

Melvin Edwards  
by Michael Brenson

BOMB's Oral History Project documents the life stories of New York City's African American artists.



Portraits of the sculptor, Melvin Edwards, October 1965. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

**Michael Brenson** Your life has been an epic one, so I don't know how we're going to tell the story. But we have to start somewhere, so let's go back to the beginning. You were born in the Fifth Ward, in Houston, in 1937. It was a very particular place, at a very particular time. What was it like, growing up there?

**Melvin Edwards** Well, I'm the oldest child, and the house we lived in was my grandmother Coco's house. She was my father's mother; her name was Cora Ann Nickerson. She and my grandfather [James Benjamin Edwards] divorced in 1920, maybe earlier. She came to Houston, and he went to Kansas City. He would come occasionally and visit Texas, but I didn't get to know him very well. Now, my mother's father [James Frank Felton] lived just outside of Houston, in McNair. It was a village, part of the larger area called Goose Creek; so we saw him maybe once a month. In my teens, he came to church on Sundays in Houston and sometimes visited with us or other family members. I should explain, my father's family's primarily from the woods in East Texas, a place called Dotson, which is a part of a larger village called Long Branch, which is in the triangle of Nacogdoches, Henderson, and Carthage in Texas. Or, the bigger triangle is Nacogdoches in the south, Shreveport in the east, and Dallas in the west. Anyway, people there were farmers. These communities developed right after slavery, because many of them moved west from Alabama or Georgia. The community that my family was a part of primarily came from Alabama. We don't know exactly where, though my mother's father [James Felton] is from Opelika. My mother's father came later, around 1910–1915, working in the saw mill industry. He + Share and mother there, in Minden, Louisiana, and married her in Louisiana, and then, when they divorced, he moved with his children [three daughters and one son] to Texas. Anyway, all that added up to, by 1937, when I was born, my mother living in the Fifth Ward in Houston. That was one of the three black wards, with the Fourth and Third Wards. Fifth Ward was the youngest; it's on the north side, so farm families moving in from East Texas often stopped there because that's the first place they got to.

**MB** Why do they call them wards?

**ME** I think a lot of cities do that. Newark is broken up into wards. It wasn't racial, I think, it was just the political organization of the city. The first school for blacks in Houston [Booker T. Washington High School, 1893] started in the Fourth Ward, which was at one point Freedmen's Town, because it was where people went when slavery ended. The second one was in the Third Ward, Jack Yates High School, and then my high school, Phillis Wheatley, started in 1927. The ward communities are knit, to this day, like a village. We run into people any number of places, and if you say you're from Houston and you're from the Fifth Ward, they say, "Oh, you're not from Houston, you're from Fifth Ward, Texas." There was a... loyalty is a word that fits, in a lot of ways. For one thing, we had locks on the front door, but the one on the back was a nail with a stick in it, and it was never locked. Truthfully, we didn't have to lock houses in that period.

**MB** The way you describe the Fifth Ward; it doesn't sound that urban.

**ME** No, it's urban, but it's full of people from rural areas. But when I was a small boy, they had streetcars and paved streets, as opposed to gravel or oyster shells. Houston was a large city

just broadly laid out. That was a movement all over the country, moving from rural to cities. There was a loyalty, and the back door had a nail with a stick.

**MB** Was it all houses?

**ME** They were row houses, one story, and everybody had a yard. We had a double lot so there was extra yard area and a garage. The row houses were built by people who were trying to make money off rent, so they put them relatively close together, but even those houses had ten or twelve feet between them. I remember it well, because when it rained, that was where the water came down off of both roofs, and that was where we dug when we wanted to play with clay. Yeah, Houston's very green. You could say, regionally, it's like north coastal Florida, south coastal Alabama, or Louisiana—bayous, and all of that. In Houston, I think there are four bayous; the main one divided Fifth Ward from downtown and the other wards. If you go there now, all of that's still there, but those wooden houses, they just can't last a hundred and fifty years, and a lot of them are falling down.

The other thing about the Fifth Ward, was that there was a significant Mexican component. So, for instance, on my street, on Wayne Street, the Sierra family lived across the street with kids my age, Enrique and Angelina. They were my playmates, and we were in and out of the houses all the time. My earliest Spanish was "Ándale, ándale! Melvin, go home!" Because we were probably over there playing too much and vice versa. Anyway, when I was five, we moved to McNair, because my father started working for Humble Oil, where my grandfather had worked. He lived in that same village. Humble Oil—which later became Exxon with Standard Oil—built communities for the workers, and they were separate racially. My grandfather had his own house, and he had two or three little houses that he built to rent out and make money. Our little house was about 24 x 30 feet, wood, tar paper on cinderblocks]. My room was probably about the size of this table. It being close to the outskirts of Houston, the toilets were outdoors.

**MB** But you had running water.

**ME** We had running water, but we didn't have running *hot* water. We bathed in metal tubs.

**MB** Do you remember it as being exceptionally hot during the summer in those early years? Was it just something that you were used to?

**ME** It wasn't an issue. The tradition in the South was, people fanned with hand fans. Every church and every funeral parlor gave them out, so everybody had them, and that's still the tradition. But basically, as a teenager, I was out playing. The thing about childhood life—and much of adult life, too—it was outdoors, not in the house. So it wasn't just that people made smaller houses. Of course, they build bigger ones now, but Texas people still like to live outside. They barbecue; they socialize outside. The only bad thing was, in that region, mosquitoes. Certain parts of the year, that was not pleasant. I still remember pulling the sheet over my head and just hearing that sound. (*laughter*)

**MB** Did your family go to church?

**ME** They did more when I was younger. After a while, I would say that the number of kids—There were three brothers and one girl: I was first; then Anne, my sister in '43; and my brothers, born in Dayton, Dan '46, Gregory, '48.

**MB** What religion?

**ME** Presbyterian, but they'd gone to all kinds of churches. Up in East Texas, in the country, the family was active in the Baptist church. That's where the burials of Edwards are [my father's side of the family]. Now, because the population is so small, they only have services once a month, because the population has all moved to Houston, Dallas, et cetera. But families have kept their land and a few older people are there, and some of the people who grew up in the city who are my age, they still do mini-farming. They have enough land to have cattle, and if you're raising twenty cows a year, that can add thirty thousand dollars to your income. They go up on Saturday, get back into Houston in time to go to church—because many of them are people who go to church. But religion, in my house, I would say, was rational [personal], it wasn't tied to the ideology. All I knew was that Baptists spent more time in church with music

and they produced a lot of musicians. My mother is ninety-five and she just published a book on her growing up from age six to sixteen [*Silver Tracks and Running Roses: Memories of a Goose Creek Girl* by Thelma Felton Edwards]. Some friends went through the kinds of things where they'd get emotional and get saved, or have crises and find God at night, you know. In my family, they didn't, and they even made jokes about it. You could say God is important, but you had to be rational about it.

**MB** It sounds like the household was really not ideological in that way.

**ME** No. Well, in a sense, it was politically. When we lived in Dayton, Ohio, my father and a friend created an organization called the West Side Civic Club, which was a black political organization. That was Republican. And when we came back to Texas, he was a Republican. But not Republican like Republicans now; the Republicans now were the Democrat-Dixiecrats of that era. My father was a part of the Eisenhower movement in Texas.

**MB** You moved to Dayton when you were seven. That must have been a real change, in every way.

**ME** It was, it was. We arrived there in June of 1944. My father had gotten picked to be trained for the Boy Scouts [administration], and then he was assigned to Dayton. He was the first black Scout executive that they ever had, and he was the first Scoutmaster of the first black Boy Scout troop, which was formed at the church we went to. His work, prior to that, was primarily labor or a waiter, that kind of thing. He worked for the Houston Light & Power company, and for a pipe supply company. He was very adept, physically ambidextrous, and very smart. He did one year of college, but that was all. He graduated high school when he was, like, twenty-six years old, because, as was typical, he came from the country when he was ten. He didn't always stay in school, because he worked.

**MB** Did your mother finish college?

**ME** No, mama had me when she was in high school, and then she went back and finished [high school] right away. She and her three older sisters, the same thing happened. They all had children, married, and then went back to school eventually.

**MB** I gather that your parents had some feeling for education.

**ME** Oh, very much. Even my mother's father, who had only three years of grammar school in Alabama, believed in it, bought encyclopedias and pored over words. No, education was important, but there was also always the need to work.

**MB** What was it like moving to Ohio from a segregated Texas city?

**ME** But I didn't know that it was segregated. I didn't know. You follow me? Age seven, I didn't know there was a white community. Houston being a large city, the black sections were large, say, fifty thousand people each, so the wards had their own high schools, stores, everything. In fact, I would say, in my memory, until we left Houston, I don't remember white people. A child's world is so much within the community and the area. And life was really complete for a young kid. Then in Ohio, we lived in a housing project. Those were new back then. We were lucky to get the housing, through my father's civic contacts, through the Scouts. It was called DeSoto Bass. Now it has the bad reputation that all housing projects have, but my memories of it are just the opposite. Based on my experience, I'd build them all over the place—but they would only be two stories tall, and they would have plenty of land around them. And everybody would be employed; that's always the key. But anyway, when William T. Williams and I, and Smokehouse, are painting walls, and dealing with communities, and public art, my thinking goes back often to that experience in Dayton. Now, this was the North, but the housing projects were segregated. Some had been built a few years earlier, in Roosevelt's time. They were a little nicer. The ones we were in were newer. We may have been the first ones to be living in those. My grammar school, Wogaman Elementary, on the other hand, was integrated. Miss Lemon, my teacher, was white, and there were white students in class. The way I see it now, it was full of immigrants from the South, primarily West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, black and white. There were conflicts involved in that. Although I didn't notice it, Wogaman evidently had enough of a problem with that that my second year, they bused

most of the white kids to another school, Irving Elementary School, which was closer to the center of the city. And my father said, "Well, we didn't come all the way to Ohio to have you go to a school that's just like the ones we had in Houston." In other words, not integrated. So then I went to Irving, too, and I was there for the next four years.

**MB** Did you have art class there?

**ME** Yeah, everybody took art there. Mrs. Bang was the art teacher. I remember she wore a blue smock. I thought at the time, *Well, artists must wear blue smocks*, because she did. She had us draw from models sometimes; she put students from the class up on a platform. I remember Flora, this blond, I would now say, chubby, German-faced girl, blond with rosy cheeks, and a blue-and-white pinafore. (*laughter*) When the art teacher said, "Draw her," and I drew her, and *it looked like Flora*—that floored me, because I had no idea that that kind of drawing was possible.

**MB** So it was Mrs. Bang who took you to the Dayton Art Institute?

**ME** Yeah, exactly. It was the first time I ever saw a museum. It had a mini zoo, so it was also the first time I ever saw a peacock, or a deer, caged, but a deer. That was important, no question. I still remember a teacher doing a demonstration. We were outside, and she had a Venus drawing pencil, and she was drawing the foliage of a tree. I mean, she wasn't doing it leaf by leaf. I liked it. And I remember the armored figures. I think they had a full stuffed horse [taxidermied] and a figure in armor. And a harpsichord. Our game was, when these guards, who I now know were senior citizens (*laughter*), were not near us, to go bang on the harpsichord, and they'd come creeping around to try and catch us, and of course we were gone. So I knew what a harpsichord was. In Dayton, going to the museum and going to concerts was a part of Irving Elementary's program. Now they've torn that school down.

**MB** Concerts, you're talking about classical music?

**ME** Yeah. Dayton, in that period, was relatively enlightened about trying to do things for the community. I never understood why everybody didn't do that. I mean, my high school in Houston, we had very enlightened educators, I would say; but, in that period, in the South, the main thing was just to finish, so you had possibly a little bit better job opportunities. But the respect for education was high and in every family there was somebody who'd had a little more education, when it was financially possible. For instance, my grandfather's brother, when another brother was killed in World War I, he got the insurance money, so he went to college, if only for a year. But he married somebody who finished college. That's my uncle J.D. He worked as a waiter at the Elks Lodge, that is, the white Elks Lodge, and that provided him with a good living. He knew how to handle that. Once he had a little money to get started, he did things with it that made his life different, like buying property. All of our houses were wood, but his was brick. He and Aunt Hattie, they had two incomes and no children, and their life was economically better. They had a new car every four years. They lived what you would now call a middle-class life. But most families...we had an old car. The one we drove to Houston, when we moved back there from Dayton, that was a classic. Dad had found an old 1934 Hudson, a limousine, practically. So much space that when we drove from Ohio to Texas, the kids were in the back and there was a steamer trunk between us and the front seat. (*laughter*) Years later, I said, "Why did you sell it?" He said, "I ask myself the same thing." He wished he'd kept it. It had wooden spokes. (*laughter*) We arrived in Houston on Armistice Day, November the eleventh, 1949. We had driven all day and all night, for two days, from Dayton to Cairo, Illinois, and then down through Missouri and Arkansas, and through all of Texas. My father was so tired that for part of the drive he had me sitting beside him, pressing the gas pedal. Big image, but hard to imagine for more than a minute or two at a time. His foot couldn't do it.



Melvin Edwards, *Southern Season*, 1990, welded steel, 14¾ x 14 x 10 inches. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** So your mother didn't drive?

**ME** No, she didn't drive, and he didn't want to stop at any of the Southern towns along the way. And we did have a fuse problem, in Cleveland, Texas. He said we didn't have far to go, and somebody gave him a push or something, and we arrived. I remember my grandmother coming to the porch, and it was, like, six in the morning.

**MB** Why did your family move back to Houston?

**ME** Everything kept getting worse for my father. He and the Boy Scouts had had a falling out after about two years, so he didn't work for them anymore, and the postwar recession that hit the Midwest hit Dayton like it did all of the cities. Jonestown, Indianapolis, their steel and rubber and all of those industries started to go down. My father was very discouraged, and he and my mother started to have problems and they felt they'd do better back in Texas.

**MB** You were just a kid, but did you feel it as a little bit of a defeat? Is "failure" the right word? Did you feel that there was a *kind of* trouble?

**ME** There was trouble. I felt, at that moment, that being in Texas would be better, and the reason I felt that was that I knew it would be better for my mother. And the reason I knew that was that it was affecting my father in ways that weren't good for how he was treating her. I was sensitive to it. I remember the day that they decided. By midnight we were packed and gone.

**MB** It happened really fast.

**ME** It did, yeah. I think there was some notion that he would go back [to Ohio], if he could make a go of it, and he did drive back to Dayton, but then he decided...Knowing him, he wouldn't want to be away from his family. And he knew his way in Houston. He had a series of jobs, the first one with the Southern Pacific Railroad Hospital. The vacation that he got in 1951, he took us to Los Angeles, where his sister lived. The railroad had passes for families. You had to ride the slow train, though. You didn't go on the one that got there in two days. You took the

one called the Argonaut. (*laughter*) That's a name from the classics for you. It took four days. I think he had a two-week vacation, and it was four days there and four days back, but it was good. In the long run, it got us to California. It got *me* there. My family already knew I liked art. One day we were driving by the Art Center School, and my aunt said, "Maybe you'd like to go there someday." They had no children, my aunt and uncle [Modie Bell and Clive Huddleston—Modie was Melvin's paternal aunt]; I was the first child in the next generation, the only one for six years, and I was her brother's son. So she was very much present in my early childhood, and my uncle, too. My mother said, "She always wanted us to send you and let you live with her. But nobody's getting my child away." As it turned out, I did live with her for four years—my first four years in LA. It was at her invitation. I had football scholarship offers in Texas. Black colleges. But they didn't have art departments. So when she offered, I just said, "Let me try that."

**MB** So you had a burgeoning interest in art, but at the same time, there's an interest in athletics, particularly football, right?

**ME** When we moved back to Houston, I was in junior high and I was on the basketball team, because they didn't have football. I went to the same high school that my parents had gone to: Phillis Wheatley, named after the poet. It was an exceptionally athletic school. The six years I was there, they won the state championship every year. The coach was extraordinarily good, and so were the players. When I played football there eventually, my last year, they won the state championship. They had won the state championship when my father played, too.

**MB** What position did he play?

**ME** End, but also halfback. We were exactly the same height, but at that age, he was more like a hundred and seventy pounds. He never gained a lot more weight. I'm the one who gained the weight. If I were a hundred and seventy, I guess I'd look very much like him.



Melvin Edwards, *Homage to My Father and the Spirit*, 1969, stainless steel and painted steel. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** But you were a running back from the beginning?

**ME** No, it was mixed. I had made All-State as a guard, but I usually played what we'd now call cornerback, or outside linebacker. Or we would alternate it up and I'd be a defensive end, because it was a pass-rushing technique. We had a fairly sophisticated system. I later found out that our coaches were going to coaching clinics at Notre Dame in the summer.

**MB** Was the team integrated, or the teams you played?

**ME** The simplest way to put almost everything I'm talking about in Texas is, it's black. The South was by law segregated. I'll give you an example. All high school football games were played at the high school stadium. There were enough teams that, with one stadium, you couldn't play them all on the weekends, so whites tended to have Friday-Saturday games, and black schools got Wednesday-Thursday. So our games were in the middle of the week. That really messed up the practice regimen. I worked on Fridays, so I didn't go to Friday practice. I worked in a local market, Orlando's Market. That's another little piece of it. In the African American community of Fifth Ward, there were four or five Italian families that had been immigrants in the '30s, and they went from owning fruit stands to owning little markets, and the Orlando family's market was the most successful of them. It was really a supermarket, but owned by a family. I worked there the first year in the vegetable department, and the other three years in the meat department, weighing meat, cutting it, filleting fish, cutting up chickens. The real butchers didn't touch that kind of work. That and the oxtails. I worked Fridays from four till nine, and Saturdays from eight in the morning until ten or eleven at night. I got a real anatomy lesson, and that was another thing. When I started studying art, anatomy became important to me. While I was in high school, my aunt [Modie Bell] in California sent me a German book on the anatomy of a horse, which started with the skeleton, the whole thing, plus the history of equines—all these little things fed into my interests. I would say the anatomy stuff, seeing drawings by da Vinci and Michelangelo—

**MB** That was in the school library?

**ME** Yeah, the schools always had good libraries, in fact. That's another tidbit, so to speak. I always liked to read—that I developed in Dayton. My mother always read a lot. Both my parents did, but she was at home, so I was more aware of her reading. She signed up for the Book of the Month Club, and she couldn't pay for the books, but she got them and read them. By age ten, I was going to a library in Dayton. I liked the adventure books and Native American stuff. There were a lot of books on the conquest of the Midwest Native Americans and of the Iroquois further east. I read the *Mohicans* book a bunch of times. I remember the illustrations by N. C. Wyeth; they had big clouds, and canoes, and Indians. I had learned to paddle a canoe at Boy Scout camp in Texas, so all of those things kept fitting into each other. I mean, I can look back and see that. At the time, they were just my interests. And between that and getting on a bicycle and riding away... We were on the edge of town. Dayton was a town where outside and inside weren't that separate. It wasn't that big, although it was a city, with trolleys and streetcars. When I went back, it was very much a faded town, and it had lost its industrial or whatever other base. I was disappointed to see what had happened to it, because there were some years I had the romantic notion that I might go back to Dayton.

