

ART VIEW/Michael Kimmelman

# Art That Goes Beyond Social Content

**D**URING THE LAST 30 YEARS, Melvin Edwards has put together a compelling body of work that deserves to be better known. The retrospective of 130 of his welded steel sculptures here at the Neuberger Museum of Art is an important step in that direction.

The strength of Edwards's sculpture has a lot to do with its openness. It is an art of inclusion and diversity, both accessible in its materials and forms and full of interpretive possibilities. It draws from African and Asian sources, from African-American quilts as well as from the welded works of Julio González, David Smith, Calder and other European and American artists who may come more readily to mind. Edwards's sculptures vary in scale: there are works of a grand, public kind quite different from his intimate, private ones.

To the extent that Edwards has achieved recognition, it is essentially, and understandably, for the series of reliefs called "Lynch Fragments" that he has been producing, on and off, since 1963. By now there are about 200 "Fragments." Several dozen have been chosen for this exhibition and, although the quality is decidedly uneven, their cumulative impact is pretty remarkable.

The "Fragments" incorporate chains, bolts, scissors, padlocks, nails, gears, axes, hammers and other tools. Edwards welds these objects together in compositions — usually no more than a foot tall — of an intense and concentrated energy. The sculptures are hung on the wall at eye level, which increases the sense of one-on-one confrontation between viewer and object and accentuates the impression of the sculptures as masks or faces. The earlier "Fragments" tend to be smaller, denser. The later ones are more varied, more linear, with more visual puns and even an occasional shock of color.

The "Fragments" are partly responses to the legacy of oppression of blacks in America, as the chains, locks and other objects evoking constraint and hard labor make clear. But these reliefs are primarily works of abstraction whose formal and metaphorical richness derives from, yet extends beyond, the social content that inspired them.

Edwards began to make the "Fragments" while living in Los Angeles. He was born in 1937 in Houston, where his interest in art was nurtured by his family and at school. He moved to the West Coast in 1955, and during the next decade studied art and art history, first with the intention of becoming a painter. In 1960 he took a class in welding and turned to sculpture. It's revealing to learn that during the 60's he studied the art of Smith and Calder, did repairs on the kinetic sculptures of Jean Tinguely, helped install several Mark di Suvero sculptures, and became friends with George Sugarman, whose use of color in sculpture paved one route he would pursue.

**Although Melvin Edwards's work is often a response to the legacy of oppression, it is always abstract, never hectoring.**

His artistic development was played out against the backdrop of the civil rights movement. Edwards became involved in the sort of community activism that was widespread among artists during the 60's and early 70's. He sought, at first through the "Lynch Fragments" and then in other sculptural projects he undertook after moving to New York in 1967, to deal with black history and culture — but always through abstraction.

In this respect, he conformed to the canons of neither figuration nor formalist abstraction, which may partly explain why his art tended to fall between art world stools and why, despite a modest show at the Whitney in 1970 and others in this country and abroad, he has had to wait so long for a museum to give him such serious attention.

Lowery Stokes Sims, writing in the catalogue to this exhibition, observes that one sees in Edwards's art "the vindication of a steadfast commitment . . . to an abstract vocabulary that encapsulates the essence of American modernism, and at the same time expresses an often neglected aspect of African esthetic essence."

The "Lynch Fragments" are the clearest and best demonstration of this fact. But they account for only a part of Edwards's output. He has also produced a series called "Rockers," begun in 1970, that includes works both small and large and that takes as its point of

departure the memory of his grandmother, Coco, sitting in her rocking chair.

