

# Melvin Edwards: The World of a Marvelous Artist

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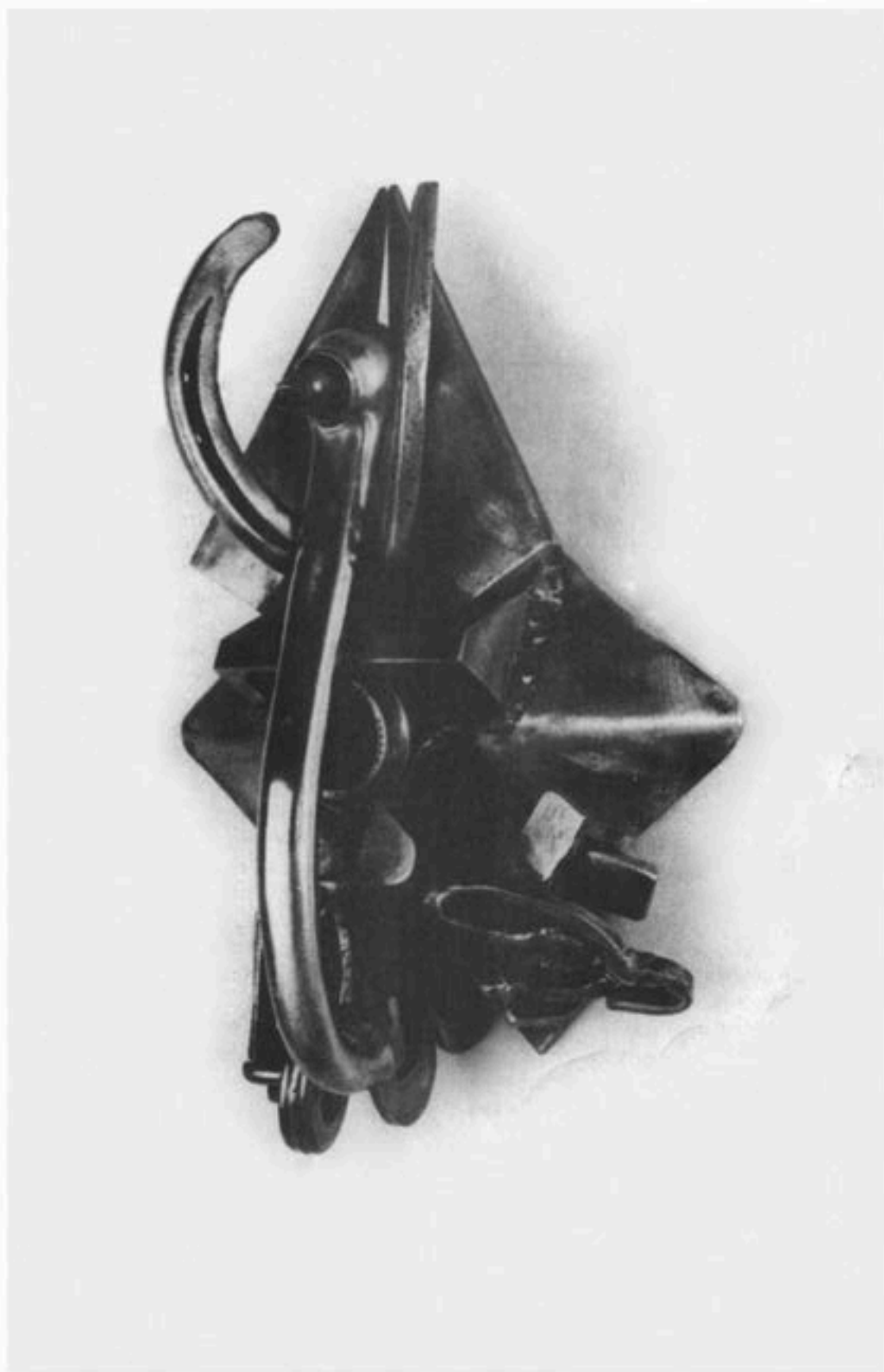
by Nancy Morejón  
*Translated from Spanish by Carmen Alegría*

In the Spring of 1993, I visited an exhibit of the prodigious work of the sculptor, Melvin Edwards, at the Newberger Museum of Art in New York. This is not an ordinary exhibit. It is a retrospective that covers thirty years of artistic work; uninterrupted work in which the artist has achieved an extremely original language, a true balance of forms. These forms of Melvin Edwards' exist thanks to his talent, his honesty, his insight, his perseverance, and his firm objective: to carry on the cultural values that surrounded him from birth in a Black community in the state of Texas. His life experience, coupled with the talents of his grandmother, Coco, and his exceptional parents, served as the bases for his discovery of the original source that emanates from an Africa that so defines us in America. Nevertheless, this artist did not confine himself solely to his African roots, but instead, sought a sculptural expression that would place him at the center of the most modern currents of his time.

