



Members' Newsletter

SUMMER 2014

Nasher Sculpture Center

In the Studio: Melvin Edwards

In January 2015, the Nasher Sculpture Center will present *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, a retrospective of the renowned American sculptor Melvin Edwards. Working primarily in welded steel, Edwards is perhaps best known for his *Lynch Fragments*, an ongoing series of small-scale reliefs born out of the social and political turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement. Incorporating tools and other familiar objects, such as chains, locks, and axe heads, Edwards' *Lynch Fragments* are abstract yet evocative, summoning a range of artistic, cultural, and historical references.

Yet Edwards' career has extended far beyond the *Lynch Fragments*. In the November 2013 issue of *Art in America*, Associate Curator Catherine Craft's article "Barbed Abstraction" documented his groundbreaking installation of environmental barbed-wire sculptures at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the first solo exhibition by an African-American sculptor held at the museum. *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades* will feature a recreation by the artist of these works, in addition to midsize and large-scale sculptures, maquettes reflecting his long career as a public sculptor, and examples from Edwards' sketchbooks. Born in Houston, Texas in 1937, Edwards attended college in Los Angeles, graduating with a BFA from the University of Southern California. In 1967, he moved to New York, where he lives today, dividing his time between his studio in Plainfield, New Jersey and residences, with studios, in Accord, New York and Dakar, Senegal.



Melvin Edwards in his studio, Plainfield, New Jersey, 1990.

Over the past year, Edwards and Craft have talked extensively about the artist's life and work. The Nasher newsletter's interview series is called "In the Studio," but what follows is based on extended, wide-ranging conversations that have taken place not only in Edwards' studios, but his apartment, the Nasher's conference room, the artist's New York gallery, a car driving through the neighborhoods of Los Angeles, and various restaurants and coffee shops. An extended version of these talks will be published in the catalogue accompanying *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*. In the excerpt below, Craft asks Edwards about welding as a sculptural medium, early influences on his art, and his first experiments with expanding the scale of his work.

Catherine Craft: You started as a painter, and had even been in a couple of group shows in Los Angeles, before taking up welding and really turning to sculpture. George Baker, a graduate student you knew at USC and also a sculptor himself, taught you to weld in 1960, and by 1963, you had already made the first *Lynch Fragments*. What was it about welding that attracted you?

Melvin Edwards: Once I started to weld steel, I realized much of the world I lived in is welded. I'd be driving behind a truck, and it's got a tailgate, and I realize: oh all of that, that tailgate, that's welded – and it's a beautiful relief sculpture. You can just see it, because you're used to seeing those things in process.

"I'd be driving behind a truck, and it's got a tailgate, and I realize: oh all of that, that tailgate, that's welded – and it's a beautiful relief sculpture."

CC: Sometimes your sculptures get described in terms of found objects. But the recognizable objects in them – hammers, chisels, chains – are also implements you might use to make a sculpture. And in some of your sculptures, you have geometric forms that anyone could pick up at a scrapyard, for practical uses. "Found object" is so important to the tradition of collage and assemblage, but it doesn't really seem like the right term for your work.

ME: They're "familiar form" objects, but they're also mainly steel – whether it's a recognizable object or what looks like scrap, it's all usable, all from a commonly manufactured material.

CC: But they're often very loaded objects as well, like chains or barbed wire and their associations with slavery and detainment. For example, a number of sculptures from the 1970s and later have machetes in them. Did you just happen to come up with a bunch of machetes?

ME: No, that was a decision. And also, I was spending a lot of time with revolutionary literature, and there was a magazine from Latin America, I think, named *The Machete*. But also, in 1973, in Nigeria, I was going to the architect Demas Nwoko's place, and if you went by the main road, you then had to turn off into this area of farms and gardens. It was wide enough for a cart or vehicle, but most people walked. And I was going from the main road there one day, and this guy came out of the bushes, and he's walking and he's carrying this machete, and I'm saying to myself, "Oh shit! What's he going to do?" Well,

this guy walks by and says hi, how you doing? It's really a farm tool – immediately, that became clear and as if to prove it, a few steps down a girl came out of the bushes, about ten years old, with a bowl on her head and a big machete lying in the bowl. So it made me think. I said to myself, you know, this is just a tool, but it's also not. I was aware of a lot of the revolutionary history of Haiti and eventually Cuba as well, of the importance of fighters recruited from the sugar cane fields, who used that, their tool, as their weapon.