**MB** They were pretty good years for you, or you wouldn't feel that way.

**ME** Oh, yeah—for me, more than for my father, because looking back, I can see what he had to go through as an adult, was not good. But for a child between the age of seven and twelve... Later I wondered how it would have been as a teenager. Now, the sports thing would have been there. Ohio was where I first got into football. The All-America Conference was in that period, '45 to '49. In '49 Lou Groza [first famous field goal kicker, part of the Browns] was an idol for me; I learned to kick because I had seen a little book on his technique, and I remembered it in Texas. I used a tomato paste can as my tee, and I practiced until I was an exceptional kicker. We lived at the end of a one-block street, a dead end, so you kick the ball, and there's nobody down there, so you go and get it, you take your can with you, and you kick the ball back. (*laughter*) In high school, I could kick off all the way into the end zone. Which was, in that period... That didn't happen. And nobody kicked field goals—except one guy, and I could kill him to this day, because it was the only game we lost in the year we were state champs. They beat us 15 to 14; we blocked two extra points, and it was the only field goal kicked in Texas in 1954, Ivory Jones and his no-good ass. (*laughter*)

**MB** Were you a good student?

**ME** I was, except for math. It took me five semesters to get through three semesters of algebra. Geometry, I was fine. I think that was intuitive. My last year, I was an honor roll student. But I wasn't paying attention; I hardly did homework. Things that had to do with books came easy to me. And, in the South, I had the advantage of Northern diction. An asset,

but also a problem. When I first got back to Texas...you know, your friends are the other seventh graders, right? You get to English class. And now the teacher's got a boy who speaks properly—I just spoke like you did in the North—and, after about two weeks, she was saying things in class to the other students: "Why don't you speak like Edwards?" So the next class is gym. You know what that means. You get to the gym, and just as you get the basketball, "Why don't you speak like Edwards?" (*laughter*) Well, that faded after a while. But the sports thing was always with me.

**MB** Was it a big deal to be a football player? Did people at the school know you for it? Did it make you popular with the girls?

**ME** Oh, yeah. It was the same way when my father was there. My mother would tease me and say, "Well, you might have been conceived on a Wheatley blanket." Evidently, in his time, they gave letterman blankets. But yeah, your reputation went up if you were an athlete. Texas is that way about sports. You could say the wards were the equivalent of small towns or cities in team loyalty. Our big rival was Jack Yates High School; every year we played them on Thanksgiving weekend, and whoever won that had bragging rights, so to speak. There would be generations at the game. It held twenty thousand, but thirty thousand people were there. The last year I played in it, there were so many people there, they had police with sawed-off shotguns to hold the crowds back. I was kicking off into that. That's the game we lost. (*laughter*)

**MB** But actually, if you have football on the one side, then, whatever your interest in art was, that's a very private endeavor, in a way.

**ME** It was, but everybody knew it. Everybody knew what everybody did. They knew I always liked art, and I got little special opportunities. When I was in the eleventh grade, a group of us were picked to go to the museum on Mondays, when it was closed; there were six of us from the three black high schools, two from each school, and we just did a lot of wandering and looking.

**MB** Was there any stigma attached to caring about art?

**ME** No, no, not at all. It never came up that you had to choose between art and sports. In fact, anything I had time to do and could fit in, I did. Boy Scout Camp, you could say a black teenager's approach to Boy Scouts, well, that's some corny, square stuff. On the other hand, everybody wanted to go to camp in the summer, so all of us who went to maybe two Scout meetings in the year got the fifteen or twenty dollars together so we could spend a week at camp. I always liked the idea of canoes, and to have access to a canoe, that took me back to *The Last of the Mohicans*. I used to make my own tomahawks; split a stick and wrap a piece of stone onto it and throw it. If I ever sent away for anything, it was a bolo knife to throw. Well, those things came back; I've used the shape of that bolo knife in forms. They stuck in my memory.





Melvin Edwards, *Kasangadila: For Francisco Romão de Oliveira e Silva*, 2004, welded steel, 15 x 15 x 6¼ inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. ©2014 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Looking back, I don't remember a stigma about any occupation, either. First of all, the mentality of the community was, *Look, just get a job*. For a woman, if you have a man who has a job, that's the accomplishment, you know. And of course, if it's a better kind of job, if it's a job where he's a schoolteacher...The upper crust, financially and otherwise, were schoolteachers and doctors and that kind of thing. There's a book that was published a few years ago called *The Warmth of Other Suns*, about migration out of the South from roughly 1920 to 1980. It covers the different directions that migrants took, and the different class levels, from sharecroppers to doctors or lawyers, landowners, farmers, and how they went to Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and New York. This book, I couldn't put it down. I called to tell my mother, and she said, "Oh, we've all read it." So it's going around. One of the people in it is a doctor who leaves Monroe, Louisiana, and migrates to Los Angeles, and one of his friends is a doctor in Houston, a Dr. Beale. Well, Dr. Beale was the sports doctor for my high school. That kind of connection existed all through the South, in all kinds of occupations and families —just different ways to be connected and function, to adapt to a new place. Like, from the woods of East Texas, people came to Houston, and many of them came through my grandmother's house. They lived there for a few weeks. That was common. When we were in Ohio, and the house wasn't occupied, she took in young men from East Texas or Louisiana, they stayed there a while and then moved on, got their own places, had their families. When she died, the funeral home was full of all these men, and I knew a lot of them because they always stopped by to visit at one time or another.

The high school, the churches, that was the basic structure of the community. Masonry, too. I wasn't old enough to be involved in that, and I'm not sure about my father. It was more the older ones. When my granduncle [J.D.], my grandfather's brother, died in '79, and I went back for his funeral, the church part was in Houston, and then we went up to East Texas, and the group of older men there all had their Mason aprons on. I knew one of them, and that man, years later, would take me around when I would go for reunions. Evidently, he'd met my grandmother as a child. He was about four years older than my father. Ultimately he lived to be a hundred. Anyway, he would show me places in the woods where there used to be houses, where my great-grandmother's house was. He showed me two cedar trees, and said, "Your grandfather's house was here; this tree was at one end of the property, and the other was at the front of the house." That kind of thing. And all of those people at one time or another, in

Houston, passed through my grandmother's house. A lot of times I was able to put things together, years later, who different people were. I had classmates who were relatives of relatives, and I only found out by going to the reunions in the '90s. People come to those from California, Chicago, all over the place. So in that sense, I have pretty thick or plentiful memories of that complex of my family and other families. There's a doctor who's my friend now, and my collector, Leon Banks—he took care of all of our kids, gave them shots, gave us Enfamil...He still is active, although he's ninety-eight now. He became the first really significant black person collecting contemporary art among us. But he introduced me to a doctor who I thought [then] was related to me, and now I'm positive. You've heard of Sanford Biggers? We're cousins. My grandmother's mother was a Biggers.

**MB** Are you in touch with Sanford at all?

**ME** We've talked on the phone, and so far we've just tried and missed. His mother, Florestine, was in high school with me. His father went there right before us; he's three or four years older. Now he's a surgeon in LA. We put it all together on the phone.

**MB** So how did you end up at USC? Did you always know that you wanted to go to college?

**ME** Oh, yeah. My mother would have been adamant. Of the four of us, three graduated from college, and the one that didn't spent so much time hanging out at them, he might as well have gone. That's Greg, the painter in California. No, it was just expected, even without means or anything, that somehow it would happen. We had a saying in the family. I know it's been around in the air, but my granduncle who got money and went to college for a year, he heard it from his stepmother: "Spend the money by getting an education, because nobody can take that from you." But also, like I said, my mother liked to read, and we liked things that had to do with school. I remember this book, *Bran the Bronze Smith*; it was in the closet of extra books in my fifth-grade classroom in Dayton, and I pulled it out one day. It was one of those adventure books for boys, but it was well written. It was about a boy, probably in the British Isles or somewhere, who was from a fishing village and got [caught] in a storm and ended up away from home, in another place. He was an orphan there, and he became a bronze caster. I remember it described casting axe heads in bronze, how you made a mold out of stone and the bronze was poured in. Then when I got to Houston, I started reading about the fur trappers in the West: Jim Bridger and Kit Carson, and those mountain men. Those kinds of books, I ate them up. I read so many books...I was bringing an armful back one day, and the librarian said, "Are you really reading all of these books? I've been counting, and you've read more books than anybody who's ever used this library." I just liked reading. Running and playing and reading. Of course, in high school you start getting interested in girls, but I wasn't getting enough going on to replace the books or the sports, so—

**MB** So why USC?

**ME** I went to USC after two years at Los Angeles City College [LACC], a junior college. I had been in the Navy Reserve, and right after high school I went to San Diego for two weeks to train; and then I went up to LA to be with my aunt Modie and uncle Clive, and I wanted to stay. Of course, as an All-Stater in Texas, I could have had scholarships, but I wanted to be in LA. I knew you could get into the junior college, and it only cost nine dollars, and that was within the economic range. I moved in with my aunt and uncle; they had bought a house just north of Beverly Boulevard. It was a very integrated area. Originally, it had been a significant black community, but that was way back, 1920 or before. It was a two-bedroom house, with a backyard and apricot trees, eucalyptus. Typical. It was a nice place. Those four years there were very nice for me. The junior colleges in California, looking back, were very good schools to enter university level at. You could get a two-year AB degree, or just do the first two years there and then go on to UCLA or wherever. And LACC had a good football team. Players usually got scholarships from there to other schools, and my scholarship offers were the University of Washington and the University of Denver. [I was a walk on at USC. In my last year at USC I had a football scholarship. In between, in '58, I went to LA County Art Institute, now Otis Parson; then I returned to USC on the football scholarship.] I was considering Denver, because it was kind of well known, as far as I knew then, for its art program. If I'd been practical, I'd have probably gone to the University of Washington. But I wanted to stay in LA.

**MB** Well, it's a good thing.

**ME** Yeah. (*laughter*) I might have ended up a good football player.

**MB** I can't imagine your life without LA.

**ME** No, I know. I'm well aware and thankful. But every now and then, you have those what-ifs. Also, see, in that first summer before school started, my aunt Modie and uncle Clive took a trip around the western United States. They liked going to the national parks. They had bought a station wagon, and we went to the Grand Canyon, up to Yellowstone, then to Bryce and Zion Canyons in Utah, then to Banff and Lake Louise in Canada, then over to Victoria Island and Vancouver. The first time I ever had clam chowder, we were on a ferry, going across the Puget Sound. Anyway, at the end of the trip, I went to see one of the guys who was at Navy Reserve training, who was from Seattle. Then I went swimming in Lake Washington there, and my high school graduation ring slipped off in the muck. Later in the year, I tried to go surfing, in Los Angeles, and I was wearing my gold and silver All-State and All-District footballs on a chain, and they were lost, too. (*laughter*) I say those things because that indicates how different my world was. By the time I got to LA, I was definitely in a world that was very different from the one I had lived in.

**MB** So then you were at USC for two years?

**ME** Yes. I didn't have enough money to pay my way in, but I borrowed some from a cousin of mine in the Navy. [The last year, I got the football scholarship,] I did well enough, went from ninth string to number two at the position. I was playing fullback, and actually, I was doing very well, but...USC had changed coaches in the middle of the year and switched from a flexible T formation to the philosophy that was at Oklahoma, which was "three yards, and a cloud of dust." That wasn't right for me. In fact, that up-the-middle stuff was the opposite of what most of those players had been recruited for. Anyway, for some reason, they got upset at me, and all of a sudden I was back on the junior team. When the semester was over, I didn't even ask whether I'd earned the scholarship for the next year. I just went in and said, "Look, I'm leaving the school." I didn't have the money to stay in school. They said, "Son, we could find a way to keep you here," but I left, and I was broke and out of work, and it was the depression of 1958. But I went back over, sometime in April, just to visit the art department, and the drawing teacher, *Francis de Erdely*, asked me, "Why aren't you in school?" and I explained. "Well, you know, me and football had a falling out." He said, "You take your portfolio over to Los Angeles County Art Institute," which is Otis-Parsons now. "Have them look, and I'll make a phone call." I took it over, and they offered me a scholarship right away.

**MB** So you actually didn't finish at USC, then?

**ME** No, here's the rest of my convoluted story. I missed football. It was the first football season in my whole life since age fifteen that I wasn't playing. So I found a way to work the concessions, or seating people, I forget, just so I could go to the games. I just missed it so much; I had to sort of eat my own disagreement [my own words]. I was working part-time at the post office, too, so I had saved enough money for the down payment for a semester, so I went back to USC in the spring of '59 for spring training and practice. I switched positions to end, and I did very well. What they didn't understand about my abilities, if I can talk about them, is that I was a hundred and ninety pounds, six feet tall. I wasn't heavy, but I was agile, and I was as fast as the fastest of the 'backs. That was a part of our strategy at my high school, to have the running guards be fast on offense. So, when I got switched to end, they were thinking, "Well, he's from the backfield, he's not going to be that good a blocker." I was an exceptional blocker, actually. I loved hitting big people.

What I'm saying is, I earned the scholarship for the next year. But just as the season started, I got a freak collarbone injury and couldn't play. Meanwhile, my time at County Art Institute had upped my interest in art; so I was a different person in the art part of school. The six months at County Art Institute, in what I'll call a pure art environment... And the library there was all art—philosophy of art, Mexican muralism—all kinds of stuff. Peter Voulkos was there in the summer, not that there was any interaction, but I saw this guy out there doing funny stuff with clay. I had never taken sculpture, but it was required, so that fall was my first interaction with sculpture. The teacher was a man named Lorenzo Fenci from Florence; he always called it

Firenze. He was a figurative sculptor, but he stressed the fact that the parts of the human body could be analyzed cubistically, so that you could see all form that way if you wanted to. He was making his living making monumental, figurative things, commissions in LA. My responsibility as a scholarship student was to document, with a camera, all of the projects that we did in sculpture. So I learned to use a Rolleiflex camera. I wasn't particularly good at sculpture, if I really judge myself. There were a couple of people who were really very good, and that was apparent to me. But at the same time, I was gaining a lot of art awareness, and I had a little money because I was working part time, so I ordered books, catalogues on Picasso and Klee, modernist kind of stuff, and Rembrandt etchings, and Goya.



Melvin Edwards, *Asafo Kra No*, 1993, painted steel in three parts. The Utsukushi-ga-hara Open-Air Museum, Ueda, Nagano Prefecture Takeishi Kamihon'iri Utsukushigahara, Plateau, Japan. Photo courtesy the artist. © 2015 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** But you had studied painting before that.

**ME** Oh yeah, painting was always a part of it. That went back to when my father worked at the Southern Pacific Railroad Hospital. He had an interest himself, probably from early on. He came home one day—I was about thirteen or fourteen—with an easel that he and a friend had made at work. And he proceeded to try and paint a loving painting of him and my mother together. And it was the ugliest, most messed-up thing... (*laughter*) He just didn't know what oil paint was. The other part of his life in those years was, he modeled at the School of Fine Arts's museum in Houston. The last three years I was in high school, his job was with Humble Oil's Humble Dining Room, which was for the twelve executives. He worked from ten to three, and then he'd come home and pick up his jockstrap and go to the museum. A couple of times he brought home charcoal drawings. He had a minor interest in bodybuilding. There were old books in the garage, *Physical Culture*, with images of Greco-Roman kinds of poses, and he'd learned about Swedish massage. He was the kind of person that you wanted as your model in a drawing class. Anyway, the short of it is, his painting didn't work out, so I inherited the easel, and I would fiddle on it. He had this free yellow paper that he got from work, and ballpoint pens were new. Then I started watercolor, and India ink; pen points were everywhere, because you were still trained to write with dip pen. And my grandmother used to get a magazine, *Unity Magazine*, a little religious tract from Missouri somewhere. They came weekly, but once a month, a larger one came, and it had these nice pen and ink drawings. So I taught myself pen and ink drawing. The person who was guiding my father was a man who worked with him named George Gilbert, who was an amateur painter, and I asked Mr. Gilbert for advice, and he told me what number sable brushes to buy and which colors to get so that you could mix every color, that kind of thing.

**MB** Did you begin to feel, when you were at Otis, that you might actually become an artist? I mean, what was going on when you were studying art?

**ME** There was nothing else for me to want to be. That was how I felt. I mean, I had other interests, football and sports, but that was the only.... I didn't just paint at school. When I got to County Art Institute, or Otis, as you call it, they would set up projects in ways that I'd never seen, and then I would set up the ideas in my own mind, and work on paintings at home, at my aunt and uncle's in the garage; I'd go beyond what I was doing at school. I had two teachers

there that I remember well, other than Fenci: one who specialized in drawing, a man named Joe Mugnaini, who was a New Yorker, but [had turned] Californian; and Bentley Shad. Shad was a fairly tight realist, but realist in a way that felt structural and made sense to me. Mugnaini would read from the writings of Ben Shahn and others while in class. He'd just walk around reading. Toward the end of my time there with him, he was discussing one of my paintings, and he said, "You know what your fight is?" He said, "You've got your weapon." That was the first time that anybody had ever referred to the work like that. He probably had been involved with the Left. Mugnaini was a thoughtful person, and what he read of Shahn made sense to me; there was stuff that wouldn't have come into my thinking any other way. I wasn't conversing with art people. I didn't have those arguments over abstraction, because I wasn't around people who argued over it. When I was back at SC, I was more in touch with the graduate students, and those were their battles. But it wasn't like I was in art school. That was a very short period, that six months at County, and the dynamic was very figurative. If I had been over at Chouinard...That was the challenging art school. Danny Johnson and them, they had all been to Chouinard. They were going to gallery openings when I was dealing with football. They became my friends in the early '60s. I learned to weld just as I left, and Danny Johnson's wife and I, our works were accepted in one of those shows that the County Museum did, where anybody can enter. I entered one of the first pieces of sculpture that I thought was *something*, and it was shown.



Left: Newspaper clipping announcing Melvin Edwards as one of the third annual New Talent Purchase Grant recipients. Maurice Tuchman, Monte Factor, Lloyd Hamrol, Melvin Edwards, Unknown, and Phillip Rich at the opening of the exhibition *Five Younger Los Angeles Artists* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (November 26–December 26, 1965). Photo in clipping © Museum Associates/LACMA. Right: Installation photos of the *Young Talent Awards: 1963–1983* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (July 14–September 18, 1983). Edwards's sculpture center. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

*Metal Sound*, it was called, because it had a plain aura, and it had tension in it. But you couldn't say it looked like a [David] Smith. In fact, I would say I wasn't aware of Smith then, though within the year or so, around '60, he had a major show in LA, at Everett Ellin.

