

# Melvin Edwards: Lynch Fragments

*In a series of some 150 metal wall sculptures developed over 30 years, Melvin Edwards has used the metaphor of lynching to evoke a legacy of collective oppression and to encompass a broad range of African-American history.*

**BY BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT**

**M**elvin Edwards's "Lynch Fragment" series is an extended sculptural treatment of a theme derived from private memory and collective African-American experience. Each of the more than 150 welded-steel reliefs he has made since 1963 in this series of mostly head-size, wall-hung works incorporates metallic found objects—links of chain, railroad spikes, hoes, hooks, locks, hammers, scissors—which evoke the manual labor associated with slavery and oppression.

Edwards's use of tools and his thematic metaphor have proven remarkably flexible for encompassing a broad range of African-American history. He draws on the family stories he heard in his boyhood in Houston and Dayton; the sense of conflict he felt in California around the time of the historic civil rights March on Washington, when he began the series; and the racial and social tensions he encountered after his move to New York in 1967. Only a few of the works in the series directly address incidents of lynching, but he intends the titular continuity to bring "that scale of intensity and that kind of power" to all the works.<sup>1</sup>

The sculptures in the "Lynch Fragment" series have been made in three periods: 1963 to '67, 1973, and 1978 to the present. Although early and recent works are not sharply differentiated stylistically, some general distinctions apply. In the works made prior to 1978, the core of each sculpture is densely constructed, with appendages radiating from the center. Often that core establishes a compositional symmetry that is altered by the placement of the additions. In the works since 1978, the appendages extend not only from the center but from the edges, creating more complex three-dimensional configurations. In the last five years, the sculptures have grown larger, a fact which Edwards attributes to his having worked outdoors when he was in Zimbabwe on a Fulbright fellowship in 1988 and '89.



*Melvin Edwards: Some Bright Morning, 1963, welded steel, 14 1/4 by 10 1/4 by 5 1/2 inches. Collection the artist. Courtesy CDS Gallery.*

Lynching has been an important theme for other African-American artists as well. For example, in Jacob Lawrence's *Another Cause Was Lynching . . .*, from "The Migration of the Negro" series, 1940-41, the power of the painting lies not in the gruesome nature of the crime but in its chilling consequences; the painting depicts only the branch, the rope and a huddled, sorrowing figure in the background. Norman Lewis also rendered the essence of the experience in his abstract paintings of the 1960s inspired by the militancy and activism of that time, specifically *America the Beautiful* from the "Klan" series, in which the repeated hooded figures are a pattern as much as a representation. As a product of the current consciousness that inspires younger artists to create what some describe as "political" art, an untitled 1989 work by Lorna Simpson implies a lynching through circular photographs of a black woman's throat and a list of terms for circular forms ranging from halo to noose.

The emotional resonance of an image of lynching remains great, although the act is virtually unknown in America today—Alabama's Tuskegee Institute stopped collecting data on lynchings in 1968—because it evokes a collective memory of oppression. The persistent potency of the image echoes the aftereffects of lynchings themselves, which could intimidate an entire community. "It's the thing people do with power all the time," Edwards says. "You kill someone as an example. The person that you kill is out of his misery as soon as you kill him, but the people around who are living are the ones who suffer from that event."<sup>2</sup> His choice of the lynching theme, Edwards says, has allowed him to "wrestle or grapple with a particular social phenomenon and what it means metaphorically or symbolically."

Ralph Ginzburg's book *100 Years of Lynchings*, published in 1962, reprints accounts of lynchings in America, including an 1896 editorial, "White Superiority in Florida," from the Springfield, Mass., *Weekly Republican*. After reading this document, Edwards, his reaction probably exacerbated by the racial climate in Los Angeles, where he was living in the early '60s, was prompted to produce the first of the "Lynch Fragment" reliefs. He has written of that work:

*Some Bright Morning* is a piece dedicated to a black family in Florida who had been warned by white people not to be militant. The family continued to be

## Edwards has also produced public sculptures, mostly geometric in character, and a series of kinetic works inspired by a family rocker.

militant until the white people said that some bright morning they were coming to get them, and when they came, the black people were armed and ready. They fought and then took to the swamp in guerrilla warfare against those whites and they didn't lose.<sup>3</sup>

Edwards's relief commemorates this successful resistance.

