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EXHIBIT | COLUMBUS MUSEUM OF ART

Retrospective features Melvin Edwards' work depicting civil-rights struggle



ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

The retrospective "Melvin Edwards: Five Decades" will include works from the sculptor's provocative "Lynch Fragments" series.

"Melvin Edwards: Five

Decades" will open on Friday, Feb. 12, and continue through May 8 at the Columbus Museum of Art, 480 E. Broad St.

Edwards will appear Thursday evening, Feb. 11, at a members' preview.

Regular museum hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays, until 9 p.m. Thursdays.

Admission: \$14 adults, \$8 students and senior citizens, \$5 ages 6 to 17, free for ages 5 and younger and free to all on Sundays.

Call 614-221-4848, or visit www.columbusmuseum.org

By <u>Nancy Gilson</u>

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For more than 50 years, Melvin Edwards has commented on issues of civil rights and social justice through his sculptures, especially the provocative "Lynch Fragments" series.

The small-scale, abstract works of welded steel, now numbering more than 200, incorporate chains and shackles as well as railroad ties, spikes and tool fragments to conjure up thoughts of history, slavery, sacrifice and protest.

"Lynching is a form of racial genocide and intimidation," Edwards said. "In my work, it became a strong dynamic. It's not the only aspect of my work, but it's a broad enough parameter that I can go in any creative direction."

Works from the "Lynch Fragments" series as well as other sculptures from the 1960s to the present — about 85 pieces in all — will make up "Melvin Edwards: Five Decades," opening Friday in the new wing of the Columbus Museum of Art.

Edwards' sculptures "are very powerful works and also very intimate," said Tyler Cann, curator of contemporary art for the museum.

"When you stand in front of them, you have this strong sense of empathy, like you would for another person."

The retrospective opened a year ago at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, then traveled to the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Edwards said he's pleased that the exhibit will be shown in Columbus, as he has several connections to Ohio.

From ages 7 to 12, he lived with his family in Dayton while his father served as an executive with the Boy Scouts of America.

"The first museum I ever went to was the Dayton Art Institute in the 1940s," he said.

The artist's first major public commission was "Out of the Struggles of the Past to a Brilliant Future," installed in 1982 at Mount Vernon Plaza on Columbus' East Side.

Cann called the piece "something of an undiscovered gem in the Columbus public art collection."& amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; amp; lt; /p>

Also among Edwards' many public sculptures throughout the United States is a 2003 stainless-steel work on the campus of Miami University in Oxford.

Still, he is best known for "Lynch Fragments."

When he began the works in the early 1960s, Edwards said, he was reflecting both current events of the time and history.

"The civil-rights struggle didn't start with Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr.," he said. " Civil rights in relation to race started the first time the first person was enslaved."

Among the enslaved was Edwards' great-great grandfather, who, before being abducted and brought to the United States, was a blacksmith in Africa.

"I know that story from my grandfather's brother, who told it to me in 1979. He had met his great-greatgrandfather who lived to be 106 into the 20th century. He had been sold to a family that lived in Alabama, and he worked making metal things on the plantation near Tuskegee."

Although Edwards initially planned to become a painter, he grew fascinated with metal sculpture as an undergraduate at the University of Southern California, persuading a graduate student to teach him welding.

"You go into your profession because it's an extension of your family, or you go into it because you're called to do it," he said. "As it turned out, it was both for me."

In addition to studying art, Edwards, a gifted athlete, played football at the University of Southern California, "one of the most sophisticated of enterprises."

"The playbook for a football team is as good and complicated as any mathematical book in university training," he said.

Edwards had his first one-man show before he graduated from college, in 1965 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in California.

In 1970, he traveled to Africa for the first time. Many other trips would follow and today he divides his time among studios in New Jersey, upstate New York and Senegal.

Also in 1970, he became the first African-American sculptor to have an exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. A number of his works from that exhibit, including sculptures made of barbed wire and chains, will hang in the Columbus exhibit.

At 78, Edwards continues to produce sculptures that, though abstract, address issues at the forefront of American culture and society.

Catherine Craft, associate curator at the Nasher Sculpture Center, writes about the sculptor's life and work in the exhibit catalog: "Over the course of five decades, Edwards has produced a body of work, primarily in welded steel, unique for its capacity to provoke thought."

Cann said that Edward achieves potent meaning using materials such as ax heads, shovels, chains and pieces of metal.

"But it's also the way in which those are put together and constructed in a form that you can relate to in an empathetic way," he said.

"I think his humanity jumps through in his work."