

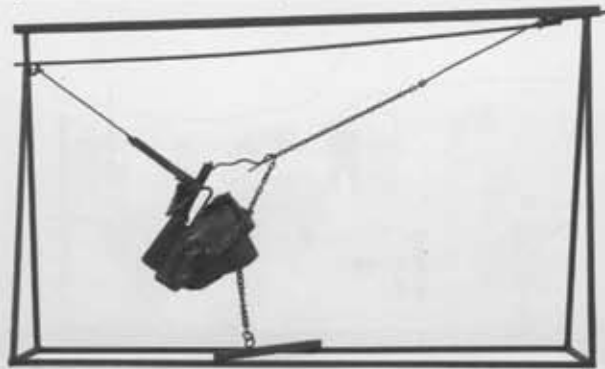
Melvin Edwards

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In early September, an op-ed feature in the *New York Times* described 9/11 as the moment that “saw the innocence of a nation crumble to the ground.” Melvin Edwards’s sculptures seem to rejoin the flawed irony of that account in mute form, to issue it a retort at once silent and searing. That the sculpture *Iraq*, 2003, marks but one chapter in the inexorable procession of Edwards’s “Lynch Fragments”—a series of small welded works begun in 1963, now comprising more than two hundred pieces (nine of which were on display here)—gives the lie to a myth of innocence crumbling suddenly. The intermittent progression of Edwards’s gnarled steel sculptures over the past five decades—responding to civil rights abuses, to Vietnam-era injustices, or to the government-sanctioned exportation of racialized violence to detention centers abroad—figures its own postwar history.

Iraq perches on the wall with the dour aplomb of a skull; one of its primary elements, a short length of heavy chain, is knit into a likeness suggesting at once empty eye sockets and a makeshift gas mask. In *Bayou Talk*, 2005, three prongs of a pitchfork curl forward to meet the upward curve of a horseshoe, while a stray steel bar inches stiffly

Melvin Edwards,
Chaino, 1964, painted
welded steel, chains,
62 x 102 x 26".



out of this makeshift mouth like a lewd tongue. *Nam*, 1973, evokes flesh torn, puckered into a wound, and bedecked with an incongruous apparatus. The contortions of the “Lynch Fragments” give allusive form to the grisly histories that subtend their eponymous leitmotif: the “strange fruit” of jagged edges and fused joints, of things bound and lashed.

Edwards’s poetics of tortured form seem tacitly to insist on an exclusively ideological—and anthropomorphized—anguish. After all, what kind of ax does a work like *Machete for Gregory*, 1974, grind, if not an expressly political one? The convergence of barbed wire, knife, and chain here refuses to release the viewer from a certain historical consciousness. Yet Edwards’s forms (and titles) also manage lyrical, and sometimes vaguely playful, counterpoints to the omnipresent gravitas. At the very least, *Steel Life*, 1985–91, confirms that the artist is as capable of corny puns as he is of lighthearted genre works. And Edwards’s ability to coax a kind of organic warmth from steel seems his particular accomplishment. *Tools at Rest*, 1973, recalls David Smith’s and Anthony Caro’s work in the poised, genteel perch of its geometries; but the duration of its components (a handle aslant in the air) and patina seem as marked by human presence as the well-worn tools in a poem by Brecht.

Unlike *Tools at Rest*, with its balanced simplicity, the large-scale *Chaino*, 1964, forms an exercise in torsion and tension. The work’s three chains suspend a warped car bumper, almost biomorphic despite its crusty carapace, amid a steel frame. *Chaino* seems as much a subtle reworking of Smith’s *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951, or Isamu Noguchi’s *1000 Horsepower Heart*, 1938, as a harbinger of Eva Hesse’s *Hang Up*, 1966. The framed and even painterly frontality of the work chafes provocatively against the rounded form fastened at its center. Its chains evoke the shackles of lynching photographs as much as they play on the stage name of the Afro-pop performer Leon Johnson— aka “Chaino.” And here again, the forms of Edwards’s elegy are indistinguishable from their ideological upshot, their engagement with art history as subtle as their barbed appraisal of America’s past.

—Ara H. Merjian