Both sides of the conflict are welded into *Some Bright Morning*: a spearlike form juts out from the sculpture, poised to ward off an intruder, while a pendant chain with a steel mass at its end recalls a medieval mace, not to mention a ball and chain. This clump of steel can also be read as a gonadal form, which signals another fight, the one for the procreative continuity of a people—the fight against genocide. Moreover, "The dangling ball of steel at the bottom of the chain is the plastic metaphor of hanging. [And] the piece had to hang on the wall, which furthered the metaphor. I said to myself, 'It is hanging there like a lynching,'" Edwards once told an interviewer.<sup>4</sup>

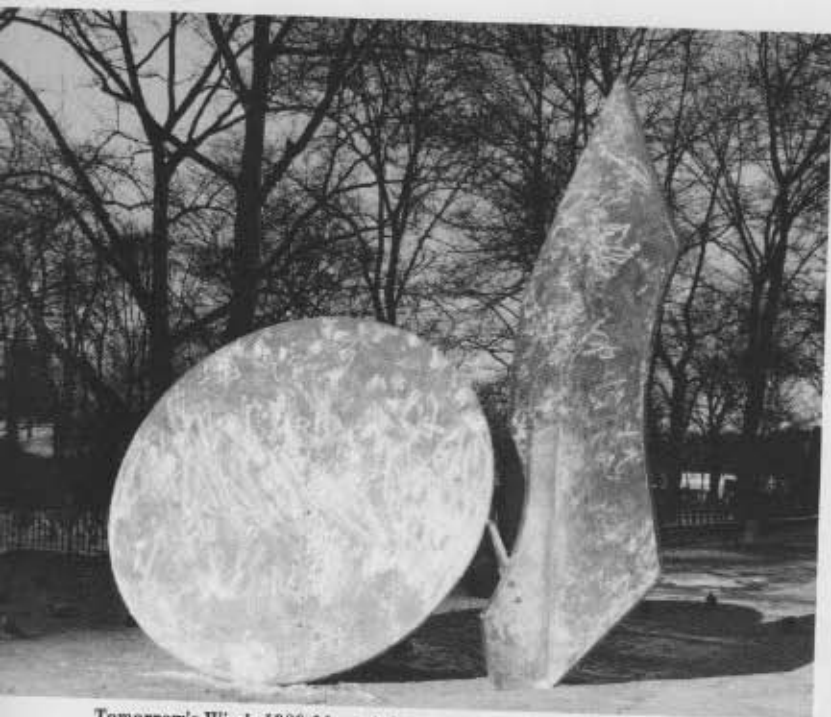
While *Some Bright Morning* extracts the factual and spiritual militancy from an incident of violence in 19th-century America and by extension refers to the civil rights movement that was at its height when the piece was made, *Afro Phoenix No. 2*, also from 1963, is a symbol of promise. In this work, by means of a steel shaft with two upraised arms that have the sweep of wings, Edwards alludes to the situation of blacks, whom he sees as "coming out of difficulty and producing something new."<sup>5</sup>

When Edwards, who was born in 1937, received his B.A. from the University of Southern California, the dominance of Abstract Expressionism was fading. One might see links between his work and Abstract-Expressionist sculpture, and Edwards certainly knew the work of Theodore Roszak, David Smith and others of the time. But as a painting major, he says, he was not influenced by it. In the early '60s, a fellow student taught him how to weld, and thereafter his principal work was sculpture.

Among the works he has produced concurrent with the "Lynch Fragment" series is a body of public sculpture, often commissioned and usually having a geometric character. He made his first public piece in 1969. A representative work of 1991, *Tomorrow's Wind*, installed in Central Park across from the Plaza Hotel prior to permanent siting in Thomas Jefferson Park in East Harlem, consists of a tilted-back disk, a bladelike element and what might be a fragment of a house; these symbolic forms are all made of stainless steel and reach 13½ feet in height.

