

## New York

**Melvin Edwards**

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To say what's timely about a Melvin Edwards survey in 2010, go back to 1958. That June, Arts Magazine published Clement Greenberg's essay "Sculpture in Our Time," which pronounced a change in direction for the medium. Brancusi, the argument went, had effectively capped off the Renaissance tradition of sculpture as a solid, monolithic form—so much so that no one subsequently could add anything further. With that lineage exhausted, the new relevant precedents were Picasso's Cubist guitar constructions and the welded-steel assemblies of Julio González. The standard-bearer became David Smith, who joined sheets of metal into floating planar compositions, as if drawing in the air. This weightless appearance was partly metaphorical: Greenberg had shaken sculpture free from the burdens of history. No longer locked into the role of public monument, sculpture could preoccupy itself with form rather than civic function. This neat trick, however, depended on Greenberg's never considering the industrial character of the new sculpture's chosen materials, on his never heeding Bismarck's martial murmur that history itself was determined by blood and *iron*.



Melvin Edwards, *Weapon of Freedom*, 1986, welded steel, 11 x 9 x 6". From the series "Lynch Fragments," 1963–.

Cue Melvin Edwards, who followed Greenberg's dictates and remedied his omissions. Starting in 1963 with his "Lynch Fragments" series, Edwards welded together dense arrangements of hammers, machetes, scissors, and nails—assertions of steel's capacity to hit, hack, cut, and pierce. Gnarled by heat but nevertheless sharp, the fragments register the moral ambiguity of treating aesthetically a material imbued with violence. As much as steel has many uses, Edwards coaxes a variety of expressive qualities out of his materials, but details like the protruding ax blade in *Weapon of Freedom*, 1986, keeps in check a formalist reading. In *Five to the Bar*, 1973, rows of barbed wire are both a compositional device and a confrontational barrier.

The tradition of welded-steel sculpture that Greenberg championed no longer feels especially prevalent, though a more wide-ranging return to midcentury abstraction certainly does. In 2010, a Melvin Edwards survey agitates for forging links between modernism's historical self-consciousness and its social conscience.

— Colby Chamberlain