

# Melvin Edwards Sculptor of the African-American Ethos

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by Sharon Patton

Melvin Edwards, a welder-sculptor transforms steel (stainless, Cor-Ten) into visually evocative and intellectually engaging forms and shapes.<sup>1</sup> Free-standing or wall-relief compositions enclose or are enclosed by space. Surfaces are wire-brushed, burnished or abraded on multiple levels. Forms are cubistic, emphasizing balance, structure and simplicity. Or forms are organic, emphasizing symmetry, convolution, and the baroque. Manufactured objects and inventive forms convey work and play, sexuality and sensuality, aggression and quietude, restraint and release.

Free-standing sculptures are versions of Euclidean geometry as in *Tomorrow's Wind*, 1989-1991. Perforated or plain forms flatten into circles, triangles, rectangles, lunettes, or semi-circles. Their geometric simplicity manifests when profiled against the sky, cityscapes or a blank wall. Also forms are masses composing a system of weights and counterweights. Forms momentarily balance, abut or precariously extend into or bisect space, suggesting impending movement. All of which reminds us of Edward's interest in architecture, as site and structural engineering.

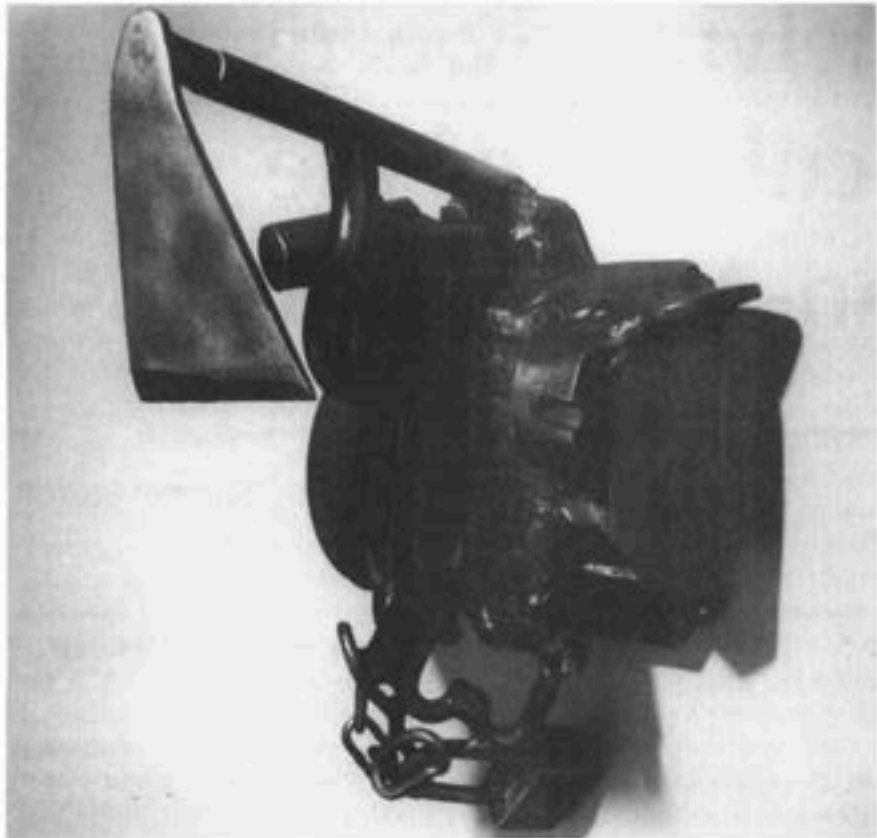
Sculptures, either monumental (life-size, public) or intimate (small, private) are modernist statements about contemporaneity. Representing the younger generation of American sculptors, Edwards unfinished imagery and *laissez-faire* technique defy traditional sculptural methods.<sup>2</sup> They acknowledge post-World War II American modernist sculptors who were interested in symbolism (Jung-

ian or existentialist), industrialized materials, "found" objects, spontaneity, and the creative process as a spiritual activity, all elements of European modernism.