Another major group of works is the "Rocker" series, kinetic sculptures of both small and large size that, like the "Lynch Fragment" sculptures, derive from the personal: they are inspired by the movement of his grandmother's rocking chair. The first of these, *CoCo*, 1970, was given her nickname. It is an almost sleigh-shaped sculpture consisting of a pair of upturned semicircles of steel joined by two bars from which hang multiple chains in catenaries that echo the curve of the steel.

Edwards has said that he "became an adult in a very confrontational period in relation to African people in the world"; perhaps as a result, public recognition of his work has come unevenly. Mary Schmidt Campbell, who curated Edwards's 1978 show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, once described New York as having been "increasingly hostile as the years went by to the vision evolving among those Black artists who chose to respond" to the turbulence of the '60s.<sup>6</sup> Edwards recalls



*Tomorrow's Wind*, 1989-91, stainless steel, approx. 13½ by 13½ feet. Courtesy CDS Gallery.



*CoCo, 1970, painted steel, 4 by 8 by 10 feet. Courtesy CDS Gallery.*

that following his 1970 solo show in the Whitney Museum's lobby gallery, he thought that "something else significant should have happened. But when it didn't, I just kept on working."<sup>7</sup> A similar lack of attention following his Studio Museum show shocked Campbell. "It was like nothing, like the show didn't happen. It was scary. It was chilling," she has said.<sup>8</sup> Both his often-difficult subject matter and his race may explain this lack of attention.

However, Edwards and other artists have benefited from the art world's recent embrace of multiculturalism and pluralism. His recognition is growing. In 1990 he had his first gallery show in New York, at CDS. During or following that show, works from the "Lynch Fragment" series were purchased by the Bronx Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, as well as by museums in Birmingham, Ala., and Caracas. This spring, Edwards's work will be the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, N.Y.

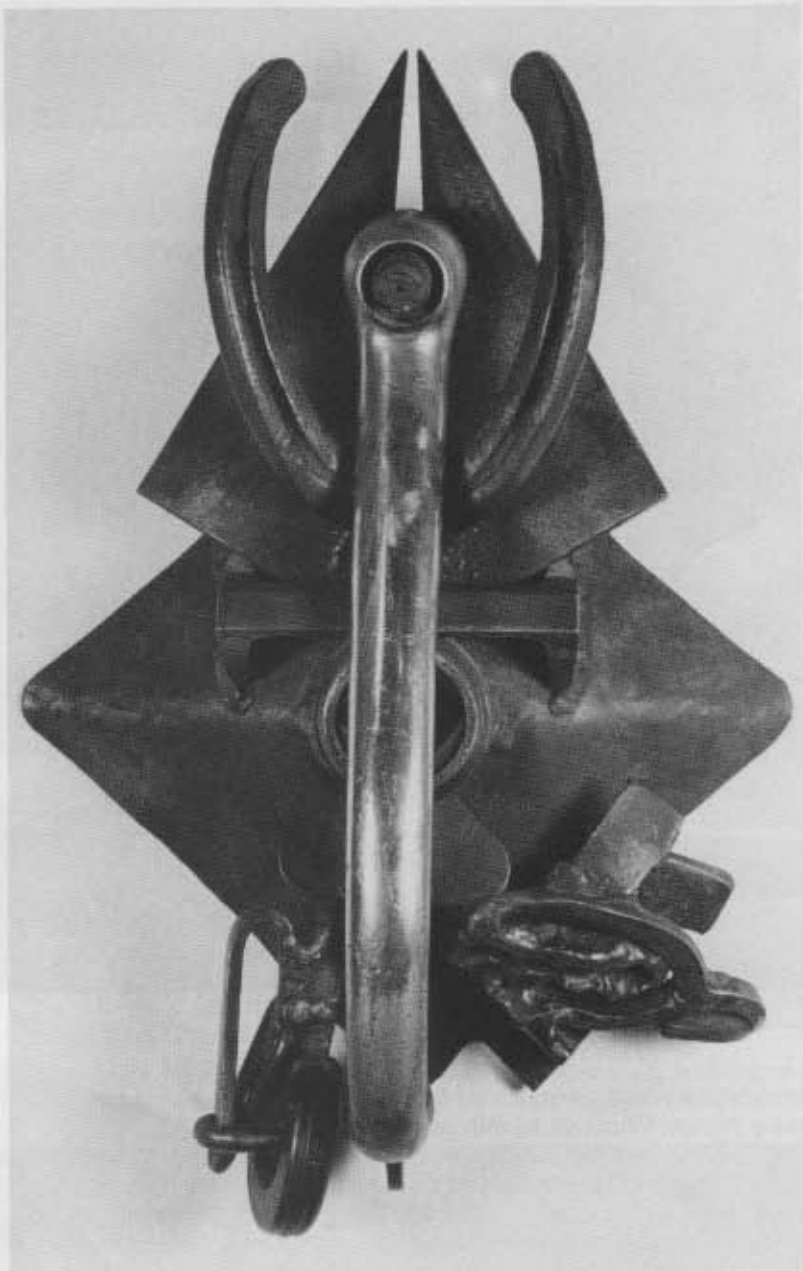
The "Lynch Fragment" series has consistently explored African customs and culture, both in American contexts and in Africa itself. The works in this series, because of their size and their position on the wall at the viewer's eye level, have been said to recall African masks. Edwards finds that response simplistic and prefers to call attention to the wider plastic influences on his work of African sculpture as a whole. He has traveled frequently to Africa, the first time in 1970, when he met Nana Osei Bonsu, an Asante and a master woodcarver. In 1971 he became acquainted with Omoregbe Inneh, the chief of the Benin bronze casters. These esteemed elderly men, both of whom were university teachers as well as representatives of African