One of the merits I find in the work of Melvin Edwards is the precise balance he achieves between cultures and pictorial craft. Recognizing himself as a legitimate African-American, Mel found, through his inspired creativity, horizons placed in his hands not only by masters of the European vanguard, but by the pride of our century, the art of jazz, created by the Black people of the United States.

Whosoever explores the gallery and the outdoor areas of the Neuberger Museum will find the world of a marvelous artist; a world that branches into two great currents that include the splendid series, *Lynch Fragments* (constituted by a large number of pieces that resemble African masks), and a group of free-form sculptures of various sizes, that take on a strange corporeality. In crossing the gardens, the spectator will find among these sculptures some that challenge monumental space to arrest their playful, enormous character. The child within our sculptor got his way and created a diversity of rockers that, transformed by light, space, and color, become wonderful toys, pleasing to the eye, integrated into the greenery of the fields by their gracefulness. In contrast with the language of stainless steel, the cast iron, and the immensity of the objects made from old railroad scrap and devastated factories, we see these polished, stone-like sculptures rising above the rest, like tall, straight trees with their dense, leafy presence.

Critics who have compiled material on the Melvin Edwards retrospective agree in their assessment of the unusual use of these materials in evoking a highly industrialized universe — an unquestionable sign of our times. The sculptor, through his craft, transforms the materials into human matter. There is something so tender, so moving, in the welded and forged steel the basic substance used in executing the *Lynch Fragments*. The



*Afrophenix #2 1963 from the Lynch Fragment Series.*

genius of the artist flowers as he gives form to the material and then gives us back the same materials, but dominated now by his feelings, feelings he shares with the spectators. And so the *Lynch Fragments*, born thirty years ago in Los Angeles, have never abandoned the sculptor. They have come to represent the heart of his talent. A heart that beats and rends itself apart and becomes the past and becomes a premonition. Though it is true that the police brutality that ravaged that city in the early sixties inspired the birth of this series, it is just as true that the artist always remained faithful to the language of art, never to the language of posters. Such a theme, such a challenge, did not fit into a shallow, or naive language. What triumphed above all else was the expression of a full artist that never shed his valuable sense of commitment and belonging to a community.

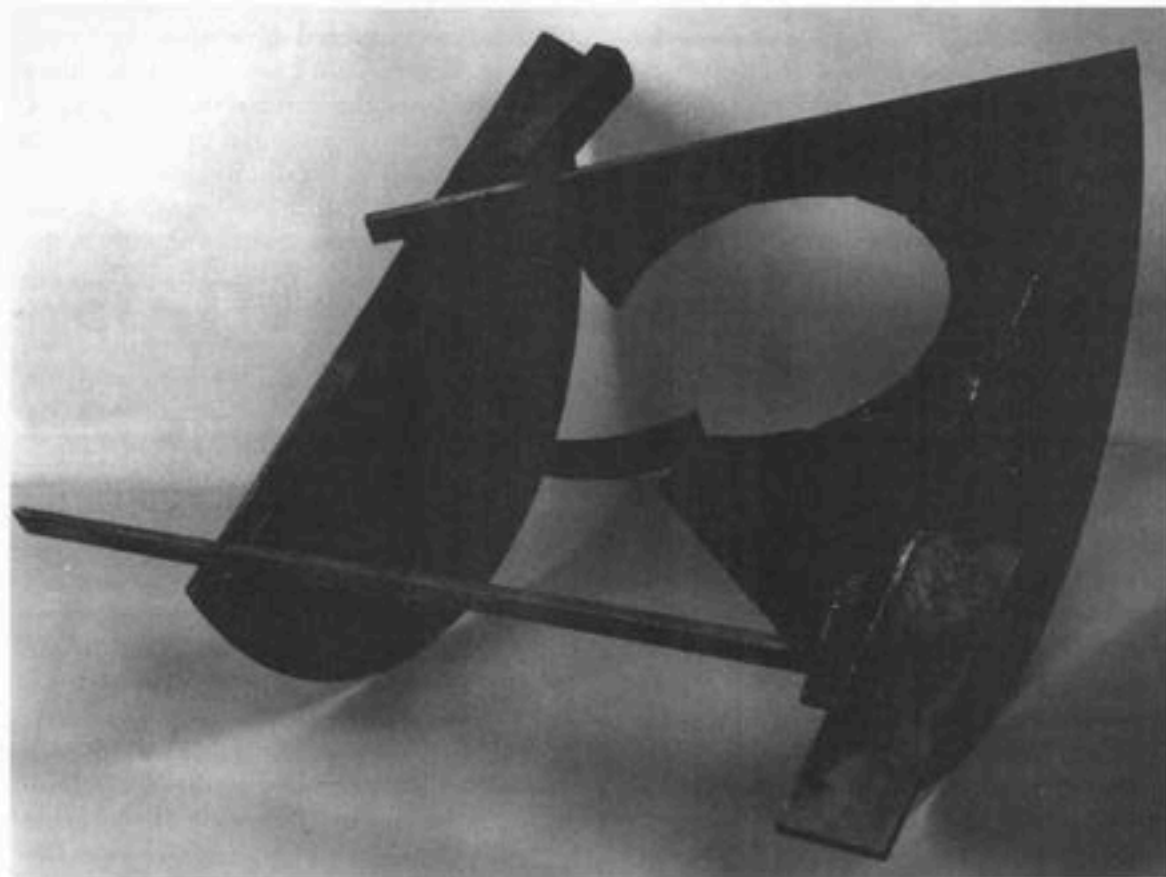
Although the playful, calming kinetic rockers kept me entertained for a long time, I could not take my eyes off the *Lynch Fragments*. I found in them an indescribable truth and beauty. After so many years of the unquestionably bad treatment we have witnessed of African-American creative art and its meaning — the sense of which we have but scratched the surface of, and at a time when we have begun to know for certain from whence we came — it is a great revelation to come face to face with masses of old steel ruins, synthesized by this sculptor, that point the way for us and push us towards a world where fantasy overflows and tears at our guts and our hearts. But such is the beauty released by these fragments that the spectator can only keep walking, finding his way back to *Nam* (1973), or *Badagry Road* (1984), *Mamelodi* (1985), or *Palmares* (1988). It is a feast of ourselves through the forging of our past.

