

From Hostility to Humor

by Charlie Schultz

Sculptures 1964-2010

Alexander Gray Associates

526 West 26 Street #1019 , New York, NY
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September 8, 2010 - October 16, 2010



Melvin Edwards makes unsettling sculptures for unpleasant realities. From America's legacy of lynching to our drawn-out war in Iraq, Edwards is an unflinching artistic responder. He's also kind of funny from time to time, entirely resourceful, and deeply connected to his African roots.

Edwards's solo exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates spans a forty-six year period—essentially a condensed retrospective—of the sculptor's laudable career. Trained in LA, Edwards hit the scene in a big way when his solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art was exceptionally well received. That was 1965 and since then Edwards has picked up a number of institutional accolades (including Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships) and his sculptures have been collected by most significant American museums.

The majority of the work in the exhibition is drawn from Edwards's on-going series *Lynch Fragments* and is actually wall-mounted. Nine steel assemblages in gunmetal grey that are about as big as a face hang at eye level. Composed of found objects (such as chains, railroad spikes, mallet and hatchet heads, bolts, and padlocks, to name but a few), these welded wall-sculptures are meant to evoke African masks. Despite the titular reference to racial violence, Edwards's deft interweaving of utilitarian objects evinces a natural propensity for balance and harmony that is characteristic of all his sculptures.



At his artistic heart Edwards is a Modernist working in the welded-steel tradition established by David Smith. His sculptures *Tools at Rest* (1973), *Five to the Bar* (1973), and *Chaino* (1964) reveal a penchant for precariously balanced geometric forms. For example, *Five to the Bar* is composed of two flat half-circles connected by a single rectangular bar. Additionally, five strands of barbwire hang slack—forming more semi-circles—between the two half-circles. *Tools at Rest* is a study in four-sided forms. In *Chaino* Edwards suspends a car motor between triangular uprights. The sculpture looks like it should fall over, but it doesn't. And that's a testament to the calculating precision of Edwards's practice.

Edwards may work with steel and he may confront issues of social violence, but he still has light-hearted moments and they supply a welcome relief to all the heaviness. The most playful is *Steel Life* (1985-91), an assemblage on a pedestal that includes (amongst other steel pieces) a short length of chain, a cup, a hammer, a big screw, and a hook. Alone *Steel Life* might seem insouciant, but in the context of Edwards's oeuvre it demonstrates the sculptor's ability to touch both ends of the human emotion spectrum, from hostility to humor.



--Charlie Schultz

Images: *Steel Life* (1985-91), Welded steel; *Chaino* (1964), Painted welded steel and chains; *Weapon of Freedom* (1986), Welded steel. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates.