

Melvin Edwards' *Homage to the Poet Léon Gontran Damas*, 1978

Going Back to Africa—as Visitors

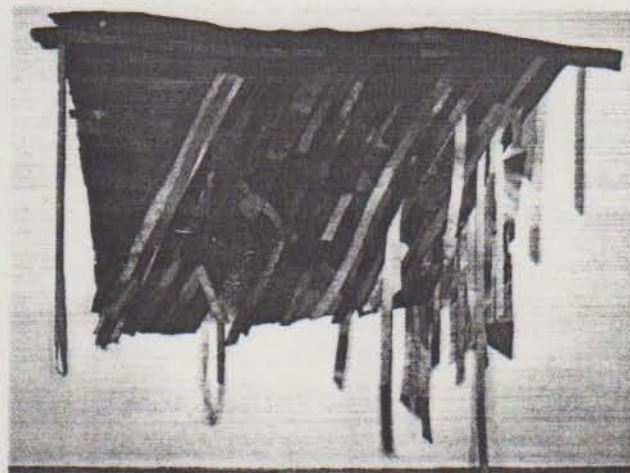
At New York City's P.S. 1, a show of Afro-American art

The exhibition of "Afro-American Abstraction," being held in the "alternative space" of a rehabilitated New York City school building called P.S. 1, is a modest sort of landmark. It has been some years since any New York museum paid much attention to what black artists were doing. There was a flurry of group shows in the late '60s and early '70s, and then the subject was all but dropped. A few of the artists in the diverse P.S. 1 show are fairly well known through private galleries in Manhattan. Others are not. Though small, the sample is illuminating.

The first point to be made about this show is, perhaps, obvious. It is not an exhibition of "ethnic" art. The traditions that have shaped the work in it are Western modernist above anything else. Welded steel plates, junk assemblage, dyed and sewed canvas, scattered installation pieces on the floor—all this is common and current language. All the artists are children of MOMA; most are under 40. There are many references to African tribal art, but they tend to be formal and oblique. What one does not see is the same kind of quotation that artists, generally white, have taken from Africa (or their idea of Africa) since Picasso started using Bakota grave figures in his pre-cubist paintings. Picasso treated African art as raw material and cared nothing about its tribal contexts or religious meanings. As far as he, Matisse and Braque were concerned, it was made by savages: the masks and carvings were emblems of ferocity, a thrilling rupture in the smooth field of French figure painting. Seventy

years later, for an artist to use African art in that way could only be racist condescension, or airport art, or both. So the problem for an artist who wants to connect his or her sense of black identity with the legacy of modernism, and do so while referring to Africa, is how to back into African imagery by allusion, metaphor, abstraction, any way except by direct quotation. In art, no American can return to Africa, except as a visitor. That is what a number of the 19 artists represented in the show have done.

The curator, Art Critic April Kingsley, lists a number of "African" traits she detects in the work: "A bold physicality, rhythmical vitality and textural richness, as well as a tendency to use linear, geometric imagery and high-energy color. The work is active, not withdrawn, robust not tentative." These are also the marks of



Alvin Loving's *Shades of '73: Composition for 1980*

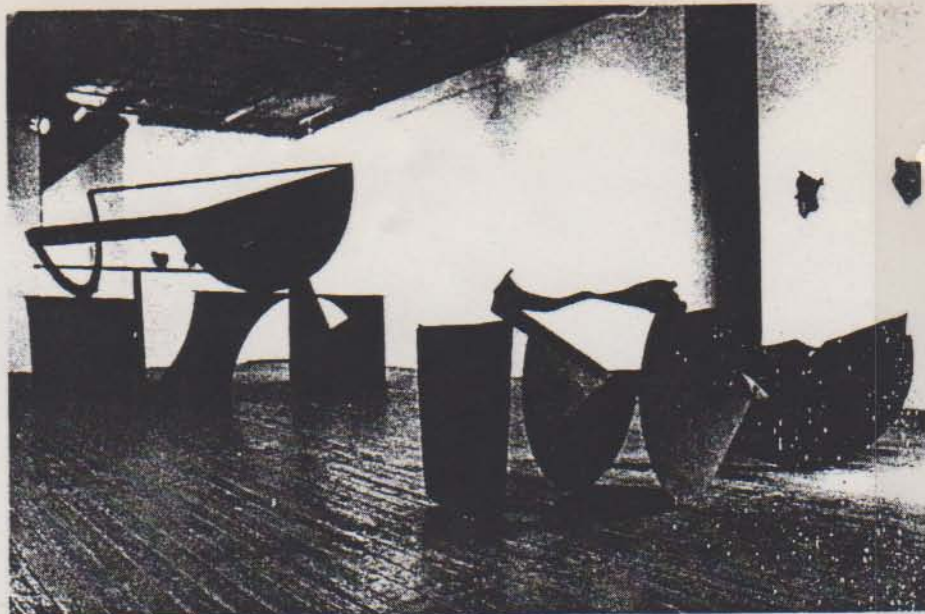
How to back into African imagery by allusion and metaphor.

much European and nonblack American art, and this points to the difficulty of locating the work in an African matrix. On the one hand, one can be sure what the sculptor Martin Puryear is about with a subtly irregular circle of dark bent wood, some four feet in diameter, a minimal serpent with a knob for a head: this handsome and assured object is like a blowup of a tribal bracelet, but with more sculptural presence. On the other, one of the best pieces in the show is Alvin Loving's wall hanging of sewed, dyed canvas, *Shades of '73: Composition for 1980*, whose variegated strips are like a moody, floral version of a constructivist motif and seem to make no perceptible reference to Africa at all.

