

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Man of Steel: The Welded Transfigurations of Melvin Edwards

by [Tim Keane](#) on November 22, 2014



Melvin Edwards, "Wayou Tugge" (2014), welded steel, 15.25 x 15.25 x 6.25 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. ©2014 Melvin Edwards / Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Melvin Edwards' welded relief sculptures conjure up human anguish and human advancement often within the same work. His art delivers the mythmaking spirit of abstract sculpture into the domain of identifiable histories. He has built a long, wide-ranging career around that apparent incongruity.

His abstract sculptures' components are instantly recognizable. They are composed of metalwork drawn from discarded farming and carpentry equipment, from random blocks or sheets of scrap metal, and from rods, gears, shipyard hooks, nails, screws, chains, rings, locks, braces, knives, machine parts and pipe fittings. Edwards then recontextualizes these found instruments into intricate, welded steel sculptural forms, in which the sum of these parts constitutes a new identity and, with it, an array of ineffable impressions. Throughout his oeuvre, there is a tough-minded ethical sense at work within a highly refined aesthetic. His appropriations of discarded metalwork and tools represent, with great depth of feeling and thought, vanished human beings who once exploited, or who were exploited by, these rudimentary technologies.



Melvin Edwards in his Studio (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

At first glance, from a distance, his sculptures' tortured, jutting and tangled formations make them seem like relics preserved in magma or dug up from vanished farming villages or prewar factories. Close up, they are vital and integrated, animated by an illusion of motion conveyed through the sculptor's contortions of the steel and superimpositions of metal on metal — and metal *into* metal. These interlocking components are intensified by Edwards' aggressive and imaginative play with their multiple, contradictory meanings. His current [show](#) at Alexander Gray Associates marks the largest exhibition of Edwards' work since a major retrospective held in the same space in 2010.

Though his inspirations are drawn from both within and beyond the borders of the United States, Edwards' biography is utterly American. Born in 1937, in Houston, Texas, and raised for a time in Dayton, Ohio, Edwards served in the naval reserves and earned a football scholarship to attend USC. He had taken up painting in high school, and then studied sculpture in the early 1960s under such diverse figures as Hal Gebhardt, Hans Burkhardt and Edward Ewing. While critics have often cited David Smith as his touchstone, the scholar Lowery Stokes Sims cites Edwards' own statements that his chief influence was the sculptor Theodore Roszak. As in Roszak's works, Edwards' symbolic designs project outwardly or inwardly from the sculpture's dense centers, consistently defying representation in order to connote kinetic energy and potentialities.

Edwards' career breakthrough came with his *Lynch Fragments*, a series he began in the early 1960s and exhibited soon after in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara to immediate acclaim. That series, which he has continued over the decades, was initially inspired by the implosive canvases of Abstract Expressionism and the urban uprisings during the civil rights era, and it has provided the impetus and the scale for almost all of Edwards' relief sculptures since, including most of the works, completed over the last thirty years, exhibited in this breathtaking show.



Melvin Edwards (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

Despite its evocations of historical memory, Edwards' work has always seemed fueled by

ambivalences that have only deepened over the years, in part due to the artist's immersion in other cultures. Starting in the late 1960s, Edwards developed countless friendships and collaborators in artistic communities in Nigeria, Gabon, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, as well as in Senegal, where he established a studio, spending several weeks each year working there during the 2000s.

In Edwards' work, personal and communal significations operate in tandem. Edward's hyper-individualized sculptures allude to a range of basic human activities, some of them productive, like agriculture, building, manufacturing and trade, and others disgraceful, like civic violence, warfare, torture and incarceration. Because of this, they produce global resonances even when, or especially when, their themes are localized or particularized.

This current show occupies two floors of the roomy Alexander Gray exhibition space. The ground floor features a series on rounded metal plates completed over the last ten years, many of which are Edwards' conjurations of Senegal's urban zones.

"MMOZ" (2005) is named after Mermoz, a district in Dakar near the spot where Edwards maintained a studio. Curved metal braces or plates, some of them resembling small horseshoes, are welded among bars of various thicknesses and joints. Within this intense synergy, a gold-coated lock or casing forms a strange talismanic focal point. The welded sculpture slopes downward as if it might melt off its circular base even as it retains its internal, angular logic. As in all of Edwards' small scale reliefs, the eye is transfixed by a network of invisible links that create a pulsing unity among the welded components. You stand before it visually tracing the sculpture's junctures and recesses, its knots and gaps, its unfolding and enfolding, a sense of motion highlighted by the liquid-like seam where the bristling body of the work is welded to the smooth base.