sculptural traditions, were models for Edwards. He also came to know many younger African artists with international interests.

In 1973, in an urban East Coast setting, Edwards returned to the "Lynch Fragment" theme under the shadow of the Vietnam War. In these works the lynching metaphor alludes to the black community's outrage over the large number of blacks who fought in Southeast Asia. Two works of that year are formally spare arrangements of just a few elements attached to a diamond-shape steel plate. *Nam* may be considered the male half of a sculptural pair in which *Yesterday's Key* is the female. Welded vertical and horizontal scars form *Nam's* axes; a protruding automotive part and a dangling chain make the work phallic and testicular. *Yesterday's Key* has the same horizontal wound, but the spreading of the vertical seam suggests the female genital cleft. By this pairing, Edwards suggests that neither gender escaped the effects of the war.

By 1978, Edwards, ensconced in the studio he still occupies in Plainfield, N.J., had concluded that the lynching theme remained vital. *Ngangula*, a "Lynch Fragment" of 1980, is titled with the Kikongo word for blacksmith and medicine doctor, a term translated by his Congolese friend, the writer Sony Labou Tansi. Edwards's link to the craft of the blacksmith is evident in his forging technique and his tools. *Ngangula* breaks free from compositional restraints to create a new form, its three steel spikes raggedly jutting into the air and a large bolt thrusting out to penetrate the viewer's space.

*Sekuru Knows*, 1988, again addresses the constrictions of manual labor. Here scissors that recall a spread-eagled human form are bound by chains and welded tightly into a work of industrial and fabricated elements, suggesting a thwarted effort to cut ties. *Sekuru*, Edwards



**Afro Phoenix No. 2, 1963, welded steel, 14 by 9 by 4 1/4 inches.**  
Collection Jayne Cortez, New York. Courtesy CDS Gallery.

says, refers in the Shona language to a grandfather or a wise elder, and scissors are a symbol of good luck to metalworkers in Benin. Edwards has previously used pinking shears in a work identified with his mother, Thelmarie Edwards, who was a seamstress.

Crossing metal rods at the top of *Takawira-J.*, 1987, add a geometric dynamism to the work—and perhaps allude to horns. This sculpture was made during the artist's stint of teaching direct metal welding processes in Zimbabwe. There he got to know three brothers of the Takawira family, all of them sculptors. The eldest, John, was of the generation of artists who imbued contemporary stone sculpture with African traditions. He died that year, and this sculpture, Edwards's tribute to a fellow artist, adopts Takawira's volumetric emphasis to produce a work which fuses Western practice with African sculptural form.