Sometimes a very interesting synthesis emerges. Melvin Edwards' small sculptures, made of scrap iron forged and welded together, have a strongly totemic flavor. They allude to the once common practice of *bricolage* in West African tribal art, whereby mixed scraps of junk (nails, tin, cartridge cases and so forth) were incorporated into carved masks and figures. Junk sculpture has also been a Western convention for decades, but Edwards invests it with a rough, sinewy power, and his larger piece in the show, *Homage to the Poet Léon Gontran Damas*, 1978, has an almost majestic aura of open declamation. More delicate and complex in feeling is Howardena Pindell's large, irregular patch of canvas, covered with a silvery-pink crust of paint, sequins, confetti and dye, in whose nacreous surface also appears a slow twinkling of glitter. Entitled *December 31, 1980: Brazil: Feast Day of Iemanjá*, it refers to the goddess of salt water in the Brazilian macumba cult, whose votaries send out little silver-painted boats laden with flowers, perfumed soap and mirrors as offerings (if they sink, Iemanjá has accepted the prayer). Pindell has given her own offering to this tropical Venus a mild air of reverence.

The most mysterious piece in the show (and the least reproducible) is *Victory Over Sin*, 1980, a room designed by West Coast Artist David Hammons. What one sees, by the light of a yellowish ceiling lamp, is three gray walls covered with a repeated motif of two kidney shapes, each with a pair of fuzzy black dots, which, on close inspection, turn out to be human hair. The floor has sprouted barely visible wands and reeds, no higher than low marsh grass, each painted in bands of primary color and adorned with more of the same hair. A burial site? A metaphor of landscape? Hard to be sure, but the room conveys the sort of obsessive intensity that signals the presence of a real talent.

— Robert Hughes



Melvin Edwards: on floor, left to right, *Memories of CoCo*, 1980, and *Conversation with Norman Lewis*, 1979; on wall, two pieces from "Lynch Fragment Series"; at 55 Mercer.

Melvin Edwards at 55 Mercer

The hegemony of welded metal during the past three decades of American sculpture generally suggests a preference for monumentality over the more intimate qualities that Herbert Read as-

cribed to portable objects or "amulets," at the opposite end of the spectrum. Melvin Edwards's recent display of welded steel sculpture demonstrated his fluency in both the language of large-scale, architectonic work and that of small, talismanic assemblages. What unites the room-size, geometric construction *Memories of CoCo*, the 25 "Lynch Fragments" he attached to the walls, and his intermediate-scale piece, *A Conversation With Norman Lewis*, is Edwards's insistence upon making abstract forms and discarded industrial materials serve the combined purposes of public ritual and private memory.

Memories of CoCo is a continuation of the kinetic, half-circle structures Edwards has created for the past ten years. Called "rockers" because they are inspired by the image of his grandmother seated in a rocking chair, these works involve various conformations in which paired plates of steel, cut to curve at the bottom, can be literally rocked by the viewer. The example here is a two-part affair, with a semi-rectangular base whose sides relate antiphonally to the pair of solid and open half-circles that twin bars of steel allow to ride on top.

Large enough for a grown man to stand inside—or, as the artist points out, to provide the kind of one-room domicile millions of the world's poor still occupy—*Memories of CoCo* is alive with contradictions. While we know a steel structure this size must be enormously heavy, its openness of design makes it feel extremely light. The stable bottom counters the surprising mobility of the top. And, for all its monumental mass and geometric elegance, the piece exudes engaging warmth and informality.

With the array of small works, each of which is attached to the gallery wall at eye-level, Edwards moves from family legacies to a broader sphere of heritage. Subtitled "A Luta Continua" ("The Struggle Continues"), these works from the past two years are part of a series the artist explored from 1963 to 1966 and resumed in 1973. The recent "Lynch Fragments" resemble earlier ones in scale, orientation around a central point, and the use of found metal objects that frequently are of a mechanical nature.

The pieces in the current exhibition seem less gruesome, however, more elegiac in spirit than their predecessors. Greater interest in drawing is now apparent, producing richer varieties of line and form. And these assemblages seem more active, more inventive in their examination of direction and space. It is as if the artist has returned from the contemplation of a blood-soaked history to announce a new promise of freedom.

A Conversation With Norman Lewis pays homage to the Abstract Expressionist painter who died last year, by juxtaposing a rocker that's free to move with one that is locked in a perpetual tilt by a single, upright rectangular appendage. The two forms have patchy, scrap metal tops—the stable one is mostly open, the mobile one is

mostly closed—stamping them with as much eloquent character as sheer size gives *Memories of CoCo*. Like it and like the "Lynch Fragments," this piece shows great attention to drawing. Its concern with stasis and kinesis relates it to the work of the deceased painter, as well as to Edwards's own preoccupations, and the image of the two unlike objects, addressing one another at an acute angle, suggests a dialogue in which affectionate good humor balances grief.

—Judith Wilson

art in america 1980, oct.