Plus there were variations in the form that I began to really pay attention to, that is, those that were say, within the iconography of Benin. Because weapons were important both as weapons and as symbols, just like the Marine Corps' dress sword, that kind of thing. All of those things, you could say, were in my head. And then, when I was working in Zimbabwe, in 1988-89, I went to the hardware store and bought related tools, traditional hoe blades. In Senegal, I bought a machete. For two reasons: for practical purposes, to have a knife, and the other is: it's just another shape of steel that already exists.

CC: A familiar form object. And, like these other objects in and around your sculptures, a tool.

ME: Often I cut them. There's a knife I still have in Senegal which is about half the length of the blade of the machete. So the short end of it is wide, like a wide-bladed butcher knife and the other part I added to another piece of steel and it's as long as a full machete, but the cutting part is only the tip. It's like any form that I've ever used. There is the initial reason of why I got it and then I've played with it through the years.

CC: Why did you become a sculptor, rather than staying with painting?

ME: I used to say when people would ask me why I was a sculptor that sculpture is closer to football. I would say it's physicality; there's some sense of that. When I first started trying to find more experimental or unusual forms to make sculpture but was still thinking in a combination of the figure and abstraction, I would use physical positions related to football. That way, you could have complex forms that weren't reclining nude poses, or Rodin's *Thinker*, but these gave me little form experiments to play with. In my grappling with ideas of abstraction, these things just would pop up in my work. All of that had already happened in painting before I got serious about sculpture.

CC: So it sounds like from early on you had an interest in finding ways to bring the body or something physical into your work.

ME: I would say the dynamics more than the body itself.

CC: Not a representation of bodies but of dynamic interactions. It's fascinating to me that football played such an important role during your education as an artist – your high school in Houston, Phyllis Wheatley, was state football champion while you were playing for the team. You studied art in college, but one of the things that drew you to the University of Southern California, where you ultimately got your degree, was the possibility of playing football there. That seems like an unusual mix of experiences for a young artist.

ME: As a young artist, yes – but that's the other thing in that period, that as a young person, at first I was much more advanced in the aesthetics and dynamics of sports



thinking. The stereotype idea of a jock didn't really become a stereotype until later. It was there a little because people would say to me, 'That's a strange combination,' but nothing more than that. By the time I was teaching, which was '65, the attitude was starting to be there. It's the one that still survives. I often resented it because one thing people who said that didn't understand is the sophistication inside football and in sports in general.

There are a lot of athletes who don't do well in football because they can't comprehend the playbooks, which in professional football are as thick as a telephone book. All you see are these big men, apparently wrestling with each other, but it's actually so sophisticated, so subtle. For example, a block means you hit somebody and move them out of the way, but sometimes you don't have to move that person but three inches. Or turn his body a certain way so he can't go ahead. To defeat someone like that, it's a matter of inches. Some people are very good with the techniques, and some are very good just with the pure physicality of it. The best ones are usually a combination of both. Some teams have very sophisticated systems, and other teams were simpler. But none of them were absolutely simple because you've got eleven times eleven possibilities. And football is divided into offense and defense, and the qualities for each position are very different. All of that's involved in the strategy. It's like chess.

CC: And, as you pointed out in another conversation, coaches plan and share those plays, those strategies, through drawings.

ME: Yes, to plan for football, you made diagrams all the time. And those diagrams deal with space horizontally, but they do it flat, vertically, on a blackboard.

CC: So you're thinking in space, but you're diagramming it flat.

ME: As an athlete, you know that's how you diagram it,

but the way you function in it is horizontally, across the field. It's the same with choreographers that dance.

.....

CC: One of the things that moves me about the *Lynch Fragments* is how small they are, especially the early ones—they're very powerful, and seem to have this enormous force packed into them. I mean, some of the early *Lynch Fragments*, like *Some Bright Morning*, are less than ten inches across.

ME: The only thing I can say that's really very systematic about how I work is, I tend to work in an area that's about the size of this [dining] table. And even if I'm developing something that's for a larger work, it just seems to be the natural way for me to work with the material.

CC: I would guess that at first some of that was also just practical, in terms of having limited studio space. But it also seems to have been a very conscious decision.

ME: My notion was, you work smaller, you can do more works, go through more of your ideas. Plus, the scale makes a lot of difference in those pieces. That's where I've often wondered—but refused to do—what if I made *Lynch Fragments* five feet, six feet in scale? I just resisted it.

CC: You've also said that the inspiration for the small scale came, in part, from jazz.

ME: The metaphor was: complicated music done in three minutes or so in recordings, or composed for that time limit. Many of those musicians in the jazz world, playing the same piece live might be playing for five, ten, fifteen minutes. But at the same time, the basic genius of the piece is in that three-minute frame, with possible variations.