One of the most striking of the recent sculptures is "Kasangadila: For Francisco Romão Oliveira e Silva" (2004), a title explained in the exhibition catalogue as meaning "Thank you" in Kamanadu, with the dedication referring to the late Angolan leader who led the country's rebellion against the Portuguese. That history speaks vehemently through steel. A large ring supported by welded spokes seems to form an informal frame, which itself contains a grooved cylinder, a smooth flat bar and a few chain links that nearly enclose yet another curved bar. Outside this circular framing protrudes a rail spike, and further down, a machete blade. Taken together these are talismans of agricultural traditions and industrialization as well as latent discord and violence, forming an ambivalent allegory of the country's post-colonial situation. The sculpture's machine-like composites seem frozen in time yet synchronized with some timeless, or ecstatic, dimension.

The gallery's upper floor contains many more compressed relief sculptures, each a kaleidoscope of visual and emotional experiences. Except for three sculptures built on elegant, grid-like bases that were created for Edwards by Senegalese metalworker Yusuf N'Diaye, most of these works dominate their almost unseen bases, giving this section of the exhibition a special charge. These frontloaded, spiked, crenellated, baroque objects seem to burst through the white walls of the brightly lit gallery at perfectly corresponding heights and consistently precise distances from one another.



Melvin Edwards, "Kasangadila: For Francisco Romão de Oliveira e Silva" (2004), welded steel, 15 x 15 x 6.75 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London). ©2014 Melvin Edwards / Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York)

“Ill Ogun” (2003) takes its name from the mythical home of a Yoruban deity. It consists of a lumpish metal base, simple nail-shaped filings, a slender hammer made from rounded steel bars, and a ladder-like central structure. The work seems an emblem of divine craftsmanship and earthy aspirations skyward. “At Crossroads” (1984) is another minimalist masterpiece that packs maximalist punch. The work references the South African township’s mass evictions by the apartheid government. A clamp from a vise has been welded into a smooth pipe, and the two in tandem seem to levitate on a miniature zigzag plate that itself forms two small, polished vertical steps. The struggle between these oppositional forces, unleashed by the work’s diminutive push-and-pull, is exhilarating.

“Angola” (1992) is one of the most forceful works. Like many of the other sculptures, its disparate elements — in this case a hammer-head, a trowel’s blade, a narrow hook and chain links — seem to emerge and almost melt into one another without an underlying support. Its chains evoke imprisonment, suggesting the brutalizing Louisiana prison named Angola. But the sculpture’s allusions to labor and to building, conveyed by the trowel and the hammer, could be expressing the labor of remaking the African nation in its own image.

In “Poetry” (2012), the most recent and least intimidating work in the show, interlaced and interlocked rods, bolts, screws and gauges coalesce into an anchorage for a single wide trowel blade extending from it. Edwards has softened the welded metal’s concatenation by overlaying its surfaces with smudged, liquid-like metal finishing. The effect is poignant. A glance at the catalogue informs the visitor that the work is an homage to his recently deceased wife, poet Jane Cortez. This highly personal homage to his late partner and to the art of poetry corresponds to Edwards’ inimitable contributions to the art of American sculpture. Poetry’s enjambments, leaps, rhythms and insertions of one word’s meaning on to another’s, as well as its ability to transform past suffering into compacted, present-day clarities, are all comparable to the effects unleashed by Edwards’ welded steel sculptures.

“Route des esclaves” (1995-99) exemplifies this metaphorical strength. It consists of a giant bolt and a tangle of chains. The chains dangle from a brick-like base. The chain links are punctuated by a padlock while additional links are welded to a large shackle, which dominates the composition. The undisguised obscenity of the slave trade has probably never been so devastatingly rendered into a work of high art.

The sharp blade protrusions and internal wiry dynamism of “For Makina Kameya” (1988) pays tribute to Zimbabwe’s stone cutters, while the compacted, heart-shaped knot of balled steel “WTC NYC” (2001) is a far more evocative remembrance of that attack’s complicated aftermath than the all-too-literal installations in places like the 9/11 Memorial Museum.

Overall the show speaks to the virtue of endurance, in many voices, registers and tones. And nowhere is Edwards’ hopefulness more in evidence than in the large freestanding sculpture called “*Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas*” (1978–81). The work, which dominates the show, pays tribute to Edwards’ friend Damas, the poet from French Guiana who cofounded the transnational Négritude movement. A giant, sharp-edged metal crescent faces eastward, leading to a room-wide arrangement of large square and circular plates and rings. These variously-positioned structures are set apart by a chain that sweeps outwardly in a perfect arc along the gallery floor, forming both a direction for the visitor and a gentle perimeter that neatly frames the work’s meditative, geometric calm.



Melvin Edwards, "At Crossroads" (1984), welded steel, 10.5 x 8 x 8.88 inches (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. ©2014 Melvin Edwards / Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York)



Melvin Edwards, "Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas" (1978-81), steel In Five Parts (courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. ©2014 Melvin Edwards / Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Walking within its monumental silhouettes and metallic peripheries, the viewer finds no easy symbolism within its rings, circles, squares and crescent. Instead, the work gradually transports the viewer beyond the narrow confines of local New York time, into a tranquil sensation of the world as pure possibility: of form, shape and function within the purity of space — an ethereal experience forged by a sculptor's steeliness.

[Melvin Edwards](#) continues at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 13.