The stainless steel, large-scale sculptures begun ca. 1965, closely resonate with David Smith's sculptures of the 1950s and 1960s. Like him, Edwards displays his drawing and painting skills in the squiggled lines etched across shaved tracks on the surfaces, refracting and modulating light as in *Gate of Ogun*, 1983. Unavoidably, at a distance, these shimmering surfaces allude to the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Hans Burckhardt or Norman Lewis or to the Afro-Cuban Surrealist paintings of Wilfredo Lam.

The release of feeling and creativity in the exploration of a new visual language and the "artist's need to experience his own free individuality,"<sup>3</sup> touted in art history as hallmarks of Abstract Expressionism, and reified in academic training and mainstream art criticism, are associated with Surrealism. However, the source for improvisation, the expression of individuality lie also within African American culture. Improvisation is an essential black aesthetic. Edwards' sculptures, with the calligraphic marks on the steel surfaces, the incorporation of "found" objects, and their inventive juxtapositions, and the seemingly nonchalant arrangement of sculptural masses personify the visual manifestations of creative impulse.

Edwards takes the formalism and philosophy of Abstract Expressionism and Assemb-



**Ready Now-Now**  
*1988 Steel.*

**Igun Hammer**  
*1981 Steel.*



lage Art and melds them into modernist text about race, culture and autobiography. Edwards scripts with steel. "As a modern artist, you work on the invention of an independent language, your own language of forms and symbols. Everybody else has to learn that language from you."<sup>4</sup>

And that language is a "private conversation" clearly expressed in a visual African-American vernacular: the *Lynch Fragments* (also called *Fragments*) series. Shaped metal objects, some mass-produced, and discarded fragments of an industrialized society, retain their identity as implements yet, simultaneously emerge as abstract wall-sculptures. Like archaeological specimens, cultural detritus, they are compressed and fragmented, spliced and fused into artifacts of a time, a place, a people, and the sojourn of a black male.

Each *Fragments* meaning depends on its unique title, the viewer's experiences and history. One allusion is sexual. Unfolding ellipses, and rigid projections evoke Jungian symbols of male and female sexuality. Another is African. Although the literature emphasizes the *Fragments* mask evocative shape, they approximate more closely African art in the accumulative layers of objects and materials, appearing like ritual objects as fetishes. Individual elements, scissors, chains, crow-bars, barbed wire, nails, etc. become icons. For example, chains symbolize slavery in a real and cultural sense; they link the Old and New Worlds. In Africa where Edwards consulted traditional blacksmiths and bronze-casters, chains may represent an interconnection between the world of the living and the ancestors and deities, as for example Yoruba (Nigeria) iron or bronze Ifa divination chains or Ogboni ritual staffs.

The *Fragments* fall into three time periods. In the early period (1963-67), welded objects incongruously juxtaposed, are simple assemblages where the shape and function of mechanized elements are identifiable. Each reveals its sculptural base, a circle, lozenge, and rectangle, as in *Ace*, 1963. In the middle period (1973), there are more textures; the metallic sheen is ruptured, and chiseled, as in *Nam*,

1973. In the late period (1978-present), there is more experimentation with the basic compact composition. Forms are less rigid and more intertwined. Some are minimal, freed from a geometric base or plaque; others are complex, attached to the base as in *Echo Soweta*, 1980 and *Igun Hammer*, 1981.

Sculptural elements and compositions are autobiographies and testimonies about Edwards' life, family, and African American history, such as the railroad, racism, lynchings, jazz, and poetry. Urban racism in Los Angeles and New York City in the 1960s, Civil Rights and Black Nationalism, motivated Edwards to make his first *Lynch Fragment*, and, subsequently, trips to West and Southern Africa, friends, cultural heroes and heroines, genealogy, and self-reflection sustained the making of them. Edwards ensures that we remember these wall-sculptures as cultural as well as personal testaments, as a sampling of titles confirm: "Texas Tale," 1992, "July 4," 1991, "Justice for Tropic-Ana" (dedicated to Ana Mendieta), 1986, "South African Passbook" 1980-1985, and "Unforgettable" 1980. Edwards creates monuments of the African Diaspora.

