

Weekend

The New York Times

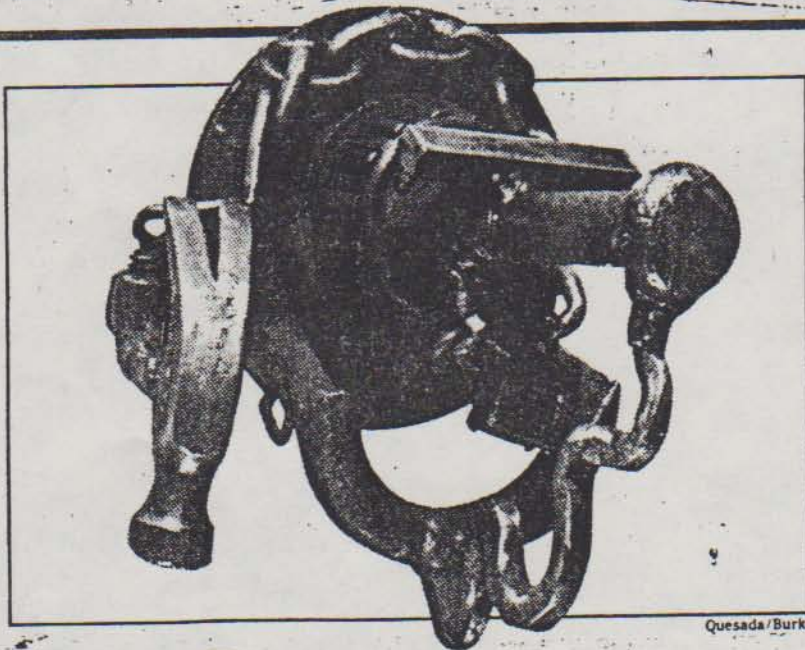
FRIDAY, MARCH 3, 1989

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Review/Art

Going Beyond Slickness: Sculptors Get Back to Basics

By MICHAEL BRENSON



Quesada/Burke

UPPER LEFT "Kassinga," 1981, from "Lynch Fragments" series by Melvin Edwards, at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

IN a season when the New York art world may seem to be wrapped in slick surfaces, status and money, three surprising sculpture shows, in three different boroughs, zero in on a more naked and physical reality. Each show is, in a way, exclusive. All 11 artists in one are black; all six artists in another are women; in the third, the four artists are men. Yet all three shows are involved with big feelings and a search for experience that is shared and elemental.

"Traditions and Transformations: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, uses the work of black artists — as familiar as Martin Puryear, Sam Gilliam and Richard Hunt, and as unfamiliar as Maren Hassinger and Tyrone Mitchell — to call attention to the vitality of sculpture by black Americans.

"In a Dark Vein," at the Sculpture Center in Manhattan, presents work by women who use the human figure to shape feelings of fear, loss and pain.

"Four Americans: Aspects of Current Sculpture," at the Brooklyn Museum, catches Joel Fisher, Mel Kendrick, Robert Lobe and John Newman at or near midcareer, at the precise point when all of them are working toward a more inclusive and monumental statement.

Almost all the artists in these three shows use a hands-on approach and remain involved in the entire sculptural process. For all of them, the idea of a particularly American art makes little or no sense. They move easily across cultures and through the history of art, and within their work build an artistic community that is international.

With all three shows, terms like radical and conservative are inappropriate. For example, if you are going to hold up these black sculptors to the tradition of the new, you are not going to appreciate their ability to bridge cultures and navigate the turbulent and liberating waters of memory.

Melvin Edwards's "Lynch Fragments" are at the heart of the Bronx Museum show, and they are a remarkable achievement. In these small reliefs, around a foot tall and installed at eye level, Western traditions of welding and assemblage are combined with African traditions of fetishes and masks. Objects used as tools by slaves and as instruments of violence against slaves — including ax heads, stakes, hammers, vises and chains — are cut and welded into eloquent expressions of rage, warning, hope and joy.