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Melvin Edwards: ‘Sculptures 1964-2010’

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Through Saturday

It is easy to forget how long [Melvin Edwards](#) has been fusing narrative and formalism into intractably, disturbingly specific objects. Especially if the hard evidence — the welded-steel pieces themselves — has not been available for viewing. The centerpiece of [this selection of works](#) spanning more than 40 years is “Chaino,” a large piece from 1964 that has rarely been exhibited and never in New York. It belongs in a museum.

With a large enginelike, heartlike chunk of metal suspended from chains strung to an impossibly thin rectangular scaffolding of steel, “Chaino” is a dour, macabre, furious thing. It attenuates the balancing act of Mark di Suvero’s work, partly through the contrast of the steel structure with the compressed hanging form, conjuring up isolation and also immense outside pressure. Formally and emotionally stark, “Chaino” introduces the theme of racial violence evident in the small, dense wall sculptures of Mr. Edwards’s Lynch Fragments of the 1970s and ’80s, several of which are also exhibited here.

The violent meaning of “Chaino” is evident without knowing that Mr. Edwards is African-American. But, knowing his subsequent work, it might even be seen as a monument-before-the-fact to the 1998 dragging death of [James Byrd Jr.](#) in Jasper, Tex.

The other pieces here attest to the quiet, undiminished integrity of Mr. Edwards’s art, guided by a sure grasp of the power to be unleashed by the interlocking of steel forms — found and made — and the emotional reservoir to sustain it. **ROBERTA SMITH**