"They come from my experience of growing up in Houston, Texas, in the Black community in the Fifth Ward, the five years I lived in Dayton, Ohio, in the all-Black Desoto-Bass housing project, and in the black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, California."<sup>5</sup>

Hung on the wall, these tectonic reliefs of industrialized forms that seem to emerge, erupt, unfold like an organism, engage the blank wall the way paint engages the canvas. Placed at eye-level, in a series, they create a tension between space and mass, stationariness and movement, an extraordinary ritual environment.

"The *Lynch Fragments* have changed my life. They made this life of thirty years as a sculptor. They are the core to all the work. If anybody ever knows I lived, this is going to be why."<sup>6</sup>

Looking at Melvin Edwards' sculptures, one can easily understand their persevering vitality. For Edwards is the subject. The sculpture is merely a manifestation, a mirror of his existence, his presence, and simultaneously an Af-

**Some Bright Morning  
1963 Steel.**



**Echo Soweto  
1980 Steel.**



rican American ethos. Each work encapsulates a moment of his life mediated through modernism. It is a masterful feat and totally black American.

#### NOTES

1. Melvin E. Edwards, Jr. (b. 1937, Houston, Texas). He is Professor of Art, at Mason Gross School of Creative and Performing Arts, Rutgers University. A thirty-year retrospective "Melvin Edwards, Sculpture" at Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY was held in 1993. His first solo exhibition at a major museum was in 1965 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, followed by one at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. Recently, Edwards was awarded grand prize at the Fujisankei Biannual for 1993, Utsukushi-Ga-Hara Open Air Museum, Japan.

Edwards makes sculptural series, "Rockers," "Discs," "Fragments" (including the Lynch Fragments), and large scale public sculptures (commissioned for site specific installations).

2. Sam Hunter and John Jacobus, *American Art of the 20th Century: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*, (NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., N.D.): 276.
3. Sam Hunter, *Modern American Painting and Sculpture*, (NY: Dell Publishing Co., Inc. 1962): 170. For discussion about the interdependence between Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture, refer to pp. 170-172.
4. Lorenzo Pace, *Melvin Edwards Sculpture, Fragments of a Decade 1980-1990*, (NJ: Montclair State College, Art Gallery, 1990):2

For discussion of the Lynch Fragments and Fragments, see extensive essay by Michael Brenson in *Melvin Edwards, Sculpture*, (NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY, 1993):21-33; also *Melvin Edwards, Sculptor*, (NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978); *Dream Singers*, (Trenton, NJ: State Museum of New Jersey, 1993): passim; and *Introspectives, Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent*, (Los Angeles, CA: California Afro-American Museum, 1989): 67-70.

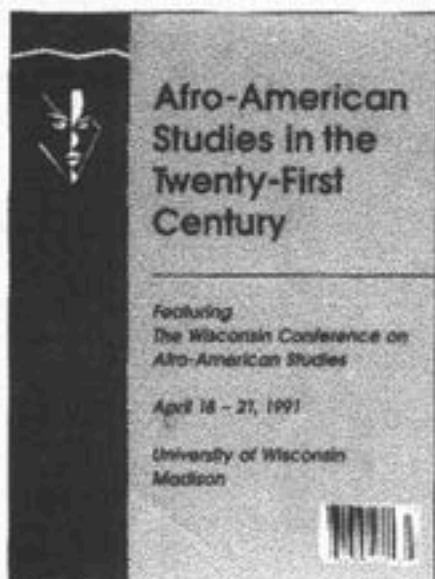
5. *Introspectives*, p. 70. Edwards learned through family oral history about lynchings, and that his mother's great-great grandfather was a blacksmith, (hence a spiritual and creative link is reestablished when Edwards begins his studies with African metalsmiths in West Africa).

Edwards free-standing sculptures are also autobiographical, as in works such as *Conversations With My Father*, 1974; *Homage to Poet Leon Gontran Damas*, 1978-1981 and *Dancing in Nigeria*, 1974-78. The *Rockers* series, begun in 1970, are monuments to his grandmother, the first was *Homage to Coca*, 1970.

6. Michael Brenson, "Lynch Fragments" in *Melvin Edwards, Sculptor*, (NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY, 1993): 3

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