

Sculptor Melvin Edwards channels history and social impetus in Oklahoma Contemporary exhibit

By Jessica Williams | 1 day ago



Melvin Edwards creates abstract sculptures with political and historical merit. (Jeffrey Sturges / provided)

Sculpture artist Melvin Edwards welds intricate, abstract historical narratives with barbed wire, steel and scrap iron.

“Steel is like cloth,” Edwards said. “If you separate it from its original source, you can make anything out of it.”

His sculptures utilize industrial materials that have often been recycled to relay complex sociopolitical messages.

The internationally acclaimed artist spoke to *Oklahoma Gazette* about his *Melvin Edwards: In Oklahoma* solo exhibition at Oklahoma Contemporary and how nothing is exactly what it seems.

“I couldn’t have anything but a good time in Oklahoma,” Edwards said. “It reminds me of my home in [Houston,] Texas, and has a unique, rich history.”

Oklahoma Contemporary connected with Edwards in Dallas through Nasher Sculpture Center’s exhibit *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*. Curatorial and Exhibitions director Jennifer Scanlan said that rather than closing a chapter to a book, this retrospective created new ideas and aspirations.

“Our staff was so blown away that they asked him to collaborate with us,” Scanlan said. “His retrospective gave him the opportunity to revisit some old ideas and revive them for OK Contemporary.”

The fruits of Edwards’ three-week residency in OKC are evident on the gallery walls. *In Oklahoma* features nine new installations, one large sculpture and some of his famous pieces.

Sharing stories

Before describing his art, Edwards fluidly articulates the complex machinery underlying his sculptures.

Speaking with him serves as a comprehensive philosophy, culture and history course.

“Information of any kind is useful for my sculptures,” he said. “The world is getting smaller; there’s a mall on every corner. If I’m going to add something new to the world, I need to keep learning.”

Edwards contributes to a larger social impetus; African diaspora and civil rights inform his works. His work is celebrated for its formidable themes of race relations and antiwar activism, and he introduced the world to it in the early 1960s with his *Lynch Fragments* series.

Language and poetry also give weight to each creation, as his wife, late American poet Jayne Cortez profoundly influenced his work. Words take such precedence, in fact, that Edwards said a sculpture cannot be named until it's complete.

"I have to wait until after the baby is born before I name it," he said. "Every name has a story behind it."

Edwards holds enough stories for multiple lifetimes. For example, one untitled sculpture will be dedicated to the Oba of Benin in Nigeria, with whom Edwards has close ties.

Even if not explicitly stated or shown, Edwards said his relationships and experiences are the backbone of his sculptures.

"People may not know the cultural or historical references in my pieces," Edwards said, "but the materials I use are familiar, and those create subjective stories for everyone."

Intellect and brute physicality generate each sculpture's quiet strength. Edwards bends and manipulates seemingly impermeable materials metaphorically with his stories but tangibly through welding.

"Looking at me now, you wouldn't guess I had a propensity for violence," Edwards said. "I played football growing up, which is fundamentally a violent game. Welding also requires a certain tolerance for violence or physicality."



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'History of struggle'

Sharp industrial materials hanging stoically from walls and ceilings conjure endless associations and meanings. Edwards' works resist strict interpretation.

"I don't really worry too much about what the audience will think," he said. "I focus subjectively on the history of struggle, and people respond collectively."

His sculptures invite audiences to find comfort in instability and embrace ideological fluidity.

Edwards has shown works in galleries across the U.S. and has been commissioned to create public monuments in major cities.

"A man in Ohio dedicated a plaque to his mother in front of one of my sculptures," Edwards said. "Once you create something for the public, it becomes theirs to incorporate into their lives, regardless of the artist's intention."

Acceptance of uncertainty is key to Edwards' art. Without an ounce of the anxiety so often expressed by young artists, Edwards said he's at peace with incomplete artworks.

"It's done when it's done," Edwards said. "But there's always something to add or change. If I need to discard a sculpture, I'm OK with that too. There's always something new to create."

Moving response

On Thursday, Oklahoma Contemporary will add more to Edwards' show with an event paying homage to the artist's love for the humanities.

Oklahoma Contemporary and the Ralph Ellison Foundation celebrate the exhibit with Freedom Visible: Voices and Music in Motion 5:30-7:30 p.m. Thursday at the arts center. Spoken-word and dance artist Candace Liger will perform with West African percussionist Aboubacar Camara as they relate stories of history, bondage and deliverance.

Admission is free.

"We want to bring dance, music and poetry into the gallery to respond to Melvin's work," said Oklahoma Contemporary art director Jeremiah Matthew Davis. "It brings more conversations into the mix and showcases Melvin's diverse range of influences."

The old and new combine to create a socially constructive experience in Edwards' installations. As an artist, teacher and grandfather, he always looks forward.

"Nothing is ever going to be perfect," Edwards said, "but what we create today can significantly improve the future."

Melvin Edwards: In Oklahoma runs through Dec. 27 at Oklahoma Contemporary, 3000 General Pershing Blvd. Visit oklahomacontemporary.org for more information.

Freedom Visible: Voices and Music in Motion

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Print headline: Metal mettle, Acclaimed sculptor Melvin Edwards welds history and social impetus into his acclaimed creations, on display now at Oklahoma Contemporary.



Jessica Williams

This article was written by an Oklahoma Gazette contributor. To reach an editor, please email jchancellor@okgazette.com with this story's headline in your subject line.