Often I was able to make jumps in my head in relation to that kind of thing—how to work, how to try to think. I'm



sometimes hesitant to say jazz and sculpture because the notion that gives to other people is not the way I mean it. There's no actual connection between one color and one sound, if you know what I mean.

CC: It seems to me that when you talk about the relation of jazz to your work, it's in a much more conceptual or structural way.

ME: That's true, that's what it meant for me.

CC: Was the improvisational nature of jazz important to you, too? That they could take a three-minute piece and play it in different ways?

ME: Things could've gone a number of directions in that early period because the ideas were things that led to other ideas pretty quickly. Even the *Lynch Fragments* have that ability, though their loaded collective title tends to make people think more about subjective notions than the dynamic artistic process.

CC: Did you ever regret the title for that reason? You stopped making *Lynch Fragments* in mid-1960s, but you returned to them in the 1970s and still make them today.

ME: I never did, but every now and then somebody would say, "Oh, it would've been wiser...."

CC: When did you start listening to jazz seriously?

ME: It started in 1956. By then I bought my first records, and somewhere I still have them.

CC: So were you listening mainly to people like Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis?

ME: Yeah, also Thelonious Monk. Almost all of them I enjoyed, but some of them seemed to be doing things that were challenging to other musicians. All I knew was what I could hear, that they handled sound differently. I

say sound because I didn't know about notes and chords. To this day I don't. But at the same time it was clear that, say, Thelonious Monk used sound and space very differently. In my head it corresponded to the idea of positive and negative in sculpture—negative space which doesn't exist.

CC: A negative space would be like silence in music—there's really no such thing as silence either.

ME: Yeah, exactly. But silence is significant depending on what comes before and what ends it, what stops being and what comes into being afterwards. And negative space is form or an area of space. That's a way of describing a phenomenon within sculpture in particular. There were big arguments about that in school.

CC: Alongside the *Lynch Fragments*, you started making sculptures that explore that idea of so-called negative space. I'm thinking of works like *Chaino*, which also has a connection with jazz. In *Chaino* there are chains, but there's another meaning to the title.

ME: Yes, referring to Chano Pozo, one of the Cuban percussionists who were specifically bringers of African culture as it moved through Cuba and further into the Western world.

CC: *Chaino*'s one of the first sculptures where you really expand the scale of your work, and you're doing it through negative space. There an object like a *Lynch Fragment* in the center, held in tension by chains and rods attached to a framework. It's hard to see in photographs, but the framework is torqued, really skewed. It feels like the pressure of containing the fragment is enormous. How did you conceive that?

ME: The metaphor that turned into the functional and practical was: if the metaphor for lynching was hanging—and lynchings didn't always involve hanging; most times they didn't—but if the metaphor was hanging and hanging



was an aspect, an idea of suspension, then I started working with suspension as a principle in the work. In other words, every way that I think I've tried to work through the years always made me think of the other point of view of the principle. In other words, hanging / suspending. Suspended what? Suspended how?

CC: And, with what I know about lynching, those questions still relate to that metaphor: you're being pulled in all directions—

ME: It's the Old English "drawn and quartered."

CC: Yeah, exactly. Unfortunately.

ME: And in terms of my own history—not that you think of this stuff all the time, but you never know when or what your own experience is going to give you in relation to something you're doing that's totally away from it. For example, I said "drawn and quartered," and immediately

I remember carrying in quarters of beef into the market, into the store. I can see them, coming out of the truck, and that period of working in a supermarket in Houston—

CC: When you were in high school?

ME: Yes, in the meat department—so you know, I did everything to a cow but kill it, to tell the truth. And when I got a job in '61 or 2 at the Los Angeles County Hospital, and I always thought, because I liked anatomy, and Vesalius, and those kind of things, "Oh yeah, that's right I can go to the morgue, and I can, you know—"

CC: —have a real lesson—

ME: —and then I encountered it, and (laughing) that took care of me! I didn't want anything to do with it!

CC: And so you chose another way instead.

PREVIOUS PAGE LEFT: Melvin Edwards, *Ventana a Isla Negra*, c. 1971. Welded steel and barbed wire, 44.375 x 48 x 20 in.

PREVIOUS PAGE RIGHT: Melvin Edwards, *Some Bright Morning*, 1963. Welded Steel, 14.5 x 9.25 x 5 in.

ABOVE: Melvin Edwards, *Chaino*, 1964. Welded steel and chains 62 x 102 x 26 in.
All photos courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Melvin Edwards: Five Decades is supported in part by a major grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.