**MB** You saw the Ellin show?

**ME** I didn't, but the guy who was teaching me welding did, George Baker. He was somewhat affected, but not really. He was interested in aluminum, and a kind of smooth thing ... I'm trying to remember. There were no [David] Smiths in the books in '58, '59.

**MB** The books that you had out there?

**ME** Yeah, and you're right to say it that way, because California then was very far away from the East. However, in '59 or '60, a show came to the LA County Museum: contemporary sculpture from New York, much of it welded. Even Larry Rivers had a welded steel sculpture in it. And there was a Gabe Kohn; that impressed me. Later I got to meet Gabe, and we became friends. He was one of two artists from that Abstract Expressionist generation that I actually got to know, and they were both woodworkers. Sugarman and Kohn. Kohn's brother Edmund was a painter who taught at Chouinard, but I knew him because he would occasionally do commercial assignments at Graphic Films, an animation house where I worked in the '60s. Graphic Films was my graduate school. Most of the people who worked there were a little older, with graduate degrees in art, and animation and filmmaking were new. My mentality, in that period, was, *Don't see American movies; see foreign movies*. And every Monday morning that was the conversation. I drove, and I cleaned up, before people got to work, filled the water cooler... The Helmsman, the bakery truck, came through the alley in the morning, so I bought donuts for everybody, and we had coffee and donuts and discussed art and film. Another quick

aside—the secretary at Graphic Films moonlighted by working for a guy who booked jazz musicians in LA named Benny Shapiro. Miles Davis [and his band] were one of the groups that he booked. She knew I was a jazz fan, and one day I got back from lunch and she said, “I’ve got somebody that I want you to meet.” We go outside, and it’s Miles Davis and Benny Schapiro. She knew I’d be thrilled, which I was. Then they took us off for a second lunch in Miles’s Maserati. I don’t know how four people got in there, but we did. We went to a place where you bought New York[-style] hot dogs, which I didn’t know about: a hot dog with everything on it, sauerkraut, chili, and this and that. They proceeded to have hot dogs and offer me bites off of them. “No thank you, I’ve had lunch.” I’d grown up in a family where if someone else eats off a hot dog, you don’t want to have it. (*laughter*) Miles and Benny can do it, but I’m not eating off that hot dog.

**MB** What year are we talking about?

**ME** It must have been 1963, because in ’65 I started working for another film company, Peterson Company. I was working there when the explosion happened, the rebellion—the newspaper called it the riot, the community calls it the rebellion [the Watts Rebellion]. That was August 1965, and then, the first week in September, I got a phone call from the University of California at Santa Barbara. In the spring of that year, I’d had my first one-man show, at the Santa Barbara Museum, so people there were aware of my work. I got a call from them, and they had a job for me. A college teaching job, that’s very different from delivering film. So I said, “Sure, I’ll do it.” But when I got home that evening, I got a second call, from Chouinard, which is now CalArts, offering me a job, too. They had seen my welded work; that’s why they wanted to hire me. CalArts is fifteen minutes away from home, and Santa Barbara is ninety miles. So I called Santa Barbara back and turned them down. I taught at Chouinard for two years; I set up the welding program there, with six oxyacetylene setups, and then a room for arc welding.

**MB** Can you just describe the difference between oxyacetylene and arc welding?

**ME** Oxyacetylene means you have to heat the material, and it takes a little bit of time. Arc welding, which is electrical, is instantaneous. It’s really an industrial advance, and you can handle heavier, thicker materials, more rapidly. What happened was, I still had a sensibility that came from the handling of materials slower. When you work slower, you think more. It’s just like carving; you have more time to think while working. Now, there are some instances when you want that process, you want to be slower, and there are electrical-gas combinations, TIG welding and stuff like that. But within my working, I accomplished similar things to what happened in oxyacetylene welding. The other thing, of course, is the grinders and stuff, and the devices of cutting steel; all of those, for me, are part of the aesthetics. It’s just a matter of how you use them, and since it’s visual art, in the end, how much of it shows.



Left: Melvin Edwards, *Sunday*, 1964, welded steel, 12½ x 7 x 7½ inches. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Right: Melvin Edwards, *Begin Again (Lynch Fragment)*, 1979, welded steel, 10 x 8¼ x 4½ inches. Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger Collection. © 2015 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photos courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

**MB** How did you get started with welding?

**ME** At USC, I saw two graduate students welding, George Baker and Robert Bassler. Baker was teaching a night class, and I took it in the spring; it must have been my last semester at USC, 1960. I think what attracted me about it was I always liked work that had dynamics to it, that had or implied strength or aggressiveness. My thinking had already turned to abstraction, not in a purist sense, but in a sense that you could work beyond just imitating the figure as a basis for what you were doing. Anyway, when you're working with scrap steel, it's not like a sheet of paper you draw on, you actually turn what you have into something else. That fit with how I was thinking.

**MB** Did you take to welding immediately?

**ME** Oh, yeah. Something clicked. I felt I was getting something out of it that I couldn't get out of painting. That was the year my first wife, Karen Hamre, and I got married, and we had our daughter Ana. In that first year, we were living in a little house, and I made some wood constructions in the back yard.

They weren't particularly good, but they fit with what came later. Also, it may be that I was working relatively flat or in relief much of the time, but the welding had a real reciprocal relationship to where I already was in painting, in terms of the complexity of form within the process: both flat and three-dimensional. It's almost like my sense of abstraction had an abstract figuration, I don't mean in the imitation of figure, but in the sense of mountains, backs, shoulders, muscularities. I always liked three dimensions, in drawing and painting; I paid attention to chiaroscuro and the formalities of form in the Renaissance. Even when I wasn't working in that kind of figurative way, in my head, it helped the dynamics of what I was doing, the power. I used to say to myself, Well, you like football, and things that are forceful. When I thought of painters I liked, they had one or another variation of that power: the Mexican painters, and Goya; Michelangelo. I wasn't that crazy about his paintings, but I liked the power within the figure, within the form. Donatello was more my style. That carved wood one, was it Mary Magdalene?

**MB** Well, Donatello was a metalsmith, too. And Orozco, of course, is a tremendously physical painter, even more than Siqueiros. Orozco used a pretty sculptural language.

**ME** I would say Siqueiros was his equal dynamically, in terms of three-dimensional dynamics, but Orozco had the feeling.

**MB** You named a sculpture after him, right?

**ME** Sure. But there was a period I was more interested in Siqueiros, and part of that had to do with his conscious interest in the plastic dynamics of three dimensions. That is, architecture and sculpture together, like that place he made in Mexico City with the round table turning and the room-size murals [Polyform Cultural Siqueros]... I like those ideas. I wasn't that happy with what I'll call the imagery of it, but I was very happy that he had that experimental bent. Still, the poet of the movement was Orozco, no question.



Melvin Edwards, *Orozco*, 1996, welded steel, 15 x 14.4 x 6.3 inches.  
Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman  
Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York.

**MB** Were you aware of Siqueiros's influence on Pollock?

**ME** Yes, I was definitely aware not only of his influence [but of his] experiments in form, space, and paint (he brought pyroxylin, early acrylic, to people's attention), and that he taught a workshop in New York City. We tried to paint murals in high school. John Biggers was emphasizing that with his students at Texas Southern University. I did not actually see the work in Mexico City until the '70s, but what I did see were pictures, and its use of sculptural form for mosaic. In terms of dynamics they were way ahead.

**MB** I have heard sculptors talk about a very particular physical experience that comes with welding. The handling, the material, the use of fire, there's a kind of sensuality that's involved with the materials, with the joining... There's a totality of experience that's different from any other kind of sculptural making.

**ME** I liked hammering, and making noise, and heating and bending things... What I liked about the handling of steel was that you could make forms, and you could change them and make things with them. It's physical in ways beyond carving. And I'll say this: Once I started to weld, I realized much of the world was welded. Before then, I wasn't aware of it. You couldn't have told me that cars were welded. Somehow I thought there was some system that made them smooth and fit into each other, formed. I just felt I could make something with the ways it looked like they made things. I started seeing that the backs of dump trucks were welded, and they looked like reliefs. And to this day, I say, "I could pull off the backs of fifty dump trucks and do a show like MoMA did with the Matisse *Back* reliefs, and people would be into it."

**MB** In terms of the welding and the steel, was there a politics to it? Historically, certainly with David Smith, there was the notion of making, and the material was identified with labor, with the working class; it was still a non-precious material. There was a different set of associations that came with metal than with marble or wood or clay.

**ME** You know, the class issue—or *issues*, plural—in American life and American art, that wasn't part of it for me. All I ever knew was people who were working class. Everybody was



underpaid, and you just did what you had to do to have a job and take care of the family. I think, in a way, I just took it for granted. In fact, if sports gave me anything, it was: If you want to do something, you've got to spend a lot more time on it than other people. I was used to doing that. So people said steel was heavy. Well, shit, I was an athlete. (*laughter*) It wasn't an issue, is all I'm trying to say. I did like the resistance of the material. As I got to know more about making sculpture, I think I appreciated all of that more, and was glad I was a part of it. It was a good fit; I was comfortable with it.

**MB** Did you have a feeling that you were working for a particular audience, a sense of who's going to look at this and who's going to appreciate it?

**ME** People always seemed to think that my work was worth looking at. I understood early on that my immediate audience was my family and community. I work for myself first, and then whoever's around me, usually family and friends, and then I take it out into the world that looks at art. When I got to LA, I saw that there was an art world, but there was very little black presence in it, so I hoped that I would be so good that maybe I could break into it. That seemed to be what happened. At the same time, there started to be more black students in art. When I was at LACC, one of my closest friends, a fellow football player from Texas, Marvin Harden, showed up at the life drawing class. I said, "What are you doing here?" He said, "Well, what are *you* doing here?" And there was some interest in the black community, little groups, art clubs, or just little pockets of people. I met a group called the Seekers in LA, in 1958, when I was at County Art Institute. They were what I'd call Sunday painters: people who had aspirations but were working at the post office. The first sculptor I got to meet who carved wood... He had carved a fairly large drummer, like an African drummer, but in its approach to form, it was Henry Moore-ish. I was shocked. I said, "Where'd you come from?" There was another sculptor, George Clack, who did very complicated and intricate abstract carved things. He should have had a place in *Now Dig This!*, but he was a little before David Hammons; he might have even been slightly older than me. Anyway, his life evidently didn't translate into a presence, and I didn't know him well. LA is a big city, and most of the black artists never found a place.

**MB** There was a point, though, where, instead of a number of African American artists being scattered—at least this is my impression from *Now Dig This!*—it actually began to coalesce into a world where artists were aware of one another. Was it an actual community?

**ME** LA was too spread out, but there were relationships. I never thought of myself as part of a group. We were just friends. California was, you could be free and do your own thing. The LA art world that exists now did not exist then. Ferus Gallery was closer to a group. The Ferus artists went to art schools. I think the Brockman Gallery opened in about June of '67, and I had left that January. They had no presence to me and the ones that I was active with... David Hammons was a student at Otis, or County Art Institute, in '67, '68, and I was teaching at Chouinard already. Daniel Johnson had gone to Chouinard, and him and Ron Miyashiro—he lived next door to me, a jeweler who then went on to make sculpture—and Marvin Harden, who had graduated from UCLA, and Virginia Jaramillo at Chouinard, who was the first one of us who showed in a gallery. [Virginia Jaramillo is the wife of Dan Johnson. And Melvin played football with Marvin Harden back in Texas.] I'll refer to "us," because we did visit each other's studios and homes, and we were friends. Johnson lived maybe ten or twelve blocks away, and that's not far in LA terms. Miyashiro lived next door, and Ed Burrell; they were all art school people. I wasn't. I was a football player and a typical college kind of person.

The issues related to the needs of black people did come up, and very strongly. There was one graduate student, and I'm very thankful to him and for having known him. His name was Herman Bailey. Herman was about seven years older, and he'd already studied in the South, I think at Alabama State, but he had grown up in Chicago. He liked music and jazz. He said he had been a band boy for Sonny Stitt. Well, that's a significant modern jazz musician. Anyway, his intention was to do something that was socially aware and provocative. As he would put it, "Brother Mel, I'm sticking with my black thing." Francis de Erdely, who was also my good friend, was very helpful to him. I myself had not the specific consciousness to be the kind of leader and activist [Herman Bailey] was at that point. He always said at USC, jokingly but meaningfully, "Look, when I graduate, I'm leaving this country, going to Africa, marrying me a princess, and I'll live happily ever after." Well, he went in the time of Nkrumah [then leader of Ghana] to Ghana and did become very important in the art world there, teaching in the six

years or so that Nkrumah lasted in the '60s. He was a part of the Ideological Institute, did portraits of Nkrumah and of W. E. B. Dubois. I have a photo he sent me of himself holding a torch in the dark in Ghana. They did torchlight parades in support of the Civil Rights Movement.

So I was in touch with people, but I wasn't part of what in New York was the specific Black Arts Movement, which people now use as a label all the time, and you are assumed to have been part of it. Which is fine, I don't object to that, but whenever I speak of it, I just say, "You know, the Black Arts Movement always existed, as long as there were black people." It had different emphases and needs. In Africa, culturally, through the years, you didn't have to think about white to make black art. It just was the art of the people; it wasn't in struggle with another culture. Okay, in the United States, our history has been such that anything we come up with creatively often has that slant to it in some way. Scott Joplin composed symphonic things, but he also was the founder of ragtime. He also was from Texarkana, from that little tribe. I understood a lot of this then, partly because I was reading record covers, and music history, and jazz history. At the same time, one of my housemates, who was Jewish, from Brooklyn, David Lawrence Goldberg, he whistled Bach and painted in the house we had together. Because a lot of his friends were musicians, and USC was a strong school for music, I was exposed to Webern and Schoenberg and stuff. Those names were popping up a little bit in jazz information as well; so I was understanding a multiple track.

Now during that period, '55 or '56, a fellow student, Virginia Burton, showed me drawings of Charles White's. It was a political magazine of some kind; I have no idea what. Then his work was in the film *Anna Lucasta* in '58, in that short period I was out of school. He was in LA and showed at USC, at the Fisher Gallery. And I already knew of Jacob Lawrence; I had seen his reproductions back in high school. (In the LA art world he did not exist. There was nothing published on black artists in this period. They were older, but their influence was not felt.) Romare Bearden didn't exist in that period; he really had no public presence. And I knew John Biggers in Houston, and of course his work is focused on the black community, as his subject matter. So I already knew that those were ways of thinking, and they weren't foreign to me, but... How would I put it? When I was in figure drawing class, if the model was black, you could say I was a black artist by what the subject matter was. What I was intent on was how I was trying to draw. I wasn't using schoolwork to be my expression of myself.

**MB** You said you make art for yourself first. But there obviously was a kind of radicalization in the '60s. Certainly, when you started to make the *Lynch Fragments*, there's a purposefulness to that work, a kind of in-your-face intention. You may not have known who you could affect when you made them, but that's definitely work that was intended to speak to a certain history, to a certain situation, and to make a difference.

**ME** You're just about saying it right. I was expressing a certain notion in that work. The model for me, more than other visual artists, was the music. Jazz musicians were expressing without being literal. There might be titles. There was a Sonny Rollins composition that I named a piece of sculpture after. The name of the composition was "Airegin," which is Nigeria spelled backwards. When I realized he did that, I started really looking at things. In the late '50s there was a hyperconsciousness in jazz of the relationships with Africa. One of my daughters, Allma, her middle name is Kora, which is my grandmother's name, but it's also the name of an African musical instrument. And her first name, there's a Dizzy Gillespie composition called "Con Alma," which means "with soul." Then there was Johnny Griffin, a very strong saxophone player who played with Thelonious Monk. He put out two albums that showed Arabic influence in the music and the title. They were the kind of extended things with Arabic words in the music or African words for titles. But the music was already different. It was like an effort was being made to be as creative as you could, but at the same time it came from your heritage. And the bass player Ahmed Abdul-Malik, who was from a Sudanese family, but born in Brooklyn, he played with Thelonious Monk. It was very cutting-edge jazz in that period. For me, that was the realm that a lot of my thinking bounced off of, as opposed to visual art; there was no information on black artists; whereas album covers were like little chapbooks on creativity. There was always some relevant stuff that you could hang your thinking on.



Left: Melvin Edwards, *Diarniadio*, 2004, welded steel, 21 x 21 x 8½ inches.  
 Right: Melvin Edwards, *Wayou Tugge*, 2014, welded steel, 15¼ x 15¼ x 6¼ inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. ©2014 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The other thing is that composition was always very important to me. Early on, when I was studying art, the Renaissance principle of six heads to a figure or whatever it was—well, once you're working abstractly, it's not that kind of dynamic. One of the things I always thought about Jacob Lawrence was that he was a great composer. I still feel that way. Now, I would say his cartoonish abstractions sometimes wouldn't have been my choice, but I understood them because teachers like Joe Mugnaini at County Art Institute talked about the dynamics of cartoons and how a lot of early cartoon history was based on geometry. You know, Mickey Mouse's round head, and then two circles for the ears, that kind of thing. Mugnaini did diagrams. Since Cubism is circle, triangle, and square—or the three-dimensional version, cube, cone, pyramid—let's say you've got a circle, and you've got a pure triangle, and if you put that triangle into the circle, you impact it dynamically. Those kinds of thoughts stayed with me. It often isn't the subjective that moves the internal dynamics of how I work, as much as it is thoughts like that. At the same time, in my looking at the work as it moves into finding itself, other thoughts come in. Especially in the sense of how to name it, what name is starting to grow with this *thing*. Sometimes it comes during the piece, sometimes afterward. Never before. You know, my corny lecture explanation of that is, making experimental art is like making a baby: everybody's busy enjoying themselves, nobody's thinking about what the baby's name will be. (*laughter*)



Melvin Edwards, *At Crossroads*, 1984, welded steel, 10½ x 8 x 8.88 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** The *Lynch Fragments* are obviously more direct in some ways. Once they have the titles

that they have, you can't get around them.

**ME** The title came about a little later, but I realized I was developing a body of work. I just didn't want them stuck in formalist criticism; I wanted to make you think about why I made the work. For me, the whole thing about modern art is, you can invent your own game and all the rules. It's just a matter of, does it come out vital as work? That's the kind of thing that allowed me to think broadly even though it looks like I'm working narrowly.

**MB** So it's a combination of a very emphatic directness, and then this other language that you're talking about, the abstraction, which is almost the opposite, a resistance to an either/or, or us/them, or this/that, where the work has a kind of freedom to it, and it can go anywhere, and it seems it's really the combination of the two.

