



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.