I am enchanted by the *Lynch Fragments* and beg the reader to forgive me if I have set aside the academic tone, the critical tone that a work of this magnitude demands. I want to let myself be led by an intuition that comes from the country and the pilgrimages and from the crossing of the Atlantic. I prefer these words that bring me closer to art, child of the most authentic diaspora. I suffer from the vertigo

of those of us who have known abandonment and have contemplated the whip of the tyrant. In these pages, I want to be able to touch the magic substance that formed these fragments. That substance, concocted in the cargo decks of boats, makes me recognize myself in the splendor of irons cast in the brambles, in the factory, in the suburb, in the *bantustán*, in the barrio. There will always be a chain there, or rather, a piece of chain. Thick ones, fine ones, these chains appear in a number of the *Lynch Fragments*; they reach the rockers, and the physicality of the great steel monuments. We stand before the poetic art of Melvin Edwards. These chains come and go, and at moments, they come together in something like masks. But although they may seem like masks, the *Lynch Fragments* are not masks. However, they point to them, and more importantly, their composition expresses the beginnings of the ancient African masks that inaugurated the best poetry, the plastic arts of this century, from Picasso to the futurists. That air of a mask envelopes each one of the *Lynch Fragments*. The sculptoric adventure of this artist brings this air to us in its primal essence, in its complex simplicity.

The world of these sculptures is absolutely marked by the presence of wrought irons, whose essence glows out of the invariable *leit motif*, the chains. Naturally, this is an allusion to the common historical experience known on this hemisphere through the slave trade and enslavement. In the *Lynch Fragments*, Edwards makes strikingly expressive use of these chains that moan, frighten, denounce, and can even be touching. A symbol of historical repression in all the cultures of humanity, in America, the chain has had a connotation only identified with the African presence in the New World.

The language of irons in Melvin Edwards' sculpture reaches such unknown splendor that it leads me to consider some of the patterns of so-called magical thought and, especially, of the artistic function of myth in our communities. Most certainly, we have before us someone whose expressive talents are ruled by Oggún, Yoruba god of forging, the wild country, and metals. Oggún survived the ups



Pamberi 1988 steel (*Kinetic Rocker*).

and downs of the transplant to America, and provides the same incorruptible trunk for Haitian voodoo, Cuban *santería*, and the Brazilian *candomblé*. Oggún does not escape the consciousness of Melvin Edwards, and so we see Oggún as a subject in some of his works.<sup>1</sup>

I don't know by what miracle Melvin Edwards has himself felt close to some of the best Cuban plastic artists. To begin with, I know of his admiration for the great sculptor Agustín Cárdenas, whose extraordinary product places him amongst the world masters of contemporary sculpture. His *Homenaje a Wilfredo Lam* (1981) testifies to this. His *Justice for Tropic-Ana* (dedicated to the late Ana Mendieta, 1986), is moving, heartbreaking. In the last few years, Melvin Edwards' work and person have given much encouragement to artists including Gilberto de la Nuez, who died in Havana at the end of November 1993; also to Ramón Haití, and Rogelio Cobas. In this country we have known how to love and appreciate — as also has been the case in other places — his indispensable contribution to

African-American artistic expression. His retrospective precisely reveals him to us as a great creator, an exceptional sculptor. In sum, as affirmed by Lucinda H. Geodon, director of the Neuberger Museum of Art, "Melvin Edwards is a marvelous artist."<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant and important artists of this century in America.

#### NOTES

1. See *Gate of Ogun* (1983), Igun Hammer (1981), among others.
2. Lucinda H. Geodon: "Foreword and Acknowledgements" in *Melvin Edwards Sculpture: A Thirty-Year Retrospective*, catalogue of the retrospective sponsored by the Neuberger Museum of Art, New York, 1993, p.7