**ME** Any people in the world that's large enough of a group to call themselves a people, they end up having their own language, their own way of saying, "This is how we are." Okay. I didn't have any awareness of the Jewish community until I lived in Los Angeles. Then there's Chagall, who was a part of your education as much as Picasso or anybody else. So I made some assumptions that, well, if other people's culture is very important to them, and it can function in art, then mine can, too. The only problem was we didn't have much history to reference in terms of modern art. But everyone has past, present, and future. Every society has what they found, but there's also what they invent. One of my discussions within the black art community was with people who said, "Abstraction can't be black." Well, I don't know why not. It always was. Besides, we do new and experimental stuff with music, with any number of other things. Why not with art? I realized I was talking to people who hadn't played with those thoughts much. A lot of people were culturally progressive, but they were rooted in the politics of social realism, coming out of the '30s, and they figured, well, if you're going to be black and radical, it ought to be a certain way. I said, "It's fine if it is that way, but there are other ways to develop it." That was all in that early '60s period where we did discuss these things and pass them around. We were very happy with Charlie Parker and that whole bebop music period because it showed that a black movement could be comprehensive in the world in terms of its creativity. It's a totally modern music, but at the same time, it does have a history of the particular culture that it comes from. The thing that many people miss, I think, is they think of Africa as something small like a country, when it's really a continent that, within itself, has incredible diversity, and encounters, and mixtures, and an array of language or creativity.



Melvin Edwards, *Before Words*, 1990, steel, 107 x 94 x 120 inches.  
Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman  
Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York.

**MB** We certainly know now that African art was crucial to the development of abstraction, which is maybe the signature expression of artistic modernity. So, in terms of your understanding or recognizing a compatibility of your own history with the language of abstraction, and being able to take that and go with it—I don't know how much it was verbalized, but you knew it.

**ME** No, it was verbalized. I mean, there wasn't any question. I always felt that the person who said, "Well, abstract art is not ours," they were just uninformed. But some very important

people, culturally important people, were saying things like that, and more in New York than anywhere else. When I got to New York, I was surprised at how backward a lot of people were. They may have been politically and socially advanced in relation to the quality of [larger] American life, or life in the world, but they still hadn't sorted those things out; and I think it was just, they hadn't had the experience or education. It's very interesting to me now to see people who go anywhere they want to with it. I think technology, education, and integration have changed the world in a lot of subtle ways, but very much so. I mean, I made tapes in the '60s in LA, trying to do stuff with sound. I had a filmmaking friend who used a recording of mine as a soundtrack for his film, and it won a prize at the Trieste Film Festival [1968]. So I was thinking in terms of sound, in terms of space, all of that. I just felt free to do those things; I didn't feel limited. I felt that if it really comes out of me and not from anyplace else, then it's valid, and it's interesting.

**MB** At what point did you have your own full welding operation?

**ME** It was early on, '62 or '63, when I took the class at Southern California. I was working a job, and taking this class at night, and I realized I had enough space to have my own equipment. Karen and I were living in a building that had apartments upstairs and a storefront below, and a garage out back. Karen was a painter, and she had a studio in the storefront. Our daughter Ana was a baby at the time, but Karen was fairly serious, and she painted in her spare moments. I set up my welding operation out in the garage. I didn't weld in the house.



Melvin Edwards in his Studio. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

**MB** When [David] Smith lived in Brooklyn Heights, he welded in their apartment. His wife was always running after him with a watering can, because he was in danger of burning the building down.

**ME** The only time I did something like that was in the studio I had on Avenue B and Second Street, from 1970 to '76. The first few years I didn't weld there at all, and then finally I couldn't resist. It had wooden floors. I arc welded and protected the floor from the sparks, but it was totally illegal. The elevator was only as wide as this table, so I'd lift stuff on a rope out the window. (*laughter*)

**MB** You started the *Lynch Fragments* in '63. The first one was *Some Bright Morning*, which referred to a particular event. Did you feel that your work really changed when you started making the *Fragments*? [These are small, abstract sculptures.]

**ME** Oh yeah. The change was already coming, but that solidified it. That was like, "Wait, yeah, you got something." I was already painting eight-by-eight-foot paintings; the idea was already there that, if you're going to be a modern artist, you've got to paint big, so here come these little things, just the opposite. But it made sense, and it kept making more sense. I realized that, in some ways, it was what I was trying to do in the paintings, but you can't do this with paintings.

**MB** It doesn't seem like one plans to make a *Lynch Fragment*. You just have an idea, maybe you go in, and then they happen. They have their own rhythm, and one succeeds another. Were they essentially done in one sitting? Does it depend on the work?

**ME** It depends on the work, and it varies an awful lot. The small size was great for experimenting; you could run through a lot of ideas and a lot of variety on a small scale. It's like a composition on a record; in the club, they may play for forty minutes on it, but those compositions all could be succinctly three minutes. But those first two or three, they happened pretty quickly. It was like what they say about athletes. I was probably in the zone and didn't know it.

**MB** The year you started the *Lynch Fragments*, 1963, was the year of the March on Washington, and Kennedy's assassination, so it's an explosive time.

**ME** It's been exactly fifty years since I started the *Fragments*, and I'll say this: There was a discussion at that time about art and what you could do, how much social comment you could put into your work. The rhetoric of the time was art for art's sake, no question; but I realized, historically, art has been made for every fucking reason in the world by everybody, any time they want it. And you cannot say that it can only be made for one kind of philosophical approach. That's like saying if people can't dance a certain style of dancing, they don't know nothing about dance. Well, people dance every kind of way all over the world. Once that little idea came into my head, the *Lynch Fragments* started coming.



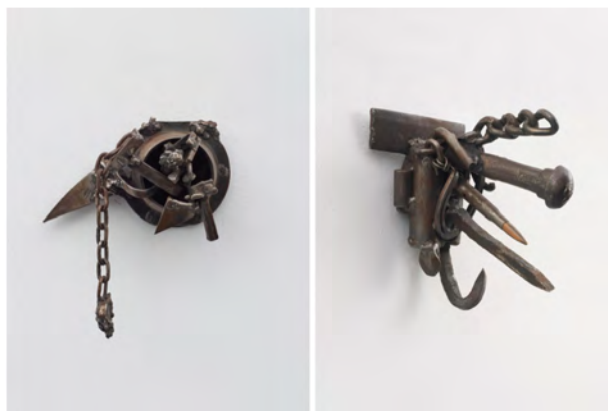
Melvin Edwards, *Ekuafu*, 1994, welded steel, 15.63 × 10.75 × 8.38 inches.  
Courtesy of Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York;  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights  
Society (ARS), New York.

I remember a guy at SC who had a reputation as a composer, and he told me one time that Chet Baker was a better trumpeter than Clifford Brown. I said, "No, he isn't. I don't agree with that at all." He said, "Well, Chet Baker is much more accurate." And I said, "Yeah, he's much less dynamic."

Now, there's room for both ways of approaching the trumpet, but if you want to say he's better, then you have an attitude about composition that I don't share. I remember that because electronic music was just coming, and that wasn't my realm or anything, but I liked listening to anything that was dynamic. It could be old; it could be new. I was like anybody young and in the arts: The idea that people are making something brand new *now*—that was attractive. At the same time, I wanted to be sure that what I was making came from me, and that I was a part of my culture. My culture was in the United States, so it would be American, but the African part had to be acknowledged. We did in my family, so why not?

**MB** I want to get a sense from you of the effect of Watts, in '65.

**ME** When it happened, I was at work at the Peterson Company, that animation house. All of a sudden, there was a buzz, something's going on in LA, riots and burning; and a lady said, "Haven't you heard? You live in that part of town." I said, "No, I haven't heard a thing." Well, I really didn't live in Watts; I lived in the Crenshaw/Leimert Park area, which is fairly far west. Jayne [Cortez, my second wife] grew up in Watts, on 115th Street, and she had founded her first theater company there. [Watts Repertory Theater, 1964, founded the year before riots.] Abe Adler and his wife, Mimi Adler, had a gallery on La Cienega, and his family had a glass business in Watts, on 104th Street. When he heard that something was up, he said, "Hey, our family's been there all the time, it won't be any problem for me." He drove down there, and he got within twenty blocks of the store, and he realized, "No, this is something extraordinary, and I'd better get out of here." And he did. Where I lived, the military occupied the area and patrolled it. There was very little damage that far west. In terms of the effect on my work, I had already started making the *Lynch Fragments*; they had already been shown at the Santa Barbara Museum. A couple of people wrote, later, "Melvin Edwards went and collected stuff from Watts and welded them into the *Lynch Fragments*," but that's not true. Watts itself always was symbolically the center, like Harlem for New York. But Watts was mixed, too. That's another misconception. Jayne talked about how it was Mexicans and gypsies when she was growing up. The problem for her generation in LA was that there were very few black students in white schools, so they had rough times, being the first black students in those schools. This is typical, I would say, of the Northern experience in relation to race, and the explosion of Watts was a consequence that was underneath and always there. It's integrated on the surface, and most times, you certainly don't find the apparent racism of the South, but you find discrimination in the North. The police in Los Angeles were terrible, terrible. I didn't have anywhere near the problems in Texas that I had with Los Angeles police. The police chief at the time was a fascist militarist named Parker. No question, they got what they deserved. That happened on his watch, and all that stuff about, "Well, we'll keep them oppressed and they won't ever do anything..." Since then, the police hide if they get a call, because the next generation became very violent. I don't happen to like that, but I realize that's the dynamics.



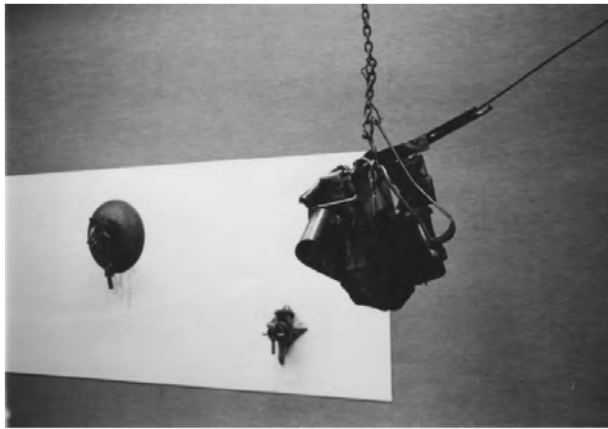
Left: Melvin Edwards, *Some Bright Morning*, 1963, welded steel, 14½ × 9.3 × 5 inches. Right: Melvin Edwards, *Grenada*, 1983, welded steel, 10.13 × 7½ × 9.88 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

African Americans, in art in particular, we never expressed the strongest feelings or the strongest situations. With the title *Lynch Fragments*, I wanted to take the most oppressive encounter, if you will, symbolically, and say, "That's what people think is okay to happen to us." I'm working in contradistinction to that. I make fine art, but I don't have to do art for art's sake. I can do art for the sake of dealing with this. Now, if you make a work of art, does it change anything? On one level, no, it doesn't. On another level, once it has a public place, it makes people think. That's what it is to be expressive. That's what I liked about the title Abstract Expressionism: Your work was abstract in

mode, but what you were expressing was up to you. I figured that, if I called them *Lynch Fragments*, people couldn't say, "Well, the form does this and the form does that," and just dismiss it. As we know, any number of good artists have been dismissed, as many as have been appreciated.

**MB** How did the Santa Barbara show happen?

**ME** Arthur Secunda, the artist who was the editor for *Artforum*, and I met. He was before Leider and then Coplans. [Their lineage at *Artforum* was: Secunda, Leider, Coplans.] Arthur came to California in '64. He wanted Tom Leavitt, the director of the Santa Barbara Museum, to see my work. So we all met in Santa Barbara. I figured Leavitt would pat me on the head and say, "Well, it's nice work. Good luck." That was all I expected. Instead, after about fifteen or twenty minutes, he started talking about a show at the museum the next spring. That floored me, to say the least.



Melvin Edwards, Installation view of *Sculpture* by Melvin Edwards, Santa Barbara Museum, 1965. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** And what year are we talking about?

**ME** I would say probably the fall of '64, so it was before Watts. It was before any of that.

**MB** Good timing.

**ME** It was very good timing. But I should explain: the incident that pushed my thinking in those directions, more than the riots, was the killing of Ronald Stokes, in 1962, in the shooting-up of the mosque. I can still see the picture of his body after the autopsy. Of course the police version and the community version are totally different. I knew what had happened. It was a case of intimidation, as simple as that. Well, Malcolm X came to town. That was the only time I heard Malcolm X live. He introduced Muhammad Ali. I took my two younger brothers to hear him. I wasn't about to join any organization because that's the way I've been forever—except the Boy Scouts, in order to go to camp. I like to listen to what people have to say, but I wasn't looking for somebody to lead me. Just like Martin Luther King, I appreciated his effort, and I also appreciated Malcolm's efforts, but I wasn't interested in joining any organizations, because it was cultish from my point of view. On the other hand, our community needed organizations, and engaged African Americans were forming some. I wouldn't doubt that every large city had groups of culturally engaged people involved in a social way. Later, in New York, I was involved with the Smokehouse group—a functional wall painting group—with William T. Williams. The only group I ever was involved with in California was mainly people from the Seekers, in around '58 or '59. They were what you'd call Sunday painters; they really had meetings on Sundays. Jacob Lawrence and Charlie Wright's generation belonged, and they were fine with me. So, The Watts riots—of course riots are riots, and they destroy a lot of stuff that you wish wasn't destroyed. My wish was that, if we're going to do this, let's do it organized and really hit some things that have been causing the pain. There were people who said, "All you've got to do is go to the hills in Southern California and light them up, and they'll burn on their own for half a year." And people knew, and people lived all over the place, but they kept it within Watts... And the police and military contained it.

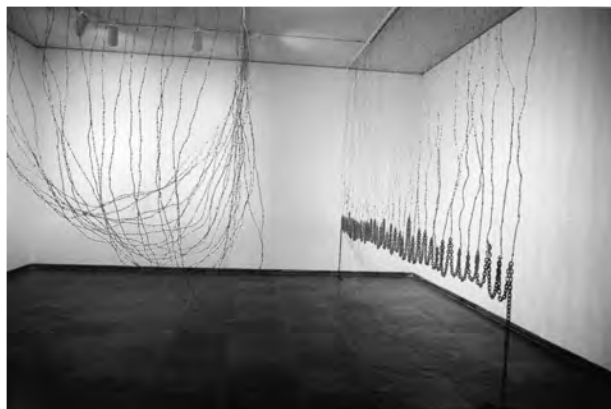
**MB** Why did you move to New York?



**ME** I'd always had my eye on New York; the music, the jazz world was there, but it was mainly about the art. My first wife and I, as young artists, thought New York was the place to be. But we didn't have the means. At that point we had three daughters: our twins, Allma and Margit, had been born in '65. Meanwhile, I had won one of the Los Angeles County Museum's Art Council Awards, and there was a major show for five artists who'd gotten that award over a four-year period: Llyn Foulkes, Tony Berlant, Lloyd Hamrol, and another guy who gave up art, I think. I forget his name. Anyway, I showed six major pieces there, and people knew me—and nothing happened for my work. No gallery, nothing. So it really felt like time to come to New York, and then I got the opportunity. I'd just won a Whitney Fellowship, and I had sold one sculpture, so I had, like, six or seven thousand dollars, and that seemed enough to move a family in those years. I came to New York to check it out, though, to be sure, and I got lucky. They were making a fictional film about a sculptor for NBC [for *Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theatre*] called *Crazier Than Cotton*. Whoever the director was, he was cognizant of modern art. Evidently, the people who worked for him went out and got some contemporary sculpture, and he said, "Naw, this stuff won't do. You've got to find someone who looks credible," whatever he thought that was. They wanted a welder. Somebody told him about my work; it may have been Gabe Kohn. Anyway, they came, they said what they needed, and I had a piece that I bolted a piece of steel to so they could mess with it in the film. For that moment I was Hollywood, the only sculpture I faked. They paid me eight hundred dollars to rent the piece, and then it came back. Well, eight hundred dollars was my money to come to New York for a month and see if it was really feasible for a person with a family to live in New York. I stayed with David Novros and I rented a place down in the South Street Seaport area, 76 Jefferson Street, which had artists in the building: Brice Marden, Janet Fish, Steve Poleskie... Then I taught the last six months of '66 at Chouinard, and in January I moved to New York. It's funny, that piece they used in the film—Hans Burkhardt, who had been one of my teachers at USC, bought it from me when he knew I was moving to New York; he wanted to help me move with some money. Then in '91, he was giving his collection to various places, and he asked who he should give it to, and I said the Studio Museum in Harlem, so he did. And then Kellie Jones put it in *Now Dig This!*.

**MB** The Whitney show happened pretty soon after you came to New York. Was that planned before you came?

**ME** No, but there had been some relationship with Whitney people. Bill Agee had come to LA and had seen the *Lynch Fragments* and the work in my studio and wanted some for the [1966] Whitney Annual, I guess it would have been '65 [when he saw my work], but it was already organized so it was too late. [The first Whitney Biennial occurred in 1973.] Another person who came from New York, museum-wise, was Campbell Wyly, who ran the Art Lending Service at MoMA. He did take a couple of the *Lynch Fragments* and showed them in the rental gallery, but nobody ever rented them. He was the person who told me, before the Studio Museum was a reality, that they were going to develop a new museum in Harlem, and he said it was going to be a good place to show art. Ultimately, he was on their board of directors. I lost touch with him, years back.



Melvin Edwards, Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970.

**MB** The Whitney show *Works*, obviously was a big deal.

**ME** It was a big deal. My pieces in this show were the first of the barbed wired pieces shown. My show was in 1970. In the winter of '69, they had shown Al Loving [*Alvin Loving: Paintings*, December 19, 1969–January 25, 1970]. His was the first of those shows. Earlier that year there had been a lot of rumbling in the art world. William T. Williams had done this show at the Studio Museum in 1969, *X to the Fourth Power*, with me, him, Sam Gilliam, and Steve Kelsey. Then, in October, Lawrence Alloway did a second version of that show, at SUNY Stony Brook. It was called *5+1*; it was me, Jack Whitten, William T. Williams, Danny Johnson, and Sam Gilliam, and then Frank Bowling. He was the plus one, because he wasn't American. Frank really joined us all. He was also the only one that Alloway trusted as an intellectual, because he had the Queen's accent. I picked that up pretty quick. (*laughter*) Frank would run that shit, and I'd say, "Frank, come on." We were good friends, and still are. Anyway, Sam Hunter was supposed to then take the show to Princeton, but I think he got nervous. We were to come out and see the space. Well, Sam showed us a fucking closet. (*laughter*) My work at Stony Brook was forty feet across. We had a quick conference and said to each other, "He's not serious. He doesn't really want to show us." We thanked him and said, "No, we think we'd rather not do it." So he didn't have to tell us that he didn't want to. Anyway, then [Robert] Mac Doty put on Loving's show, and then he wanted me to show the *Lynch Fragments*. He had seen them somewhere; I don't know whether he came to LA or what. But I said, "I'd really like to show my most recent work." Who knows, that may or may not have been a mistake in a sense, but I think it was the right thing, because I didn't want to be the guy from California showing the California stuff. The barbed wire work was new, developed in New York. My cousins, the Taylor family, when I'd visit them in the country outside Houston, they had barbed wire fences all around, because they all had cows and horses. I encountered the barbed wire again in upstate New York; I was teaching at Orange County Community College in '68 and '69, and I had a house upstate, and I did some welding up there. I started doing the plans and diagrams for the barbed wire pieces there.