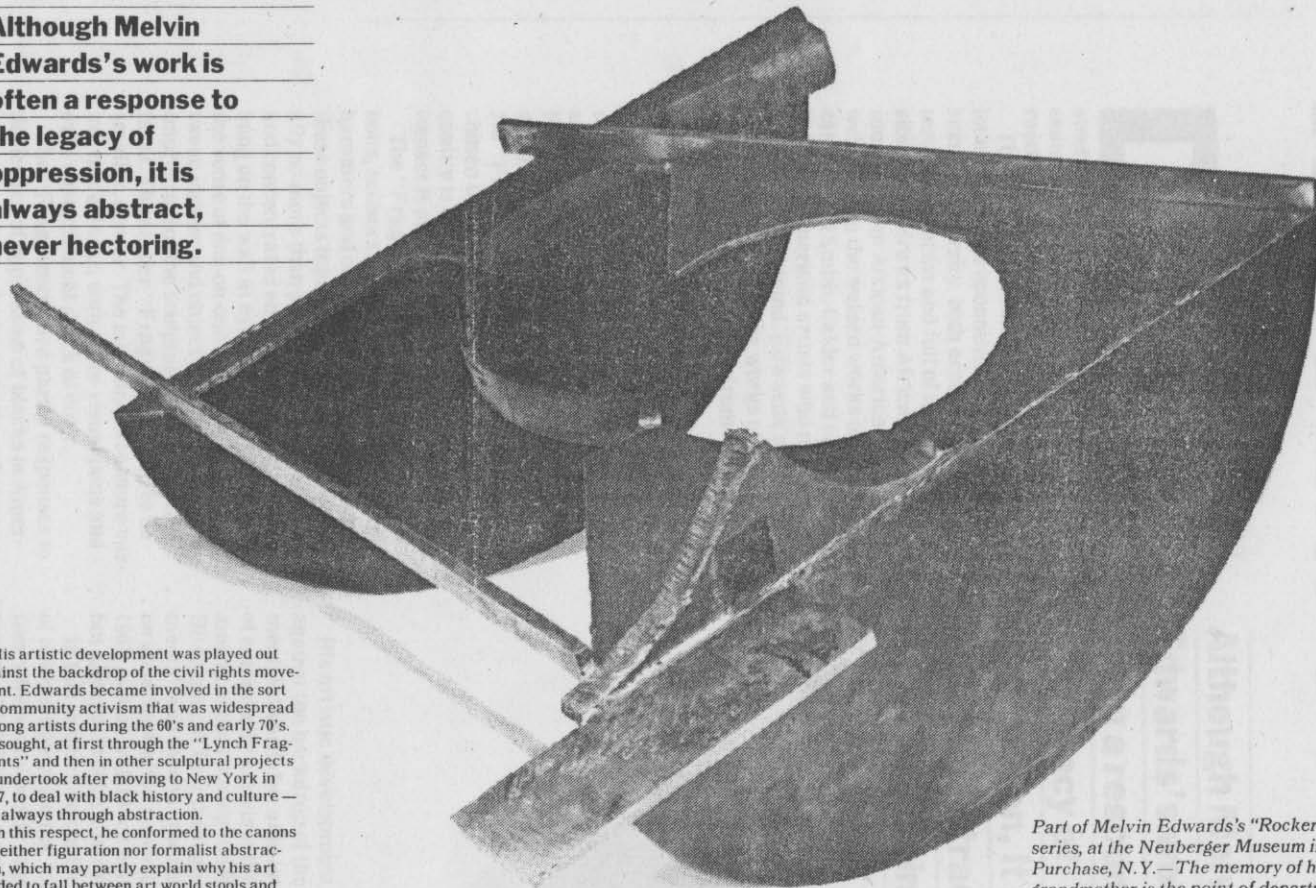
These works reduce the rocker to an essential C-shape. "Pretty Little Rocker," one of the smallest and most graceful in the series, consists of an open, linear pair of C's linked by thin steel bars and a strand of steel scroll-work that resembles a decorative ribbon. By contrast, "Before Words" is a hulking object made of thick sheets of metal, a giant chain slung across one corner of the rocker, a heavy block weighing down another corner and seeming to tip the sculpture forward.

Edwards's art often seethes with a coiled energy. One of the best of the sculptures on pedestals is "Wachung," which evokes a broken chain link, or a pair of large magnets separate yet seemingly drawn together, so that

the whole sculpture implies tension and struggle.

A similar tension characterizes "The Lifted X." Using some of the clustered, clotted vocabulary of the "Fragments," Edwards suggests a metal bar being stretched like a rubber band, on the verge of snapping.

**O**NE OF THE MERITS OF THIS exhibition is that it brings these works together with some of Edwards's large public sculptures, which, in their emphasis on basic forms like the disk and in their lightness of spirit, have a different feel. A work like "Asafokra," with its red, blue, and yellow spheres and half-spheres, is a kind of playful maze that leads a viewer around and through it.



Morris Lane/CDS Gallery/Neuberger Museum of Art

Part of Melvin Edwards's "Rockers" series, at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, N.Y.—The memory of his grandmother is the point of departure.

"Felton" and "Thelmarie" consist of twisting linear forms that can bring to mind the arabesque of figures in Matisse's "Dance."

Edwards has said he believes in a public art that makes life "better for living" and that "esthetics always has to do with the quality of life." The sentiments are certainly timely. This retrospective, organized by Lucinda H. Gedeon, director of the Neuberger, remains on view through June 27, after which it will travel to Springfield, Mass.; Hanover, N.H., and Memphis, among other locations. It should be seen not only by those who care about the modernist tradition of welded sculpture but also by those who need proof that contemporary art arising from deep social and political concerns doesn't have to be hectoring or didactic. □