, NY: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978) pp. 20-21.

² Ibid. Written at the time of his withdrawal from the Whitney Museum of American Art’s controversial Contemporary Black Artists in America exhibition and subsequently published on the occasion of his solo show at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1978. The reaction by many, including the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), to the exhibition’s limitations of inclusion exemplified the artistic and cultural tumult of this period in the United States.

³ Michael Brenson, ‘Melvin Edwards’, BOMB Magazine, 24 November 2014, available online at <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/melvin-edwards/>.

⁴ Lowery Stokes Sims, ‘Melvin Edwards: An Artist’s Life and Philosophy’, Melvin Edwards Sculpture: A Thirty-Year Retrospective, 1963-1993, edited by in Lucinda H. Gedeon (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 1993) p. 10.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Melvin Edwards, conversation with the author, 24 January 2020.

⁸ Kellie Jones, ‘Emerge: Putting Southern California on the Art World Map’, in South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017) p. 60.

⁹ Brenson, ‘Melvin Edwards’.

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and led Edwards to create his first 'Lynch Fragment' the following year.¹⁰ A circular relief containing torqued blades, steel protrusions, and a moulded mass hanging from a chain, 'Some Bright Morning' (1963) was a formal outcome of the rigorous material process that Edwards was developing, and a means for distilling his experience amidst the struggle for civil rights in the United States.

The 'Lynch Fragments' provided Edwards with a formal and conceptual system in which he could experiment. Returning to them throughout his career over three distinct periods – 1963-1967, 1973, and 1978 to the present – the artist has likened the work to a refrain, referencing the experimental three-minute compositions of jazz musicians.¹¹ The series embodies Edwards's life-long engagement with historical and contemporary manifestations of oppression, labour, and violence against the black body. Infusing a thoroughly modern idiom with the individual and collective experiences of African Americans, Edwards at once addresses the social histories and cultural traditions of the African diaspora while responding to a lineage of modernist sculptors, including Julio González and David Smith.¹² The 'Lynch Fragments' established Edwards's career as a sculptor, landing him his first solo exhibition at The Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1965. Mary Schmidt Campbell, the former Director of The Studio Museum in Harlem who organised the 1978 exhibition of 'Lynch Fragments' and other works at the Studio Museum, described the sculptures leading up to 1965 as "strangely prophetic" of the Watts Riots that would ensue and the assassination of Malcolm X that same year.¹³

'La Luta' (2007) represents one of the more recent experiments. The spindly composition, comprised of railroad spikes and a curved shackle, has an anthropomorphic quality. It recalls the angular abstraction of a Chiwara, a Malian ritual object, while the title translates as 'The Fight' in Portuguese. Evoking the popular rallying cry 'A Luta Continua' (The Struggle Continues) used during Mozambique's fight for independence from Portuguese colonial presence, and contemporary calls for activism in Nigeria and Uganda, the work cumulatively reflects Edwards's extraordinary interdisciplinary approach towards a social abstraction. Cultivated through the artist's keen awareness of a broad network of cultural and political references, which he continues to develop through travels in Africa and around the world, 'La Luta' connects the past and present, ancestral and contemporary, in a gesture that is both singular and universal.

Edwards initially travelled to New York in 1963, where he was introduced to members of the Spiral group, a collective of fifteen artists including Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff and Emma Amos. Spiral formed as a way for artists to support one another in response to the institutional racism that they faced during the Civil Rights Movement. The collective supported African American artists' desire to pursue their own feelings and interests in their work, in turn affirming the individual approach that Edwards had long held.¹⁴ In 1967 Edwards moved to New York. The following year he met the abstract painter William T. Williams, who shared Edwards's belief in the visual power of abstraction to affect change. They formed the Smokehouse Associates with fellow artists Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose in 1968, a collective that developed community-oriented public art projects in Harlem that aimed to transform the urban environment through vibrant, geometric abstract murals and sculptures.¹⁵

In 1970 Edwards became the first African American sculptor to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The year also marked the artist's first visit to Africa, resulting in a deeply affecting experience that ignited his life-long engagement with the continent. Edwards began his second series known as the 'Rockers' during this period, which 'Coco Vari Providence' (2017) belongs to. Interested in Alexander Calder's and Jean Tinguely's kineticism, both sculptors he had been exposed to while in Los Angeles, Edwards created 'Homage to Coco' in 1970.¹⁶ Composed from portions of steel, the semi-circular rocking form supports lengths of chain that are suspended across its interior. As it heavily rocks back and forth, its chains sway in rhythmic counterpoint due to the influence of gravity.

Named after his grandmother Cora Ann Nickerson, who was known as Coco, and inspired by the memory of her rocking chair, the 'Rockers' build upon the artist's use of personal biography and formal vocabulary, bringing the essence of Edwards's practice sharply into focus. Influenced by the geometric patterns of his grandmother's

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Edwards, conversation with the author.

¹² Mary Schmidt Campbell, 'Introduction', in Melvin Edwards: Sculptor (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978) p. 3.

¹³ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁴ Stokes Sims, 'Melvin Edwards: An Artist's Life and Philosophy', pp. 14-15.

¹⁵ Eric Booker, 'Smokehouse, 1968-1970', Studio Magazine, Fall/Winter 2017-2018, p. 66.

¹⁶ Edwards, conversation with the author.

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quilts, Edwards notes the affinities between Coco's patterns and the visual traditions he has observed throughout Africa. The artist also likens his grandmother's system of making to that of his own, citing a visual tradition of African American serial composition that can also be seen in the work of Jacob Lawrence.¹⁷

'Homage to Coco' and 'Coco Vari Providence' continue Edwards's use of iron chain and barbed wire, the latter of which the artist first introduced during his 1970 exhibition at the Whitney. Within these works, drawing in space takes on a new set of connotations, as tools traditionally used for bondage and the enclosure of livestock are charged with poetic and political realities, the weight of segregation, and genocide.¹⁸ At rest, the 'Rockers' still imply movement formally, but also in their gesturing towards the great movements of history and culture. Jones notes that the "intimations of migration" are rooted in Edwards's found metals, asking us to consider what was taken and what was left behind along the journey.¹⁹

The work of Melvin Edwards is a lesson in formal ingenuity, creative persistence, and the power of symbolism. Forging a uniquely individual approach to abstraction over the arc of six decades, the complexities of Edwards's life and work continue to enlighten. His sculptures collectively form a powerful statement for the connectivity of culture and the ongoing triumphs and struggles of the African diaspora.

This essay was written to accompany the solo exhibition, 'Melvin Edwards' at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (7 February–5 March 2020).

¹⁷ Josephine Gear, 'Melvin Edwards's Freestanding Sculpture', in *Melvin Edwards Sculpture*, p. 89.

¹⁸ Brenson, 'Melvin Edwards'.

¹⁹ Jones, 'Emerge: Putting Southern California on the Art World Map', p. 60.