Melvin Edwards, Installation views, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970.

**MB** Where did you get the barbed wire?

**ME** I bought it at Agway. Upstate there were these rural, agricultural supply places. It would have taken quite a while to find barbed wire in New York City.

**MB** Did you work with it with gloves? Did you like working with that material?

**ME** I had to use gloves, no question. I was working with it because I liked what it did. I got scratches and punctures, which was a problem, but it had lots of possibility. And right away, and again these are my art history instincts, I said, Well, between the chain and the barbed wire, you've touched on drawing in space with totally different materials. Here I had materials that were what they were, but people already had them loaded with poetic and political and other realities. In the little brochure that accompanies the show, I wrote about what barbed wire was, and William T. Williams added a little analysis of how, mechanically or formally, I was thinking.

**MB** Which floor or which space did you have at the Whitney?

**ME** It was the big room downstairs, off the lobby. The show consisted of four works. There was the barbed wire curtain, a variation of the one I did for Alloway at Stony Brook, except that this one didn't cut people off from coming into the room. Then there was the looped piece, which was a square on the ceiling that was named after [a line in] one of the poems in Jayne's first book. "The mirrored distance in measured time" was the line. It wasn't very sophisticated mathematically, it was just the notion of a square on the ceiling, and if you make equidistant points and you hang equal lengths of barbed wire, as the points get further apart, the wire slowly gets higher and higher, so you get this quasi-cone developed off of a square. It's a flexible form based on a rigid, linear placement diagram.

**MB** Were you pleased with the Whitney show?

**ME** Oh yeah, very much. There's no reference to Smith, no reference to Caro, or to anybody who worked with steel, and yet it was steel. It wasn't welded, but what I had learned from using steel was that where things were joined, like in a chain, it's manipulated. A lot of times, in the end, it doesn't look like it's affected by gravity. On the chain curtains, gravity is pretty clear. In the smaller works, like the *Lynch Fragments*, sometimes gravity's effects are clear. Or there can be a fixed placement of the chain or a combination of the two that determines the value of the form. There can be suspension. As soon as you add elements with fairly specific weights to preexisting linear geometry, it affects their placement in space. Every time you add form, it changes the whole spatial configuration of a piece. Like when there's an eclipse; the light moves, and it changes the whole composition of the sky. Now how that one, two, three, four changes—I can't describe it. I use my own intuition and some awareness of Antonio Gaudí's use of chains in architecture. Early on in the '60s, I bought a book on Gaudí. How he developed structures for arches by suspending chains from two points. I've paid much more attention to him than Caro. I've actually developed it using gravity, but then you weld it so it's fixed.



Melvin Edwards, *Chaino*, 1964, welded steel and chains, 62 x 102 x 26 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** Do you see it, in some sense, as related to a piece like *Chaino*?

**ME** Oh, yeah. One time, early on, maybe '62 or '63, when I was moving from painting to sculpture, I sat down and wrote out what I thought was going to be the difference. I was that conscious that I was moving from painting to sculpture. It was, Okay, you can do work that's freestanding, because that's what sculpture is, three dimensions. You can use the whole environment, because three dimensions means the whole environment. You can do work that comes from the floor, work that comes from the wall, work that comes from the ceiling. And if you develop your ideas, maybe you'll get something special out of it. That was the gist of it. I was pretty aware of the possibilities. And in '65, I was very aware of David Smith, no question. People were starting to talk about Caro, but he didn't mean that much to me. When I did see his work, I understood the difference. I didn't think he was as strong as Smith, but I did feel the idea that more of the environment was covered by a piece, that was significant. But the person I really appreciated for that idea was Sugarman. I met George in '65, and he showed me pictures of his work—I didn't see it in person until I moved to New York in '67. What I liked was the color. That period was when I suspended *Chaino*, but in the frame. I had shown it at Santa Barbara, but attached to the ceiling in the corner, no frame. So I was aware that suspension had some possibilities. I showed maybe six suspended pieces, generally on that principle.

In *Chaino* suspension and tension go together. The elements are pieces of chain; originally the notion was each piece would change depending on what space it was in. You need different lengths of chain to accommodate the different spaces. *Chaino* did not have access to walls or ceiling. You can call it environmental in the sense of its relationship to the gallery or museum. The title came from a conjunction, a merging, of Chano and Chino Pozo's names. They were musicians who brought African and Cuban rhythms, and percussions and drumming, to jazz

music.

**MB** With the Whitney show, you must have clearly felt that something was going to take off, that something was really going to happen.

**ME** I did and I didn't. I had hopes, don't get me wrong, but I had been through LA, where, okay, your picture's in the paper, you get a Whitney Foundation Fellowship, you show at the County Museum, and they ain't buying nothing. I figured that maybe LA would pay attention now that I was doing something in New York. Well, not a word. *Not a mumbling word*, as the old song goes. So I became stoic. I realized that I had to just, if I liked making art, keep doing it. I was creating an art life, and where I thought my work should be in relation to the quality of work that was out there... Well, it was a fact of life.

Meanwhile, in '69, Karen had moved back to California with the girls. We were splitting up, and she needed to be in LA, and I had to decide what to do. I almost moved out there, too, just to be near my children. But then I changed my mind. I felt I really should go ahead and continue what I was trying to do. Luckily, the kids were around my family an awful lot. And my family was better than me, in certain ways. They're a family that's just structured to take care of itself. At the same time, even though Karen and I no longer saw eye to eye, she was very good with taking care of them and working.

When I was discussing my father having to leave Ohio, you mentioned the word "failure." It's a word I never use, but my father did, and I always was sorry that he did. I felt that he carried too much of that kind of weight, when much of it wasn't his fault. He didn't make the world he had to make his way in. My mother was more resilient. I would say my father was more brilliant, but she was more resilient. And I felt early on you had to be that way. You had to be able to take this shit a long time. Also, I was living an interesting life. Jayne and I often talked about, "Well, we could have had more money," but then we laughed and said, "Well, shit, a whole lot of people haven't gone as many places, seen as many things"—

**MB** —met as many interesting people.

**MB** When did you meet Jayne?

**ME** We met in LA in about 1964. We didn't start to have an interest in each other directly until 1969 when I had done the drawings for her first book of poetry [*Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (New York: Phrase Text, 1969)]. A mutual friend, Bob Rogers had called [and said] that she needed some drawings. She knew I was a sculptor but not sure of my 2-D work. We knew each other at a distance. We were all mutual friends in the art and political world of LA, with Rogers's studio being the headquarters for SNCC. Jayne was an activist working with him from '64 to '67.

In '67 I moved to NY, and so did Bob and Jayne. Occasionally we would all meet to talk about LA and our interests in the arts. Once, Jayne asked me to do the drawings—I had never seen the poetry, and I said, "Wait this is really good; I'm not sure my drawings are up to what she needs." So I said if she couldn't use them she could discard them. After that we became close friends and after that was our history of life and art together.

Jayne was a very important part of my trips to Africa.

**MB** Your first trip to Africa was in 1970. You later made regular trips there, to different countries. What was that first trip like? Did Africa become a major part of your life the first time you set foot there?

**ME** I would say that it did. In my mind, Africa was always there, in one form or another. Friends of mine had gone to Ghana and worked there, but they all left when Nkrumah was ousted in the coup in 1966. Before that, Herman Kofi Bailey, my friend from USC, was my correspondent between me and Africa. This trip in 1970 happened because of a grant. Jayne and I got together at the end of 1969, and I started teaching at the University of Connecticut, at Storrs, in January of 1970. They had a grant program for faculty, so I applied to go to Africa, but I got turned down. Meanwhile, Jayne had applied for a Rockefeller Foundation Grant to take this trip to Africa. She had been to Ghana and Nigeria before, in '67, with her son, Denardo. She was moving to New York from Los Angeles, so the two of them took a trip around the world that let them literally end in New York. She and her first husband, Ornette Coleman, divorced in 1964. Anyway, Jayne got the grant. Then I found out that her trip was

being sponsored by Howard University *and* the University of Connecticut, where I was teaching. So I went back to them with that information, and, typical of universities, the grants department didn't know anything about it. So then they gave me the money to go along.

The trip was primarily teachers from the United States, being introduced to Africa and African culture. It was a big group; a hundred and thirty-five people of which I'd say a hundred and ten were black. And it was an interesting group, for the most part high school teachers, a lot of them from Philadelphia, but from all over the country, really. The upsurge in interest in African culture was clearly a part of everybody's thing. We went to very interesting places in four countries: Ghana, Togo, Dahomey—which is now called the People's Republic of Benin—and Nigeria. It was a six-week trip, starting in early July. We arrived in Accra, and then went to Cape Coast, to the east. It's a major Ghanaian city and a historical port, and it has a major branch of the University of Cape Coast there, so we stayed in university dorms. The students were away, so we slept in their beds. (*laughter*) We were in Cape Coast for two weeks, and we took trips to various local villages and got a taste of everything. The food every day was straight Ghanaian diet, and it was delicious. Food-wise, I could have sat right down there and stayed, but I'd probably weigh four hundred pounds. A lot of fish and palm oil stew, and African yams, and then—what was similar to what I grew up with—the gumbos and that kind of stuff. I hadn't thought about it growing up, but coastal Texas was like coastal West Africa, in many ways. They've got crocodiles; we've got alligators. Not in the cities, of course, but if you go to the rural parts, the bayous, there is a similarity in the regional experience, whether you know it or not.

We spent a weekend in Kumasi, Ghana. This is important because they were having the first enstoolment of the Ashanti king in forty years. You couldn't have a better introduction to the African culture than that. You could say the ground shook when Asantehene Opoku Ware came in. He visited New York City in 1984; I was asked by the Studio Museum to present him with a gift. I made a version of the *Lynch Fragment*. There was a loose chain inside the piece and if you shook it, you could hear something inside. Ashanta asked for me to demonstrate it, as being a king he could not touch the gift. It went to his collection after he died. Another work that went to a traditional African ruler, Oba Erediauwa, happened in 1985 when I was revisiting [there]. That one didn't have a rattle. All this relates to Jayne because she requested her ashes to be put in both Benin City, Nigeria, and Dakar, Senegal, which was granted. From 1969 to 2013 relationships with universal African culture was an essential part to our approach to life and aesthetics in general. Collaboration is an important word here as we came to a lot of ideas together from our own experience.

After three weeks in Ghana, we spent five days passing through Togo and Dahomey, both very small countries, and then about two weeks in Nigeria: in the capital, Lagos, and Ibadan, about eighty miles inland, really the largest city in West Africa. Ibadan is Yoruba, in content and context. Because we were in a university group, there were a lot of lectures on the history, and there were a lot of small books and booklets available to buy. So I just ate up African history in those places, and I really saw so many connections to—I don't know how to explain it. In my own generation of artists, and people I encountered there, I realized Africa was going to influence me 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. In Nigeria's case, it had been ten years since independence, and they'd just had a huge four-year civil war. Ghana hadn't had a civil war, but they had the problems and dynamics of being a new country and having had a major political coup. If I had to generalize about Ghana and Nigeria, Ghana is the calmer personality; Nigeria is more dynamic.

**MB** Nigeria is a much bigger country.

**ME** Yes, and you could say it's really six countries of twenty or twenty-five million people each. It could easily be that set of units. But I think it's better that they struggle to hold themselves together. It's kind of like, are you going to be a nation-state, like the United States, or are you going to be like the countries in Europe? As for Africa as a whole, Nkrumah's idea of a United States of Africa, that's a dream for the future. There are regional organizations that do some of that kind of thing, some of that connecting, like the European Union is doing for Europe.



Melvin Edwards, *Out of the Struggles of the Past to a Brilliant Future*, 1982, stainless steel. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** Did you feel, when you went, the sense of an entity called “Africa,” or did you feel, immediately, a differentiation among the countries that you went to? Or was it, in part, both?

**ME** It was my opinion, and still is, that it’s both. There are so many connections among the countries, but Africa is too large a continent to be one thing. The North has got its history, ever since Islam, which is about 700 AD, and the North’s been very influenced by that, some of it totally taken over. But in coastal West Africa, you don’t see much of the Islamic aspect. At the same time, what you find out is, historically, various peoples have had migrations in the region. For example, Yoruba culture is in western Nigeria, significant parts of Dahomey or Benin, and somewhat into Togo and Ghana. Then there’s a tribal group in Ghana called Ewe; it’s pronounced “evé,” but it’s e-w-e. That may be because Germany was in control in that region at some point. Ewe people are related linguistically to the Yoruba, all the way over in Nigeria. For instance, the Yoruba word for blacksmith is *alagbẹdẹ*, and the Ewe word is *bẹdẹ*. I pay attention to those things related to metalwork.

The Yoruba traditionally had sixteen different linguistic kingdoms, or variants of the Yoruba language. Technically that word, *Yoruba*, only referred to one of the sixteen groups, the Oyo Yoruba, but they were not the first of the kingdoms. The origin is always Ife, but historically, Oyo became the most, I would say, imperialistic of the Yoruba kingdoms. The relationships, group to group—it’s like, there are Scandinavians, and then there are Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes, but they’re all variants of a Scandinavian linguistic set of ethnic groups.

And just like you can make the connection linguistically between the Ewe and the Yoruba, you can make the connection between the Gas, who are the primary people of Accra, and the Benins, who are Edo. The Gas migrated along the coast to Accra maybe four or five centuries ago from Benin City, in Nigeria. If you say hello to somebody in Benin City, it’s *koyo*, and in Accra, among the Gas, you say *yo*, just a slight change of the word.

You find words and connections, influences and remnants of encounters—primarily because of trade, early on—going back to the 1500s, at least. In western Ghana is an area called Takoradi, and their word for shoe is *zapatza*, very similar to *zapato* in Spanish, or *sapato* in Portuguese. Well, the Portuguese were in that area. The area’s called El Mina, the mine, because they got so much gold from there. Then you go all the way around the continent to Zimbabwe, and if you want to say good morning, you say, “*Manguana, manguana-ni.*” Well, *mañana* in Spanish, *manhã* in Portuguese. It’s because the Portuguese had come in through Mozambique and established communities fairly far inland in the region.

To me, Africa has always been multiple. Think of Africa’s real, old, traditional notion of religion. You didn’t really fight people over what somebody’s religion was. For instance, the Yoruba have a system of *orishas*. People say gods for African *orishas*, but that’s the wrong word. Africans know that God is God above all of that, but you get different powers from different sources. It’s kind of like the patron saints in the Catholic system; your patron saint will guide you through life. Each person who is born, they do a kind of prediction, or divination, and they decide who’s the patron *orisha* for that person. Ogun is the *orisha* of

metalworking. One of the tributes of Ogun is, Ogun slays to the left, Ogun slays to the right. In other words, he's impartial. If Ogun comes out to kill in war, he doesn't care who's on the good side and who's on the bad side. Somebody dies on both sides, because Ogun likes blood. (laughter)

And just to show how the information has come to me in different ways: In the summer of '69, when we had the exhibition at the Studio Museum, Jayne came to the opening with a man who was from Nigeria. One piece of mine was two lengths of chain on the floor. Here we would call it process art, the kind of thing where you simply present the material. These two chains were of slightly different dimensions and therefore different weights. When this man saw that work, he said, "This is related to Ogun." I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "I'll tell you a story. There was an Ogun—" They call blacksmiths by their patron's name sometimes. In Yoruba, *alagbẹdẹ* is the word for blacksmith. Or Ogun, which you could compare to Mars or Vulcan in other cultures. There is a piece of mine at SUNY Purchase, *The Gate of Ogun*. This was in a 1996 show at the White House. Some visitor who was Yoruba saw the sculpture at the White House and saw the title and wanted to know how an American knew the meaning. Well, the president is the commander-in-chief by law, so it was appropriate as Ogun is the commander-in-chief, *balogun*, of the military. The Yoruba visitor said, "Ogun was the smith in his village, and his job was not only to make stuff but to provide protection. Ogun said, 'When I die, put a chain in my grave with me that runs up through the ground to the surface. If the community should ever need me to come and fight their enemies, I'll do so.'" The idea was there for generations, and the kids would say, "Yeah, sure." Well, the story goes, one day some kids rattled Ogun's chain. Of course he came out, and he killed everybody in the neighborhood. So in other words, you don't call on Ogun lightly; you don't make war lightly. So unbeknownst to me at the time, the year after this man told me this story, I would be in West Africa among the Yoruba, starting to get information on metalworking, and one of the places they'd take us is Ife, Ilé-Ife, which is the—how would you say?—the Vatican of Yoruba culture.



Melvin Edwards, *Gate of Ogun*, 1983, stainless steel in two parts, 96 x 144 x 48 inches. Collection Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York. Museum purchase with funds provided by Vera List and the Roy R. and Marie S. Neuberger Foundation, 1996.09.01. Photo by Jim Frank.

**MB** Those histories you're talking about are so complicated, so multiple. How do you begin to orient yourself? What, on that trip, did you feel closest to, or what felt most urgent to you and what felt most distant or most different?

**ME** One incredible thing happened in Ghana on that first trip. We went to Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region; it's maybe seventy miles north of Accra, the capital of Ghana. The day after we got there, they were having the enthronement, or enstoolment, as they call it, of the first Ashanti king in forty years, because the previous king had lived that long. Now, the Ashanti have been a historically significant people since 1700. They've been a cohesive country or group of people for as long as we've been in the United States. The Ashanti nation came to power with a particular warrior king named Osei Tutu. Now there's a history to that, but anyway, here we are in 1970, visiting through Educators to Africa [ETA], and a new king is being enstooled, and we happen to be in the city. So ETA takes us there for the public celebration. It was in a soccer stadium. If any one event said we were there in Africa at the right time, that was it. I mean, we've all heard stories about kings and queens, they ride in coaches, and, you know. But here was an *African king*. We got to the stadium at noon. It took four hours for it to fill up, with entourages from each of the sections of [the] Ashanti [region of Ghana]: Mampong, Brong, et cetera. Each entourage had a hundred or more people, each with drummers, and people all dressed in rust red or black, the funerary colors of Ashanti, or in cloth that has these [symbolic] patterns, adinkra, the funeral cloth. All I can say is, it resonated. It just did. There must have been fifty thousand people in that stadium. The public celebration took all day. [There are many other phases of the ceremony that are private—the whole ceremony is called a *Durbar*.] The president of the country made an appearance; he drove in in his white Mercedes-Benz and his white suit, and there was a nice patter of applause. About twenty minutes later, Asantehene came into the stadium, and, shit, the ground shook. They shot off those old-fashioned guns that make a lot of smoke and shit. Each group had maybe thirty or forty drummers, old men. You know these guys knew everything on the drum you could know. It was just incredible.

