

Review/Art

Sculpture,
Private
And Public

By MICHAEL BRENSON

Melvin Edwards is one of the best American sculptors. He is also one of the least known. He made a barbed-wire-and-chain environmental installation for the lobby gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art, but that was in 1970. His reliefs and freestanding sculptures have been presented at the Studio Museum in Harlem, but at the age of 51 he has never had a New York gallery show.

So the opportunity to see together the public and private sides of his work is something of an event. His big, open, freewheeling stainless-steel sculpture called "Confirmation," a commission under the art-in-architecture program of the General Services Administration, was recently installed in front of a Social Security building in Jamaica, Queens. And six small, compact, taut sculptures from his remarkable "Lynch Fragments" series are included in "Affinities: Idioms/Esthetics/Intents," a group show organized by the artist Juan Sanchez for the nearby Jamaica Arts Center.

The "Lynch Fragments" are steel reliefs, most of them no more than a foot tall. They may include found objects like chains, nails and padlocks; sometimes Mr. Edwards hammers and shapes the tools of oppression himself. These reliefs are inspired by African masks and their ability to express powerful feelings of fear, violence, vigilance, sexuality and play. All these fragments seem to be faces, looking, pointing, warning, no matter how much they seem to be impaled, wedged in, enslaved.



Lorna Simpson

Melvin Edwards's "Da Ten Da Mhiza," left, and "Anthropology," both of sculptured steel, are included in "Affinities: Idioms/ Esthetics/ Intents," a group show at the Jamaica Art Center.

There are now well over 100 sculptures in the series, on which Mr. Edwards has been working on and off since 1963. They are inventive and masterly. The ease with which the artist manipulates seemingly un-

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bendable steel bars is essential to a body of work that is very much about the fullest possible understanding of freedom. No matter how aggressive the solid shapes, attention is inevitably drawn to the voids behind the wild assemblage of ax-blade jaw, chain mouth and padlock forehead in "Da Ten Da Mhiza" is a bristling, breathing darkness.

One of the signs of Mr. Edwards's sculptural intelligence is that the sense of scale is as convincing in a public piece like "Confirmation," which is about 12 feet tall, as it is in the small, private fragments. While the shapes in the public work — a large, upright disk, with a small triangular opening near the top, welded to an arch — grow out of the "Lynch Fragments," they are more expansive and architectural. The arched entranceway suggests an opening, a way out. The disk is like a wheel. By extensively working the surface, Mr. Edwards makes the steel both raw, almost graffiti-like, and responsive to neighborhood light. While the "Lynch Fragments" journey inward to personal and racial memory, the large pieces look outward and roll ahead.

"Confirmation" is at the corner of Jamaica Avenue and Parsons Boulevard, near the Parsons Boulevard stop on the E and F trains, in Jamaica, Queens. "Affinities: Idioms/ Esthetics/Intents" is at the Jamaica Arts Center, 161-04 Jamaica Avenue, two blocks from the sculpture, through next Friday.

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