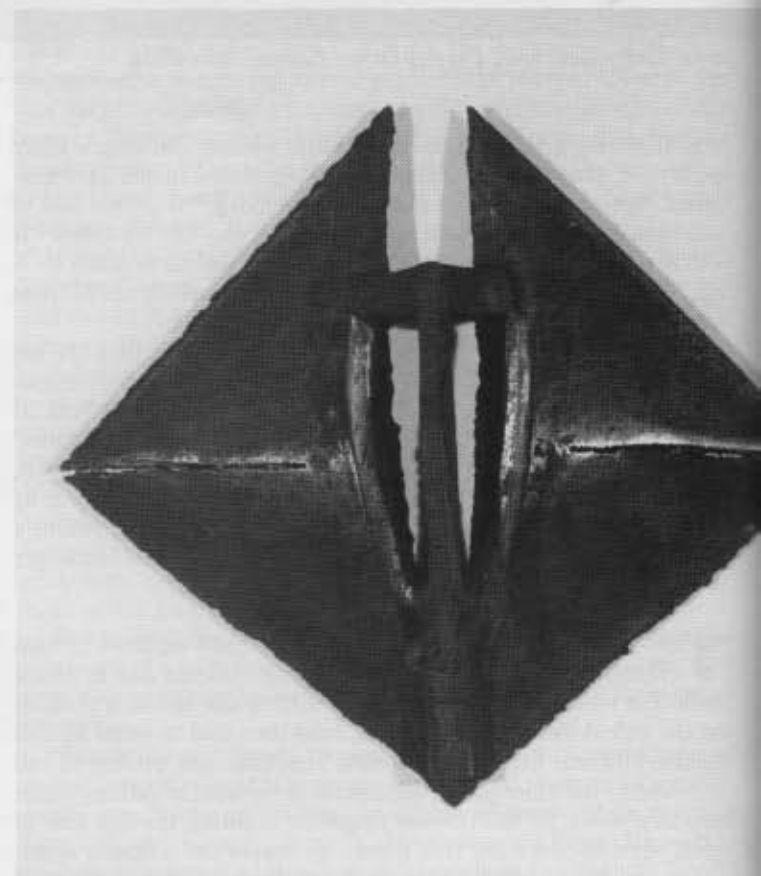
By this point, it might seem that Edwards has strayed far from direct references to lynching. But his intent was never literal representation, and the series has progressed beyond its genesis when the political cli-

## Having lived and worked in Africa several times, Edwards often speaks of the plastic influences on his work of African sculpture as a whole.

mate influenced much of it. The work, which is distinguished by its constancy of tone and by its independence from artistic trends and political fashions, has served to illuminate African-American history from past to present. This history is his, Edwards says, and the struggle is not over. His fight is manifested in this resilient body of work which he has pursued with conviction for 30 years. □

1. Melvin Edwards, "Lynch Fragments," *Free Spirits: Annals of the Insurgent Imagination I*, Paul Buhle, Jayne Cortez, Philip Lamantia, Nancy Joyce Peters, Franklin Rosemont and Penelope Rosemont, eds., San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1982, p. 94.
2. Unless otherwise attributed, all quotations from the artist are from an interview with the author, Jan. 20, 1992.
3. Edwards, "Lynch Fragments," p. 95.
4. Unpublished artist interview with Joseph Jacobs and Christopher Youngs, Oklahoma City Art Museum, December 1990 and February 1991.
5. Edwards, "Lynch Fragments," p. 95.
6. Mary Schmidt Campbell, in Campbell et al., *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973*, New York, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985, p. 51.
7. Valerie J. Mercer, "Sculptor's Horizons Have No Limits," *New York Times*, New Jersey edition, June 3, 1990.
8. Michael Brenson, "Black Artists: A Place in the Sun," *New York Times*, Mar. 12, 1989.

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**Yesterday's Key, 1973, welded steel, 12 by 12 by 6 inches.**  
Bucknell University Art Gallery, Lewisburg, Penn. Photo Debra Cook.

Takawira-J, 1987, welded steel,  
14 by 10 by 9 inches.  
Courtesy Brooklyn Museum.