I saw other peoples in Africa who were just as vibrant, who also had continuity of culture. Once when we were on the road in some small town in Ghana, we had to stop, because there was a political motorcade, and all of a sudden people with drums filled the road. We saw how things were done traditionally, but at the same time it was a world of automobiles. It's a very mixed set of experiences, and they're living through that mixture. There are villages that have been self-sufficient for thousands of years, so naturally some of the competition or oppression of the twentieth century banging in on them... I could see that it was going to be difficult for Africans for some time to evolve to the level of governments that we have here, for instance. We've been working on it longer, but we went through the same things: civil wars, separating ourselves from the colonial powers, all of that.

**MB** And it's not like what we've got, what we've worked out is such a perfect...

**ME** No, it's not. I didn't know what form the similarities would take, or the differences, but they didn't seem to be problems for me. I'll say this. I had studied anthropology [Los Angeles City College, physiological anthropology, not cultural anthropology] and I was used to running into things about people and about yourself that didn't fit with what you thought you knew before. Yet they were real. I guess you could say I'm lucky I didn't go to Africa at age nineteen. Just like coming to New York at age thirty was better than coming at age twenty. New York has got all these great distractions—who knows what would have happened?

**MB** You went back to Africa the following year, in '71. Did you know immediately, when you got home in 1970, that you were going to go back there soon?

**ME** As soon as I could. The institute was going again, the same trip, and we weren't a part of it formally, but since they had chartered a flight, we traveled with them and, paying our own way, stayed in some of the same university facilities in Accra. We didn't go back to Cape Coast, but went straight on to Lagos in Nigeria. We traveled by bus, the silver dog (what the locals called it), old Greyhounds. Nigeria is a large country. They had just finished a civil war and were on a building campaign and making new roads. At that period Lagos was the capital; it's now Abuja. We stayed at the universities in Ibadan, Lagos, and Yaba. We met John Pepper Clark [poet and playwright] in Lagos and the architect Demas Nwoko in Ibadan; he was the co-chair of the theater department. He was a fine dramatist. Demas felt the best way to move ahead with culture was to retain one's culture and modernize, like the Japanese. This thought was for the young adults dealing with the changes after the civil war. How can a country be its own country? The problems we see now in Africa are because things are not so solved from the past. After those trips, I just wanted more. But I didn't know if I'd have the money. I had



the teaching job, and they'd given me the grant, but I had some California responsibilities, and there was the cost of life in New York. I had a studio on the Lower East Side, on Avenue B and 2nd Street—my second real studio in New York.

**MB** So were you commuting to UConn at Storrs? How was that working?

**ME** I was getting up at five in the morning on Tuesday, driving to Storrs to be in class by nine, and staying there until Thursday. My classes were on Tuesday and Thursday. There was a sculptor there named Ray Hitchcock, and I rented a room from him and stayed those two nights. It did allow me to use the equipment after hours, so I could work on ideas and small things. The first of the rockers, *Coco*; that was the first time I ever used a metal fabricator. That was Bearce Machinery in Coventry, Connecticut. After I moved away, I really wished I could have hung around Bearce for another year or two. I had seen what a fabricator could do.



Left: Melvin Edwards, *Homage to Coco*, 1970, painted steel and chain, 48 x 96 x 120 inches. Right: Melvin Edwards, *Study for Homage to Coco*, 1970, watercolor on paper, 18.13 x 24.13. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** So what did you do for that? You gave them a drawing or a model?

**ME** I gave them a diagrammatical drawing, right down to the inch. They didn't have any trouble fabricating it. They said, "Hey, you got some more work like that? That was easy."

**MB** But most of your work at the time was being done in the city? Or was it being done at Storrs?

**ME** It wasn't a lot of work, really. I mean, it was small, and it was in the loft there in New York, the wooden-floored loft where I was welding. Then in the fall of '72, I started teaching at Rutgers. Bob Cook and I cleaned out a building in Piscataway to work in, but then the building burned down. It turned out to be a good thing, though. They put up a prefab metal building on the nice cement slab that was left, so we had a good place to do metal stuff. At the same time we built some outside buildings where we could cast and fire. Bob was very good at building things.

**MB** Were you teaching welding?

**ME** Not always. In fact, I resisted that, because I didn't want people following me. I was mostly teaching undergraduates, and I tried to teach sculpture comprehensively. But the department got on my case to teach welding. I decided to teach it at the beginning of the semester. So we had very young, inexperienced people handling the equipment, and welding just scares the shit out of everybody, especially co-eds. It's just true. But I'd work with them and tell them, "You can weld like anybody else." My first experience teaching welding, at Chouinard, was that kind of setup. The students who were most interested were women, and they could weld fine. I never had any head trips about what women could handle or not. Plus, just knowing the physical, actual experience, not the attitude, but the actual experience of welding... Well, if something's too heavy, shit, don't lift it. Or get some help. That's what I do. As far as the sparks go, well, we all get sparked, but it's not going to leave a scar. At first they were scared, but then, three days later, these little co-eds were, like, "Zzzzzoom!" I didn't just teach the process, which was simple. I taught them how to approach sculpture; to see what sculpture is in its varieties and let them go with it. Because otherwise, some students have the idea that if you are good at it they should develop your way. And I didn't want any protégés. I wanted them to find their own voice. "How come you won't let us work like you?" I wasn't that

concerned with aesthetics, because they were all over the place. But I had one test for all of the welded projects. We had a cement floor. I said, "Your work has to stay together when it's thrown up as high as I am tall, and you let it hit the floor. If it breaks, your grade's got a problem." It got to be a nice game between us.

**MB** You said you taught sculpture comprehensively. Does that mean you also taught modeling and carving?

**ME** Yeah, modeling with clay and plaster, and some carving. I wasn't pushing to make them refined sculptors. My approach tended to be, Look, you get the experience of the process. By the time a semester is done, you've internalized some aspects. If you're going to go further with it, you'll be confident to go to the material and try to do something.

**MB** Did you also teach the history of sculpture at all? Did you have them go look at particular things...?

**ME** I went through the history; I would show slides when I did lectures. But mostly I assigned particular things that I thought might be helpful to their projects. I felt that that was the best way to guide them, to give them reference to themselves, and then they could question each other about what they were doing and why. I would say, for example, "Okay, now you've got this thing that you welded, and it's yours. Now develop something from it, but make it out of laminated wood." That meant they had to make some significant adjustments, make something maybe very different from what they had started with, and they had to grapple with their own ideas at the same time. They had to make something they had no example for. I found that was a good way to work. I often also taught a course called *Materials and Methods*, an introduction to three-dimensional products in a variety of materials: clay, wood, plaster, steel. That tended to move them, if they had feelings for one material or another, or just whether they had an interest in sculpture. Everybody took it, whether they were going to major in sculpture or not.

**MB** What happened with the Whitney's 1971 show *Contemporary Black Artists in America*?

**ME** The Whitney was going to do an exhibition of African American art, and Robert Doty wanted me to be a part of it—he had curated my show the year before—and I initially had wanted to be a part of it. But I had a problem with it. There was a group picketing, Benny Andrews and the BECC [Black Emergency Cultural Coalition], and they had political and racial issues, but my issue with Doty was—and it spread to half a dozen of us—that he wasn't curating the show correctly. You've got a major painter like Ed Clark, and you say, "Oh, he was following the Color Field people." Well, shit, anyone who knew Ed's work would say, "What he's doing, he was doing before Color Field was mainstream." Ed Clark was doing shaped canvases before Stella. People in decision-making positions knew that, they just chose to do differently. I remember saying, "I can see a problem," to a writer from a magazine, about what she was writing on Stella's shaped canvases. The writer said, "Don't worry, people know." But I was speaking about what was ahead. You know, the business world. It was glass ceilings and manipulations. As I got to New York—Color Field movement, and minimalism—the art world was producing movements then, and it grew as a mercantile entity in the '60s as it had never had before. We live the consequences now. Ed Clark was at the Brata Gallery with Held and Sugarman and all of them in the '50s, and he was in Paris with them before that. So you can't say he was a follower, a nobody or nothing. And then they put graduate students in the Whitney show? But Ed was disappeared as Norman Lewis was. Ed Clark and Rauschenberg were in Paris at the same time together. The European edition of *Time* ran an article of the both of them giving Clark and Rauschenberg equal space. However back in New York, that recognition was lost. You can ask Sal Romano more about that, and his wife, Corinne Robbins. I will say this about art writers: Ignorance has a way of exposing itself. All arts come from what came from before. I just wish there were better journalists to get a more pluralistic view of realities.

The reason I could have that discussion with Doty was, he had asked me to write something in relation to the show. So I wrote what I wrote; I talked about the history of American museums. Of course, he didn't like it. When he read it, he said, "We've got a good record." I said, "If that's a good record, you'd be in the minor leagues in baseball." He said, "We showed your work, we showed Al Loving." We were supposed to be grateful and not recognize the truth.

They were doing the show in '71 to shut people up and it didn't work. And I said, "Look. That's last week. That's last year. What have you done since 1936? I looked it up. You haven't done nothing, except you did a show of Barthé in '34." I wasn't against what he was doing, because at least he was doing something, but you wouldn't want to call attention to that by saying, "We've done all this," and "all this" is Al Loving's show in November and mine in March, and then the next year you're doing this. Anyway, he didn't use what I wrote, and I saved it, and the basis of it is in that one-man show I did at the Studio Museum in 1978, and the group show Williams put together in 1969. And I chose not to be in that Whitney show. I told Doty, "Okay, you're a curator, you can do what you want. But I'm an artist, and I can do what I want." I'd just turned down another show, too, of African American art in Boston. The curator came down and talked to me; I was still staying at [William T.] Williams's, so that was 1970, just before I moved to Avenue B. He sort of ran through a list of stuff, and I didn't like some of his notions, and he wasn't somebody I knew, so I decided not to be in it. Later on, Frank Bowling titled a painting of his *Mel Edwards Decides*.

**MB** And why did you decide not to be in that show?

**ME** It didn't seem like they were treating the art and the process of evaluation at a serious level. It was too mixed a bag. I always pay attention, if I can, to the nature of whatever exhibition I'm in. I'm like anybody on one level, of course I want to show my work, but at the same time, I have some limits and guidelines for myself. The thing I learned is, other people are not going to do things the way you would do them. Like the show at the Whitney last year, *Blue Smoke*. I was so pissed off at how they hung my work, and they put somebody else's work like they were trying to relate his wall stuff to it, and they separated it from the *Rocker* piece, and they were meant to ensemble with the three *Fragments*, and the *Fragments* weren't at the right height— The guy wanted the name, but he didn't take the time to understand the work.

**MB** From what you say it feels as if a cultural tone, or a tone in museums, or your attitude toward institutions, shifted between 1970 and 1971. Is this true?

**ME** The Studio Museum stands in contrast to the collecting museums. They didn't have the money or were prepared to take care of a collection fifteen or twenty years down the road. It gradually grew and improved. Served as the first time in history for a training ground and residency for African Americans to be museum professionals. But how many actually developed with resources within African American community? How many positions are filled by them?

**MB** You went to Cuba in '81, and the impact of Cuba on you seems almost commensurate with the first trip to Africa. As different as they are, that trip created a kind of bond or connection that then got developed and obviously is still alive in 2014. What took you to Cuba?

**ME** Ana Mendieta and Lucy Lippard organized this trip to Cuba for artists, and Jayne and I went. I had met Ana through Nancy Spero. Her husband, Leon Golub, was a colleague of mine at Rutgers. He hired me. Leon came to LA at the time when I was at the Tamarind Print Residence (Louise Nevelson, Gabriel Kohn, Richard Hunt, John Dowell, and Leon were all there). I would go by there because I worked nearby. I had a delivery truck and would stop by to have lunch and meet the artists. In 1972, Leon and I were both teachers at Livingston College together. But anyway, Leon and George Preston convinced me to go to Rutgers. I had been chosen one year to head the CAPS artist's grants competition [The Creative Artists Public Service Program], and I needed a juror who was a female sculptor. I had a few ideas, but I also asked Nancy, because I knew that she was very active in relation to what women artists were doing. She gave me a list of four or five people, and she talked about this new person in town named Ana Mendieta.

**MB** Had you already met Carl Andre?

**ME** I met Carl way before Ana was here, probably in '66, around the *Primary Structures* show. I had heard of his work when I was in LA. So, Carl was around and his first show happened. And then he was more brilliant than he had ever been, that's what people thought. He and Rosemarie Castoro were around the Park Place people that I was around when I first came— David Novros, Mark Di Suvero—and it turned out that Rosemarie knew the brother of one of

my football teammates from California. Carl was okay. We were remotish from the beginning. I felt that people credited Carl with a profundity to his thinking that I didn't feel was quite there. We had no issues; he just wasn't somebody I'd have a cup of coffee with. But Ana was a very good fit for us. We really got to know Ana very well on that trip to Cuba. Then she moved in next door to where we lived, on Sixth Avenue. She and Jayne maintained a friendship, and in fact, in all the years that we were married, if I came home and found Jayne at home, talking to somebody and having a drink, it was her and Ana. They really became close. But Ana and Carl, they had a cat-and-dog marriage. I'll be frank. Carl was not a good fit for us. That's all I can say.

**MB** But Ana was a good fit. Did you like her work?

**ME** Yeah. I thought Ana worked very hard to develop something, and I appreciated where she was going. The way she talked about it in the three months before her death, about what she was doing with her work in Italy, and what it meant to her... Her works were more about their ideas than their physical presence, though they are physical. If they could be not transitory, in other words, if some of her articulations of female form, earth and water together, could remain permanent—but the nature of what she was putting together is water. They're going to erode, they're going to do what nature does, and that was a part of what she did. In a sense, almost nobody was working that way at that level, with the psychology of being a woman and being feminine, being maternal, and all those things. At the same time, my personal take is, because of the way that her parents sent her away to the US, Ana never got to finish growing up with her family, and she really needed that. Ana was Cuban in personality. That's a part of my sense of Ana. She found something in Cuba that was very important to her, and she missed it very much. When we were in Cuba, we met a couple of her relatives, and one said, "Oh yeah, she's a solid Communist." And another one said, "No, she's just the opposite." Ana said, "Well, the Cuban family is that way." Very strong opinions both ways.

**MB** You saw her shortly before her death, no?

**ME** The Saturday that Ana was killed, in the daytime. Jayne and I were going to meet a friend for dinner, and we were going to the subway on Sixth Avenue, just before Spring. Ana was across the street, and she yelled, "Hey, you guys!" And she ran across. "How you doing?" and stuff. "We heard you were back from Italy." She said, "Yeah, when can we get together?" "Well, is tomorrow good?" And she said, "Yeah, I'll meet you." At this Mexican restaurant. Well, we knew that meant Carl wouldn't be coming, because that often was the way it was. So the next day, we waited for two hours for Ana to show up for lunch. She never did, because it had happened in the night. We didn't hear for two or three days... Somehow we missed the news, and I was at Rutgers. Then on the first day of classes, because it was September, this phone call comes to me from Juan Sanchez, wanting to know where the funeral ceremony for Ana was. I said, "What do you mean, funeral for Ana?" He said, "You don't know?" I said, "No, I don't know." And he told me. So I had to call Jayne at home. I wanted to wait, but just in case the news got there another way, I called her. That was a lot for us. September the eighth, 1985. The thing was, Juan had become a friend of Ana's in recent years, and in the June just before that September, Ana had come back very upbeat about what was happening with her work and her career, and the four of us had had coffee at the Borgia, down here on Bleecker. I know, because we took photographs that day: me, Ana, Jayne, and Juan Sanchez. Of course, when people said Carl did it, I said, "Look, it was a cat-and-dog marriage. If Ana could have thrown his ass out the window, she would have." I'm not surprised if he... The details I heard said that he did. Within the next year, I went to a party, and there was a man there. The lawyer who had first arrived on the scene, whom I knew from LA—Jerry Rosen. He had arrived on the scene and cleaned up Carl's act so he could get through it. At this party, when I said, "Hello, Jerry, how you doing?" he said, "I'm all right, but that fucking ungrateful Carl Andre. I got him off and the son of a bitch hardly gives me the time of day." And I said, "Oh..." Because he didn't know. So I said, "Here, Jayne, I want you to meet somebody." And immediately... He knew about her and Ana, and he clammed up like a clam. I haven't seen him since. He knew he had given it away when he said that to me. Carl, when we were at Ana's memorial, he smiled toward me, and I just looked the other way.



Melvin Edwards, *Transcendence*, 2008, stainless steel. High Street, near Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania. Photo courtesy the artist. © 2015 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** I wonder if you would talk a little bit about your connection with Cuba.

**ME** The Cuban Revolution came along right at the time the Civil Rights Movement was heating up and African countries were getting independence. If you were a black person watching TV in the United States in the '50s, you saw various freedom fighters, like Tom Mboya lobbying for Kenya's independence, and Jomo Kenyatta, who was jailed for anti-colonial Mau Mau activities. We had information enough to be aware that these were people whose efforts you should appreciate. And Fidel, in Cuba, fit that description, no question. My own politics leaned that way. I could never have been doctrinaire toward Communism or anything else, but the general social objectives of people having food, clothing, shelter, education, and a job—I just think everybody ought to have that. Otherwise, I don't know why anybody has a government, because all the other things they do... Well, that's a whole other conversation. What I'm saying is, when I got there, it just felt comfortable.

There was one other thing. In '77, Jayne and I had gone to the African festival in Nigeria, FESTAC, the Festival of Art and Culture, a month-long thing, two weeks of which we were there for. Alongside the literary events, they had a small exhibition [*Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture: FESTAC '77, Lagos, Nigeria*] that I had a piece in. I showed a small table top sculpture of what would be *Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas*, [1978–81]. It was a small exhibition but symbolically significant. It so happened that the African American artists were showing near the Cuban section in the big hall. So, when I went to visit that area, Cuban guys were there, and I said hello. They liked that. Their English wasn't good, or my Spanish, but we just hit it off. I met Gilberto de la Nuez, who was a self-taught, really self-directed, painter of very small images. He's got a painting in the National Museum in Havana, about this big. Which is about 36 x 40 inches. The houses and people in the work were about an inch high. He's a real miniaturist. It looks like every house in Havana. There's also a naive museum in Santiago where he's featured. He was a wonderful man, more my father's age than mine. I also got to know Remigio Pina, who was a preparator for the exhibition.

