

Sculptor's Horizons Have No Limits

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DESPITE having had numerous exhibitions of his work in the United States and other countries, and having received fellowships from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the John Hay Whitney Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the sculptor Melvin Edwards just recently had his first exhibition in a New York gallery.

The attainment of this milestone makes it clear that at the age of 52, Mr. Edwards, well known among critics and fellow artists, is finally gaining official recognition in the mainstream art world. Like many of his admirers, he is quite aware that this has been long overdue.

"I certainly thought that around the time when I did my show at the Whitney Museum of American Art" in 1970, he said, "something else significant should have happened. But when it didn't, I just kept on working. "You see, an artist needs a gallery as a business partner. We're not trained to be salesmen. There's no way that we could be efficient at creating art and managing the business and social aspects of this profession.

"On the other hand, I've always been a realist about American life. You know that things should be different; unfortunately, they aren't. The racial attitude of New York galleries has not been nice. But it's really been their loss because people are ready to see and to know more."

'A Man of Immense Knowledge'

Clara Diament Sujo, the owner of the CDS Gallery in Manhattan, where new work by Mr. Edwards was exhibited last March, agreed. "It's incredible that he is not known sufficiently well in his country," she said. "We South Americans have seen Mel's work and have wanted to know more about him. I had wanted to meet him for a long time. He is a man of immense knowledge. When we met, he knew so much about my culture.

"His work means very much for art in America, as well as the rest of the world. I'm not interested in the very young artists who become a success overnight and burnout too quickly. I believe in the work that comes from mature intellectual artists like Mel. Their work will live on."

When critics write about Mr. Edwards's sculpture, they usually note the apparent influence of stars in Western modernist sculpture like David Smith and Anthony Caro. Mr. Edwards does not deny their importance in his artistic development, but he contends that "it's often a mistake to throw around the art-historical names when you talk about influence because the people who had more of an effect on my art and career were other people whose names aren't in the art-history books."

To begin with, there were his art teachers at the high school he attended in racially segregated Houston, where he was born in 1937. "From them I learned how to draw and paint," Mr. Edwards said. "They gave me lots of drawing paper to take home and constantly told me, 'Draw what's around you.' "

As a youngster he was introduced to the work of Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Charles White. He also discovered the Renaissance and was fascinated with Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. He studied at Los Angeles City College and the Los Angeles County Art Institute, receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Southern California in 1965.

About the same time, Mr. Edwards was exposed to the art of the Mexican muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco. He said he had gained a sense of social and political responsibility from his parents, but it was the example of this group of artists that had encouraged him to seek from his own culture and experience the means of effectively transmitting this consciousness through his art.

Up until 1963, he mainly worked as a painter, producing large-scale abstract oil paintings, although he had been formally introduced to sculpture in college.

"As the civil rights movement advanced," Mr. Edwards said, "sculpture started to take over when, in response to the events of the time, I began to feel that I had ideas that seemed to have no possible place in the painting I was doing. Looking back, that's not absolutely so. It could have been worked out another way, but it seemed that in my state of mind at the time, it was the only way."

Sculpture became his primary medium after he was able to give expression to his new ideas through a series of sculptures called "Lynch Fragments." They are welded-steel wall reliefs meant to be installed in exhibitions at eye level. Measuring at least a foot in height and width, each is different from the others and has its own title. All consist of a variety of found, and sometimes created, objects, like chains, hammers, spikes, nails, chisels and horseshoes.

Mr. Edwards said he had produced more than 100 of the pieces. For him, they represent "a continuance of the resistance against oppression" and can be understood, he said, as a "private conversation - most of them relate to my personal experience or specific incidents within the history of racism throughout the world."

A Skillful Synthesis

Critics are now paying attention to the "Lynch Fragments," admiring them especially for their confrontational quality and demonstration of Mr. Edwards's skillful synthesis of the traditions of African and Western sculpture.

Over the last 20 years he has traveled extensively in Africa, as well as South America, the Caribbean and Europe. For the last two summers, he has conducted workshops with students at the National Gallery of Art in Zimbabwe at the invitation of the government.

"I work with a group of students in relation to working in metal," he said. "They work very well in stone because their whole modern art movement is centered on stone sculpture. But they have a steel industry there, so they'd like to expand more into metal. The best way for me to teach them such methods as the welding process is to do my own work while working with them. So I've come home with about 14 pieces of new sculpture."

Since his return from Africa, Mr. Edwards has been working hard in his large studio here. It consists of a workroom with welding equipment and a sitting room full of books about art and literature. Some of his works, in the form of drawings, prints, maquettes and sculptures, are on display throughout his studio.

This has been a particularly busy year for Mr. Edwards. So far, his sculptures have been shown in at least six exhibitions. Also, his first New York exhibition resulted in the sale of his sculptures to the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the Bronx Museum.

These days, he is busy working on a public art commission for the Division of Motor Vehicles office in Eatontown. In the last 10 years, he has completed monumental outdoor sculptures for several public art commissions. Many are in various parts of the country, but at least three can be seen in New Jersey, at Rutgers University's Livingston College Student Center, Lafayette Gardens in Jersey City and the Peat Marwick Mitchell Corporation in Montvale.

As another aspect of Mr. Edwards's work that has received critical acclaim, these outdoor sculptures are often noted for their affinity to the sculpture of David Smith and Anthony Caro in technique, formal language and ambition. They are cut from steel plates and are characterized by burnished surfaces and motifs of chains, disks, squares, rectangles, posts and lintels.

A professor of art at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School, Mr. Edwards teaches a course in sculpture to graduate and undergraduate students. He has also developed and teaches a course called "Third World Art," which he describes as "kind of an exposure course through slides to the visual art of usually contemporary, but not always, non-Western cultures, like that of Africa, Asia and Latin America."

Mr. Edwards, who has three adult daughters, lives with his wife, the poet Jayne Cortez, in Manhattan.

He talked about his objectives for his art and career. "The one thing, quite frankly, I believe about myself is that I'm nowhere near my level of ideas. I just started to be able to do large commissions in the last 10 years, and I don't just mean the size of them, but I mean the relationship of my work to society.

"See, I think the idea of public art is very important - art related to architecture and making life better for living. Just developing that attitude of building new cities, new places that are humane, that esthetics always have to do with the quality of life. Trying to get those things more in sync is very important. That's the project for human beings anyway now. If we can give up war, then it's how to make life."

He started to laugh, then continued in a serious tone: "I don't want to sound like some unrealistic dreamy person, but I just think it makes more sense. We can do it and we can put everybody in the world to work. That's an esthetic for all of society. And visual art plays an important part in this, just as all the other arts do. We can make better art and a better life. That's my ambition."