So when we went in '81, on that trip with Ana, I wanted to get in touch with them. When we got there, I called Gilberto from the hotel, and he invited us over. We got in a taxi, Jayne and I, and when we got there, I went to the door and left Jayne in the car, because I wasn't sure of the address. When Gilberto's wife answered the buzzer, and I said, "I'm Melvin," she said,

“Sube! Sube!” I didn’t know what the fuck “Sube!” meant. It means, “Come on up!” They lived on the second floor. But I figured that was what it meant, so I went and got Jayne, and we went up. And we just had a wonderful reunion. He called Pina, and Pina and his wife, Mercedes, came over. That was the week I met Wifredo Lam. We traveled all over Cuba; we went to Santiago and got some of the history of Santiago and the old *trova* music, which is very close to the blues in form. Most of the musicians there were very old. Everything about the trip just felt good. The bus broke down once in the middle of the sugarcane fields, and even that was a wonderful three hours. I have beautiful pictures of me and Jayne. The sun was setting when we got moving again, and it was just flat cane fields to the horizon. It’s one of those images that will never leave me.



Melvin Edwards, *Safe Journey*, 1991-93, stainless steel, State of New Jersey Motor Vehicle Services Inspection Station, 109 New Jersey 36, Eatontown, New Jersey. Photo by Douglas Petersen. © 2015 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

On that trip I could see that Cuba was having a hard time. But it was much worse when we were there later. We went back a couple of times, and on the trip in '91 [after the USSR fell apart], they were having one hell of a difficult time; people were thin, people were ashamed to invite you to their house because they couldn't offer you anything. When I went to friends' houses, I just brought a bottle of rum from the hotel so we could have drinks. I didn't want to make them uncomfortable. One of our friends, a sculptor, was angry at the whole socialist thing, because he felt the promises hadn't come through. He felt that if he were out of the country, his art life would have been better, but he'd done better than some people.

I always hoped—I knew socialism had the human factor, like every other system, and often that was a fucked up part. In just about every governmental system human beings have ever invented, it might sound good on paper, but when you get the human beings to actually live in it, you've got the same thing going on that you had before: people being personally aggressive, greedy, or acquisitive for power or advantages of various kinds. Gilberto had one painting he showed me, and it was pretty hard on Uncle Sam, and he apologized to me. I said, “You don't have to apologize. Uncle Sam, shit, I have to live with him!” (*laughter*) What I'm trying to say is, he was respectful of the fact that I came from the United States. The issue is one thing, but the people are another. Anyway, we drank a lot of rum together, and I was very comfortable there. In that house, I felt not just that I liked Cuba, but that the family felt like my family. And to this day, there are four or five families there that I'm close with. I'm closer than ever to the Gilberto's family in Santiago.

**MB** You just had a sculpture dedicated there, in Santiago. It seemed to me, if not the tallest sculpture you've done, pretty close to it, no?

**ME** Yeah, it probably is. It's about eighteen feet tall.

**MB** What's the title of it?

**ME** *Column of Memory*. Do you remember the piece you wrote on me for the inauguration of Socrates Sculpture Park in 1986?

**MB** I remember that sculpture. Solemn, watchful, and statuesque, installed close to the East River. The one in Cuba is cubic in form, rectangular, not round, more like a post and lintel structure made me think of it, totally, with the chain.

**ME** Yeah, it's a family of works. I found that form within a piece called *Out of the Struggles of the Past to a Brilliant Future*; that's what I pulled the form for the series out of. It was a theme that was chosen from the community before the piece came to be. It was a good principal and I knew it would be a good title. Installed at Mount Vernon Plaza in Columbus, Ohio, one part of it is held up by a column of chain. The volume form is slightly curved in that one. It's a notch construction, so it supports one end of these sort of arcs.



Melvin Edwards, *Point of Memory*, 2010, steel. The artist with the sculpture, Parque de la Beneficiencia, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba. Photograph courtesy the artist. © 2015 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** The column in the Cuba piece is a rectangle. When most people think of columns, they think of something round.

**ME** They were always squared. That started in smaller works, but when I did that first of the large chain works, I decided, This is cubic. It's Cubist in its analysis of form, if you will, but that also increased the dynamic of the volume. Since then, I've done variants on it, but always cubic. To the point where I said, Well, I guess I've got to do a round one, just to compare.

**MB** Did you make it here and ship it there?

**ME** No, I'll explain. About eight years ago or so, a curator from Cuba, Marilyn Sempera, came here and did a couple of talks, and we became very good friends. Her husband is a filmmaker, named Rigoberto López Pego, and I brought them both to Rutgers, and Rigo showed his films. He had a beautiful film that shares a title with one of my works, called *The Long Journey*. It was about the history of the Chinese and their migration to Cuba, and their history within Cuba, which ultimately, in art terms, encompasses Wifredo Lam, because his father was of that generation who came. When slavery ended in Cuba, in 1886, they needed workers who could be paid very little, and the Chinese were available for that. So any number of Cubans—no matter what they look like—have Chinese in their family heritage. That Chinese history is very important in Cuba. Here in New York, you'll see Asia de Cuba restaurants, Asian and Latin combined restaurants. That's Cuban history. In Lam's case, he was relatively well indoctrinated into his Afro-Cuban culture; and when he encountered Picasso and the Cubists and Surrealists, and then went back to Cuba during the war, he really gravitated toward it. Anyway, Marilyn thought a work of mine would be nice to have large, as a public artwork. So on my next trip to Cuba, I brought a maquette, about two feet high. The architect, a sculpture specialist in public works, liked the idea, and he put me in touch with a couple of Cuban officials related to sculpture; [one was] a man named Tomas Lara, a sculptor who welds, interesting guy. But there was another guy we had to meet with, and he was a bureaucratic

functionary. That's all I can say. I was sure if it didn't happen, it was because of him. And it didn't happen. When I found out, I decided to give the maquette to Pina as a gift. But then I saw my friend [Lescay], a Cuban sculptor, at a get-together at Haiti's [Eduardo] house, and I was telling him the story, and he said, "Let me take the maquette to Santiago." I knew he had a foundry at Fundación Caguayo (means chameleon in Spanish). Lescay was the director of the foundry, but I didn't know what he could or would do. I didn't hear anything for two or three years, and frankly, I just forgot I'd given him the maquette. Then I get an email, about two and a half years ago, with pictures of the sculpture being fabricated, and then a picture of it being installed. He ended up doing the chain a bit more square, which gives it a more mechanistic appearance. That's a variant I wouldn't have done, but it gives me something. Instead of a normal chain, it reminds me of the mechanics of a motor or a bicycle chain; this has some of that feeling of interacting with something else.



Melvin Edwards, *Maquette for Before Words*, 1990–91, welded steel, 9.8 x 7.3 x 9.8 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** So this is a maquette that goes back maybe twenty years?

**ME** It's a type that goes back to '83, but I've made any number of small variants of it. I have a couple of them sitting in Dakar [Senegal] that I made before that one. I had my metalworker in Dakar fabricate it for me. But I was right there with them, so I could keep anything that I thought should be a little different than what they understood.

**MB** But this one, when you showed up for the dedication last month [November 7, 2013], it was a *fait accompli*.

**ME** Yeah. It had already been up for a year and a half. This is always the situation when you are having things fabricated. There are times you need to be there, but the process is not always predictable. It is a natural industrial variant in a major historical site. Now, I'll say this about Cuba, and it probably is true of much of the Caribbean: it's close to Africa, but it's also very Spanish. Where I grew up in Texas, if the politics along the Gulf had not been the politics of the Southern United States, I have a hunch that region would have been like the Caribbean, in its mixture of people and culture. I read some political stuff written in the late nineteenth century about the United States. They really wanted to take Cuba, but they didn't want a voting population with that many black people. And there are small towns in the sugarcane regions of Cuba that are named for plantation families from the South; when slavery ended here, they went and invested in Cuba. Well, that tells you a lot about what Fidel ended up fighting. It was the monopoly of the Americans on sugar and other industries. The other thing they have in Cuba is chrome, which is for stainless steel, and that's a very rare mineral in the world. Anyway, I see the Cuban family as similar to the family I grew up in: a working-class family trying to improve its circumstances. I see that in Africa, too. People in Africa, their families are the first ones to finish high school, first to go to college, and you see the families fighting for that.

At the same time, you can see that the African influence in Cuba comes pretty specifically from two regions: the region of the Congo, and I say region, not country, because it's that



general Bantu-ish part of African culture; and then the Yoruba region. Those were the dominant cultural influences. It's the same in Brazil, and in Haiti. This kind of specific cultural influence is something you can see in the US as well, of course, certainly in art. Think of Picasso's African art influence. That's primarily from Gabon and only from the French areas of trade. There's no influence on his work from Benin, Nigeria... Whereas Matisse's cutouts I see coming straight out of the Ivory Coast; Ghana; and Dahomey, or Benin. They always did cutouts there, appliqué imagery. You can see it in Haitian art, too, because that's where the most significant number of slaves came from to Haiti. They then transformed it into metal; flat cutout stuff that they started doing in the '40s. But that method of appliqué is old. Those patterns exist culturally in all kinds of philosophical and other aspects. I'm not experienced and erudite enough with that stuff to take it much further than that, but I definitely recognize it. It's easy for me to see, I think because I'm a visual artist, and I spend a lot of my time understanding by looking, and making visual comparisons. I have had a chance to spend time in Zimbabwe, for example, and it is very different from where I was in Nigeria.

**MB** When was the first time you went to Zimbabwe?

**ME** I went in '86, for two weeks, as a juror for their national arts exhibition. They really emphasize art in Zimbabwe. It's a big deal, and for a small country, they produce a lot of artists; and they might as well, because working for a living otherwise is so poorly paid. If you sell four or five sculptures to tourists, you make as much as somebody in a month, laboring all day digging ditches. A lot of guys will walk up to you and say, "Want to buy this?" And it's a rhinoceros, and when you really look at it, it's one hell of a little carving. A little Henry Moore.

**MB** They specialize in stone.

**ME** Yeah, their whole modern movement is stone. Frank McEwen, who founded the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, encouraged the "original ten," they call them: the original ten sculptors in Zimbabwe; farmers and that kind of thing who had the hobby of carving stone. Zimbabwe doesn't have a history of stone sculpture. Congo and Zambia next door, and Angola, too, west of them, they have that tradition. But in Zimbabwe, the stone was a hobby, or went into architecture. They worked a lot in clay, for ritual reasons, but they didn't fire it, and it often just dissolved; the weather took them away. Their modern movement in stone is a truly modern movement. They really have an affinity for stone. I don't have that. I like it, but the mindset to beat on a rock all day, and tomorrow, too, and then you look at it and you say, "Well, shit, it's still a rock." (*laughter*)

**MB** So you were there for three summers.

**ME** Three summers: two weeks in '86, then three months in '88, and then again in '89. Cyril Rogers, director of Zimbabwe's National Gallery, wanted me to come for a year, on a senior Fulbright, but I explained I couldn't take that kind of time away from my work. So we split it into three visits.

**MB** Was Jayne with you?

**ME** Oh, yeah. It fed into her work very nicely. We both liked it. We always said, "When are we going to get back to Zimbabwe on our own?"

**MB** What is it about Zimbabwe in particular?

**ME** First of all, just geographically, it's five thousand feet up. Compared to the coastal people of Nigeria, they're a little more reserved. Unless you fuck with them. (*laughter*) On my second trip, I was there with a Nigerian artist, Twins Seven-Seven. Now, Twins was a manipulator, selling things or buying things. He's a real Yoruba in that way, I would say. He loves to trade, loves to bullshit, and he moves art, and gets things from people. Anyway, we went one day to do some souvenir shopping, and there was a special warehouse that was just full of stuff. So we had been looking around for half an hour or so, and people were buying little trinkets and stuff. And Twins wasn't buying anything. He finally came to me and said, "Edwards, I don't understand these people. They're so quiet, but they just won a revolutionary war." I said, "Well, Twins, you Yoruba, y'all talk a whole lot of shit, but the Hausas came in and kicked your

ass, and you ran away.” Whereas in Zimbabwe, these are people who—they don’t talk that much, but if they decide something, they’re very committed. He says, “Okay, okay.” But then he says, “We’ve been here half an hour. If we were in Nigeria, by now, somebody would have called me to the back and shown me some things, and we could do some business, behind the business.” I said, “Twins, they’re not going to do that here. They’ve promised to be honest workers, and they will be.” He said, “Well, I don’t understand these people.” *(laughter)* I said, “You really do understand them; you would just like for them to be your way.”

There’s a lot of that kind of cultural lesson going on in all of these trips. Every time I had some idea of how things would go, it was very interesting how they really went. I thought because I ate food with hot pepper sauce in it sometimes that I could eat anybody’s food that was seasoned spicily. Shit, man, I had some pepper soup the first time I went to Nigeria, at the home of the architect Demas Nwoko. It looked like split pea soup, but it damn near split my peas. *(laughter)* I immediately broke out in a sweat. And there was no way around it. The ladies put out the soup at the beginning of the meal, and you’ve got to eat it. I’ve since learned that was one of the first trade goods out of that region, red and black pepper. Shit, they’ve got some peppers. In Senegal, on the farm project, they started growing peppers one year when I was not there. Peppers sell very well in the market. When I got there, my friends said, “Oh, we got a new pepper this year. It’s so strong we call it Tyson.” For the boxer, Mike Tyson. *(laughter)* And I said, “Oh yeah. I’ll pass on that.” *(laughter)*

One time, Nana Osei Bonsu, the carver of the Asantehene, showed me his tools, and he gave me a set of carving tools. The finishing knife is a very sharp triangle shape, a good-size butcher knife, with a thick blade that’s cut short, so it’s about a triangle. They keep it wrapped like you’d keep a razor for shaving, very well taken care of. Often, instead of sanding, they cut with that, to get the wood smooth. This is how you find the blacksmith’s relationship to other occupations: The carvers need special chisels in different configurations. For the drums, which you’ve got to keep a log for and go all the way through, they’ve got adzes, blades eighteen inches long. He gave me a couple of those. Years later, in Senegal, I went to a blacksmith and had him make me some tools; even though I’m not actually carving, I like to see the process, and have the examples. I also put a couple of the tools into works of mine.

**MB** Can you say which works? Looking at the sculptures, would people have any way of knowing where the tools in them came from?

**ME** Individual blacksmiths do things differently, but carving tools are not that different, they’re functional. There’s one tool called a tayali; I dedicated that piece to Henry Tayali from that region. He was the first modern sculptor of Zambia. His community would be Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Tayali piece was the mail card for the exhibition in Paris. It was a typical Zimbabwe farming blade you can buy in a hardware store. But the shape and form is an industrial imitation of a heart-shaped leaf that the blacksmiths made. In Senegal I asked the blacksmith I often worked with to make me a version of that.



Melvin Edwards, *Tayali Ever Ready (Homage to Henry Tayali)*, 1981–86–88, welded steel, 8.8 x 11½ x 11 inches. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** Do you forge yourself?

**ME** Well, forging, in the simplest terms, is any heating and hammering of steel. It doesn't have to be a hammer and anvil. It can be more intricate.

**MB** But forging is still a very different process from welding?

**ME** Yeah, but there is what we call hammer welding, where you heat up two pieces of steel and you hammer them together while they're red-hot. It's not welding in the pure sense, because welding is a fusion: steel and steel are melted and become liquid, and they become one, whereas forging is usually for changing the shape. I wouldn't say I forge to the extent a blacksmith would; but, on the other hand, I've done a whole lot of forging in pieces but made no particular point of it, except it was how I got things done when I needed something smaller, or flatter, to fit into something else. What I do with it may or may not end up being something visual or visible.

**MB** David Smith has a series of forgings now at the Gagosian. He has his own ancestry of blacksmiths, and they're—

**ME** Sure. His name is Smith, after all.

**MB** Yeah, that's right, totally. I was thinking, they're done with enormous pressure. That kind of weight, that kind of compression on form to make form, that's really different from welding.

**ME** I would say forging is different for Smith. For me, forging, to some extent, was always a part of it, but you didn't have to think you were forging. In other words, you've welded this, connected to this, you've got this sticking out that way, but you want it to go over that way; so you heat it and you hammer it over; or you stick a steel tube on it if it's too hot, and you hold it with that and just bend it with your arm. In other words, heating and changing the form is basically forging.

**MB** When you were in Africa, you spoke with Nana Osei Bonsu who was an Asante master carver. You worked with master stone people. You also worked with blacksmiths, and in Benin, observed bronze casting. So what you encountered there were these craft traditions that were very powerful and masterful. What effect did working with those traditions have on your own work?

**ME** My Africa experience in the late '70s was like an extended graduate experience of observation and discussion. They spoke about history and what different tools were for. Bonsu often carved drums. A tree had to be hollowed out. Blacksmiths had special tools made for that. The big difference was that most of the technology was nonelectrical, but the work was very similar. This could be/happen anywhere in the world with quasi-rural metal fabrication. When I see something, whether it's made by somebody or it's just visually interesting, it can easily resonate the same way for me. On the other hand, I'll be frank, when it comes to Africa, I just have sentiment for that place, I guess, like any people who come from a specific place.

People ask me where I'm from, and I say, "Texas." And I only lived in Texas for, what was it? Seven plus five years. But I feel like I'm from Texas. Africa has probably been that way for most African American families: a sentiment. I got lucky, and got the sentiment corroborated. I have an appreciation and an understanding, I think, of how African people historically have organized the things they do, if not in detail, then in general. To be a child, they have organized ways that you should be a child. Ways, plural, because one region may do it a different way, or one environment has different requirements than another one, but African society was conservative and functional. Functional doesn't mean it's not culturally artistic or creative. They had, as all peoples in the world had, their time span for when changes took place. And like everyone who hit the Industrial Revolution in the twentieth and twenty-first century, they're going through the upheavals that all of that has caused. They'd like to keep a lot of what they're losing, just like a lot of Americans would like to have kept a lot of what they've lost. The difference with the United States is, it's a totally new construct in the first place. In Benin City, you go back two hundred years, well, you haven't gone anywhere. You go back two hundred years here, and you've gone all the way back to the Constitution. We've mythologized and recognized American history for what it is, but we should sometimes face the fact that this is a new society. Now, African countries are facing that, when they have the modern nation-state, and they've got to incorporate three or four or five traditional kingdoms that had nobody over them before, until colonialism. In that respect, everybody is learning things in this last century.

**MB** You've seen many changes.

**ME** You couldn't make a decent phone call from Ghana or Nigeria from 1970 to '85. And, shit, now you can't avoid a cell phone. You've got a person walking in a field, plowing or picking peanuts, and he's got a cell phone, talking to his cousin in LA. That's the reality of now. You've got hip-hop music in Senegal; young people are crazy about it, I hate to say. But I understand it's young people's business, and it's international music. Music travels faster than almost anything else.



Melvin Edwards, *Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas*, 1978-81, stell in five parts. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2014 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**MB** At what point did Senegal become important to you?

**ME** Senegal kept coming up in funny ways. I met [Léopold Sédar] Senghor in Los Angeles, in '66, right after the first African festival. I knew there was a poet named Senghor, and that he

was now the president of Senegal. My landlord, Tony Hill, who owned the ceramics factory Tony Hill-Wilmer James in LA, was a real black intellectual, and when people came to LA who were significant, he was always a part of things. Now, he was just my landlord, but I had worked for him, and when there was a reception for Senghor, he invited me and Karen to it. I went and bought a suit. Because I'd been a real artist, I just had a sport coat. (*laughter*) We went to the reception for Senghor, and I got to meet him and his wife, and he was very gracious. Then, in '69, Léon Damas came to the US. He was one of the trio that was Damas, Senghor, and [Aimé] Césaire, the fathers of Négritude, as the three of them are called. He lived the last nine, ten years of his life in Washington, D.C., taught at Federal City College and Howard University. He's the reason for the sculpture of mine called *Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas*. Damas's house in French Guiana, where he was born, had burned down, and he wanted to rebuild it, because it was built in a kind of Caribbean, colonial style. He had said he wanted me to do a piece of sculpture for the house. But unfortunately, before that could happen, he got ill from cancer, and he died at the beginning of 1978. But I made the piece. It has two horn-like things, and the idea was they would be directed toward the east, meaning the sun would rise from the direction of Africa and come through the two points, and there'd be a seating area. That's why the double circle that's kind of low to the ground is a part of it. The planes one, which is freestanding with a circle, is in a flat configuration. If you'd drawn an open book on a flat sheet of paper that would be what that form is. And then the right side is tilted up a little, just a rectangle, because I wanted that to just stand and be like a page to be written on. In other words, the story of the form continues, like a silhouette, just a flat 2-D form, but when standing up in space there is the illusion of dimension. It is just another way of playing with space; 2-D can look like 3-D or 3-D can look flat depending on what you do. Damas became our closest connection to the whole French thing. He spoke French; he was a friend of Duchamp. He said when he came to the US in the '40s, he and Duchamp came together and stayed at the Great Northern Hotel, which was where he was staying when I met him in '69. We drank Scotch and ate those funny little pretzels.

**MB** Was that a famous artists' hotel? I know it's right by Carnegie Hall.

**ME** It may have been. I drove there; I had a car. That was a part of why I became close to him. He had to go here, he had to go there, and I wasn't employed at the time, so it was a perfect match. We really became very good friends. I understood him very well, and he understood me. His wife was Brazilian, Marietta Campos Damas, she was part of the Brazilian equivalent of the Black Arts Movement, with Abdias do Nascimento. A lot of the people were actors, poets, painters, that kind of thing.

Going back to Damas and French West Africa, this is a little bit of Damas's history, and it will tell you some of the feelings I have. He, like Césaire, was from a French colony: Césaire from Martinique, Damas from French Guiana. They were about the same age, about my father's age. To go to high school in French Guiana, you had to move to Martinique and do high school there. Then, if you got the pass to go to college, you went to France. That's what they both did, and that's where they met Senghor. This was the early '30s, and they started the black radical group and publication called *L'Étudiant Noir* [a student publication in Paris]. Damas was the first of the three Négritude founders to publish. It's a book [of poetry] called *Pigments*. It was published the year I was born, 1937. Then I think Senghor published, and he may have given the name Négritude to the movement. Césaire was the one who, I would say, became the most involved and accepted by the French art world. When Senghor became president of Senegal, he immediately instituted art schools for fine and applied arts. He wanted what was going on in France; he knew a lot of those people, and he was able, as a head of state, to push that through. Césaire was stuck in Martinique as the Mayor of Fort-de-France, and the French weren't going to let him do anything politically significant in France— Martinique and the other French colonies—that he would want to do, though culturally he had a ticket. Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant went to the same school that Césaire went to in Martinique, Lycée [Victor] Schoelcher, named after Victor Schoelcher, who was part of the abolitionist movement in France. That's why schools named after him exist in the colonies. At the time of World War II, Damas was a speaking-out kind of person. He was probably more directly political than Césaire or Senghor. They were, shall we say, modulated in ways that made them able to function. (I got to know Glissant after my exhibition in Paris. He lived his last years in New York City. We were good friends and got to be better friends once he moved to New York after 2000. Édouard bought a piece from my Paris show in 1984.)

**MB** When you say political, you mean anti-colonial?

**ME** Yeah, they were all three anti-colonial, but you could say the path of elections and parties and stuff like that worked for Senghor; he was very much the personality almost to be a Francophonist. Césaire was more independent, but he worked in Martinique for the rest of his life, and he kept writing all of his life. Damas, after World War II, was appointed to the French parliament for a term; but with his politics, he could hardly find a job in France. Luckily, because African countries were becoming independent, people would give him jobs and stuff there. His claim to fame, in terms of the respect he had from other African countries, was that when World War II hit, and everyone was saying, “The Africans have to help us to fight the Germans,” Damas said, “Shit. The French, the English, they’re colonizing us. We should be fighting them to get our freedom.” Well, that didn’t go down too well in the colonial world, and they never forgave him for that. But when he and Marietta got married, in the mid-’60s, there were five African presidents at their wedding, because they had all been students and friends of Damas in the years of people struggling for African independence. Marietta was a bank clerk in Brazil, as far as occupation: sweet lady, a nice person.

Anyway, I wouldn’t have chosen French Africa and Senegal for us to get a house, ordinarily, because of the language. Nigeria would have been my absolute first choice, or Ghana, because they were making these gated communities—in other words you knew what you would be buying. But Souleyman, an architect, made it easier for us by designing the house. Senegal is also logistically easier to get to from JFK. Nigeria has everything, as far as I’m concerned. The country is big enough; it’s got variety enough; it’s got all of the cultural directions and possibility; it’s got intellectuals and business people, people who’ll be scientists and doctors, all of that. But as much as I like it, and I go there every chance I get, Nigeria just kept presenting too many problems.

**MB** It’s a pretty tough balance there, too, right?

**ME** Oh, yeah. They have the conflict of north and south, Islam and the extremists. When they had the Nigerian civil war, which was basically between the north and the south, well, the south was not necessarily a unity, and neither was the north. They were several traditionally different kingdoms, some of which had fought each other through the centuries. Also, once Islam became jihad-radical in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century, they started the holy wars, and they conquered a lot of the areas that were not Muslim and got pretty far south in Nigeria; but they got stopped when they got to the forests, because they were cavalry oriented, the tsetse fly gave the horses sicknesses, and it wasn’t open land. So the other kind of fighting, brush or bush warfare, that’s what the people of the south were accustomed to. So the north could only get so far. You can see that on the map. Now, since colonialism and independence, if the dominant group given the lead was Muslim, they quickly took most of the jobs, you know how people do.

However, just to contradict that—in Senegal, for instance, Senghor was a Serer. The country speaks Wolof and is predominantly Wolof people [and Sufi Muslims], whereas Serer are predominantly Christians, and are less than ten percent. And Senghor was married to a European woman, but he had no problem being elected. Those things don’t matter in Senegal. I don’t say people don’t talk about them, but they wanted the person they thought was best for the country. The next president was Abdou Diouf; his mother was Fula and his father was Serer. He ruled the country for about twenty years. And then the president who was elected just as we were getting the house there, Abdoulaye Wade, he is Muslim, and he’s married to a French woman, in fact, a lady who likes art very much. The Senegalese pride themselves—they’ve not had coups. They’ve had a couple of threats, but they’ve never had a coup.

**MB** Is your house in Dakar?

**ME** Yeah, the capital in the [Sud Foire-Grand Yoff] area. When we were first going there, it probably was seven, eight hundred thousand people, and it’s upward of three million now.

**MB** And when was the first time?

**ME** The first time, other than just stopping in the airport, was in ’81. Jayne and I took a trip just to go to Senegal. We spent time with Souleymane Keita [a footballer] and a Ghanaian

friend who was a writer, Jawa Apronti. He was stationed there because he was the cultural attaché for the Organization of African Unity. He took us to our first meal in Dakar. And we called Souleymane, and he took us over to Gorée Island, which is where he lived, where he was born and grew up. They fixed a beautiful dinner there. So that was the first time we were in Gorée. Then there was a quick trip in 1986. I got a phone call from [J.] Max Bond [Jr.], the architect. He was given a part in this project to build something in Africa, and they were jurying and investigating the project, and he needed a sculptor, and he thought I was the perfect person. So we flew off to go to Gabon, but we stopped in Dakar, spent the night, and then went over to Gorée, because one of the ideas was to do something like the Statue of Liberty in Africa. The centenary celebration of the Statue of Liberty had just happened. There's a fort in Gorée, with a cannon that the French built in the 1800s. We sat up there and talked. But the concepts that we were considering never happened. They had their own ideas, already had the architect and were halfway through. Other developments happened with the change in government.

**MB** When did you get the house there?

**ME** We got the house in 2000. We had gone to Ghana in '97 to see about possibly getting a house there. We came back to Dakar, and Souley talked to me about this farming project on land that he had started. He had seven hectares of land and seven more available. I bought another seven and we raised okra, peanuts, eggplant, and watermelon. What we hoped was that the farming would pay for itself and that it benefitted from the local farming community. He bought more land and was in the middle of developing that when he passed away. I wasn't there enough to have my hands on it, so better to enjoy what he did. Two personal celebrations were when we raised two tons of peanuts! And the year we harvested the cassava I planted. For the first time in two hundred years we farmed, harvested, and ate from the African land. The action was beyond rhetoric. Souley and I had promised each other many years before that if we got some money, we would do something together; we didn't know what. He had been very ill in New York in the early '80s and went back to Senegal, married and had his first child. He had two. He named the first one after Jayne, that's how close we were. She's twenty-three, twenty-four now. Spent three or four years in Paris, and is back in Senegal. Got married four or five days before we buried [my] Jayne, in Senegal. I couldn't get her off my shoulder, because she was crying so. There's a picture of her and that family in this book. [*Jayne Cortez: Random Notes & Photos* (New York, Bola Press: 2012).] But I explained to her, I said, "Look, you know Jayne. One of her first books was called *Festivals and Funerals*. Yes, we're here for her funeral—" Ah. Excuse me, I'm losing it a little bit, but I'll pull it—I said, "She would have appreciated being at your wedding." I said, "That's— she's your—" Excuse me. I guess biography is like this. She calmed down, and we talked. She's as tall as me.

**MB** Have you made sculpture in Dakar? Before going there, do you imagine the art you'll make there?

**ME** Yes, if I am there for a month, I usually do some work. I've been there so much I feel at home and when I feel that way, you can be sure I'm working. There are some pieces at Alexander Gray that I made in Senegal. In fact that piece of sculpture, a version of *Point of Memory*, we installed it on the farm. When we sold the farm, and I wanted to preserve the sculpture, I gave it to the city of Saint-Louis in Senegal in 2010. In 2012 they made me and my family honorary citizens of Senegal on account of that. The piece is in Comptoirs des Fleuve Square.



Melvin Edwards, *Column of Memory*, 2005, steel. Opposite the entrance to Les Comptoirs du Fleuve, Saint Louis, Senegal. Photo courtesy the artist.  
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**MB** The first time I saw your work was in the Studio Museum's 1984 exhibition, *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963–1973*. It included several of your *Lynch Fragments*; I still see them on their wall. I had never seen anything like them. That institution had a certain edge to it. I didn't expect to see work there that was institutionalized, and, as such, I often had a more immediate response to what I saw. Much of it made sense and I trusted it. I was interested in your work and in that of other artists of your generation. Thelma Golden's *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, which was '94, I think, basically skipped whole generations, and its focus was very much on a—

**ME** It was limited. Very limited. That's why I didn't like the title. I said, "The exhibition doesn't bear the weight of the title." "Black male" is worldwide. But I understood the issue she was really saying. Well, people title things to be provocative, or to direct people at something else. I wasn't crazy about the show, but it served its purpose. My issue was more, in the seventy years I've been on this earth, there've been those five exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art. They had a one-man show of Glenn Ligon, and before that it was Basquiat. Then there was that group of shows that I was a part of, back in '69 and '70. But the scale of a real one-man show, it was just Ligon and Basquiat. And you can't say we didn't have the artists. I mean, a lot of people did say it, but I just won't wear that shoe. It honestly doesn't fit. In terms of the art world in New York, for all these years, I have no respect for it. It's the same thing as the Solid South or the Tea Party. It's not that anybody ever insulted me—they wouldn't anyway—but what I mean is, you can't ignore a whole community of people with as many artists as we are in New York, and at the levels that we are on. You can't not have them at least be present. That was the truth, for so many years, and although there's more interest now, it's still not over.

**MB** My sense is, there's some kind of shift in terms of the experience and knowledge of your work in New York right now. The move to Alex Gray, three years ago, it's a real move. I know people who saw your show there who didn't know it before. But I know that Clara Sujo, the first dealer who took you on [1990] and represented you at her gallery, CDS, was very devoted to you.

**ME** That's right. I had hoped that a gallery with a person from another country might have international connections and really get the work out into the international world of art. Clara, it turned out, was very good among a range of people, and she could focus well on museums, and she was a historian herself. We had very good conversations. I liked talking to Clara when we had time. She was sort of Dona Clara. She's a real lady, in that formal sense, which I liked. We could talk about a lot of things of interest to me, artists like Joaquín Torres García or Wifredo Lam, in a deeper way. She had an interest in art and people. We invited her to several fairly big events at NYU that involved African women writers. Clara was always introducing me to people, and anything I wanted to do, for the most part, was okay with her. The only limit I ever found with Clara was that the space got smaller and smaller, and that part really didn't fit. But Clara sold enough work to keep me going. We didn't break any records or anything, but for the first time in the art world I could say I felt the part of an artist, a living artist with a



gallery. That meant something, just to be frank about it. It meant something.

**MB** Last year, several of the *Lynch Fragments* were in Kathy Halbreich's contemporary installation at MoMA, which, I think, made an impression. People who didn't know your work were bowled over by it.

**ME** The four pieces at MoMA, that's Clara's baby, through Kynaston [McShine].

**MB** She convinced him to buy the work?

**ME** Well, he already liked my work, and she knew him, because years before, when she was in Venezuela, evidently he, as a younger curator, had spent time with her there. They always saw eye to eye, and he always had respect for her and her work. While it wouldn't look like that was his basic area of aesthetic interest, the truth was, Kynaston and I had talked enough about my work that he had an understanding. I remember one time, they were to be showed, and some curator was planning to put them on the wall one above the other, and called me about it. I said, "What?" And Kynaston called almost at the same time, because he knew that was wrong, and he straightened it out so they hung them right.

Kynaston and I always got along. He used to tease me and Danny Johnson. He'd say, "Here come the cowboys from California, coming in, trying to take over New York!" And we laughed, because, hey, we did come here to try to do something. That was true. I first met Kynaston when they were installing the *Primary Structures* show at the Jewish Museum. He was working there, and I was helping Bob Grosvenor install his piece, because it had been made, originally, in LA right next door to me at my friend Ron Miyashiro's. I was in New York when they were installing it, so I went up with him. He didn't much need me, so I took pictures. Bob Grosvenor was a nice guy. He and I used to play badminton together, that kind of thing. When he moved away we just kind of lost touch. One time I drove him and his sculpture out to [Joseph] Hirshhorn's house in Greenwich, Connecticut, because Hirshhorn had bought this piece of his. That's when I decided Hirshhorn was a real asshole.

**MB** When was that?

**ME** Well, it would have been around '68, before my first wife and I really split-split. I loved the Calder he had at his place, and he had Rodin and shit. Up the drive when you turn, it's the perfect setting. It's beautiful. He had the Calder on the other side, overlooking a valley. But he was not a nice guy, and he was not nice to Bob. He was treating Bob like he was some poor sop that needs to be in his collection. Whereas I knew that Bob was from the Melville Grosvenor family, you know, of the National Geographic Society? So running this kind of treat-him-like-a-serf attitude... And it was just bad taste, anyway. But Bob, he was very nice and didn't say anything.

**MB** Speaking of which, this class system in the art world is obviously still there. The more money comes into it, the more there it's going to be. I just wonder, one, your sense of it, and, two... I don't know what we can do about it? Other than we do our own work as well as we can, and we support who and what we believe in, and we talk and write as fearlessly as we can. But I think, now, the power of money is more decisive than it was with the advent of Pop art in the mid- to-late '50s, more than when I came back to New York from Paris in '82, and more than it was ten or fifteen years ago.

**ME** Sure, it's true, and a lot of it is going right into the realm we're active in. No, I have no illusions. Once I figured out and really internalized that this is a mercantile society, mercantile interests drive or affect just about anything... What's the saying? "Money talks, bullshit walks?" Well, bullshit talks, too. Bullshit comes from all kinds of places. But, in relation to what you're saying, I have no illusions that what I do will change things much. I just wanted to be sure I didn't get caught not expressing what I thought was important to me. That can easily happen, because you can easily get discouraged by not being allowed to participate, or just being ignored, when you know your work is beyond ignoring. I saw enough of that with other people. If it was just me, while everybody else like me was doing okay and being treated fine, then I'd have had bad luck. But it's a purposed thing. People with power don't give power away.

**MB** I don't know if a lot of money automatically assumes a class attitude. We certainly live in a

society now that, with the top one percent, or half of one percent, and then everyone else, there are the people who have it, and fuck everyone else. At the same time, we both know people with a lot of money who are not this way. Some art patrons are remarkable people. But given the state of American society right now, and the intensity of the class divisions and the wounds that have been created by this economic disparity, this class system *is* more of a problem. I don't know what, exactly, short of an economic collapse, is going to mitigate this violence. I mean, there are a lot of people now with a lot of money in the art world who wouldn't piss on us, you know?

**ME** Oh, sure, and that ain't new. The war between poor people, with each other, bothers me more than the fact that the wealthy and the powerful do what wealthy and powerful people do and have always done. I'm more concerned that, in a sense, the masses turn on each other so much that we can't make the progress we could make, and we are easily manipulated. This Tea Party stuff, that's people who don't have a pot to piss in, backing up assholes. I'm a black person, and people generally know what my experience might have been, but go to Appalachia, where you rarely see a black person, and you'll see poverty and difficulty and people oppressed by the country. And that's the state where all the steel and oil came from, with Benjamin Franklin and all of that history, and you say, "What use have the people in power made of that? That the Senate acts like the House of Lords ..." It was designed that way, you know.

**MB** Lucinda Gedeon organized your first retrospective, *Melvin Edwards Sculpture: A Thirty-Year Retrospective, 1963–1993*, for the Neuberger Museum of Art and which opened in 1993. Catherine Craft is organizing a more comprehensive retrospective, which will open in January 2015 at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. In Texas! How do you feel about this?

**ME** Very good! I can say that now because they are just going to press with the book; they are doing an excellent job and as Lucinda Gedeon said, they couldn't do everything in the first retrospective. But Catherine Craft has extended the view slightly. Sometimes going home is alright. It's sentimental; I am sentimental. It's not a word I dismiss.

Tags: , steel sculpture, african culture, anti-colonialism, museums, history, socialism, painting, oral history

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