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## Resistance of Steel: Melvin Edwards at Alexander Gray

by Jonathan Goodman

### Melvin Edwards at Alexander Gray Associates

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508 West 26 Street #215, between 10th and 11th avenues

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The powerful group of welded-steel artworks on view at Alexander Gray Associates surely makes it clear why Melvin Edwards is one of the strongest sculptors we have today, for Edwards maintains formal mastery even as he has invested his work with materials—chains most especially—resonant of black American experience. Indeed, “Lynch Fragments,” the name of a sequence of pedestal-size sculptures that incorporate chains and elements such as farm tools that pertain to black history, is likely his best-known series. Yet he finds presence and strength in the chains as signs of cultural connectedness, even as his work implies violent repression.



Melvin Edwards, *Texcali*, 1965. Welded steel,

19-3/4 x 15-1/3 x 8-1/2 inches. Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York

central panel, it is eloquent and self-sufficiently sculptural.

This double message is transmitted through Edwards' remarkable sense of form, which results in constructions dense with materials and meaning alike. The “Lynch Fragments” are eloquent but also brutalized shards of content. The individual constructions, installed at eye level and several feet apart, feel as though they are ready to explode—not without reason, for the first example of the series was made in Los Angeles in 1963 against a backdrop of political upheaval. Remarkably, Edwards has continued to make works belonging to “Lynch Fragments,” with the latest example in the show dated to this year.

The iron nexus that the examples of the “Lynch Fragments” afford shows us how one can speak eloquently of prejudice and loss while maintaining a vigorous, even positive, presence as an artist. Most of the pieces are tight with metal objects, fragments, and cultural attributes that pertain to black American culture. *Texcali* (1965), one of Edwards' most inspired works, consists of a chain dangling from a square piece of steel. The latter butts outward and is placed in the middle of the disk that serves as the sideways platform of the sculpture. What looks like part of a C clamp seems to hang off the center left of the piece. At the bottom of the last chain loop are two steel balls, which give the work an assertively masculine authority of self-defense, a stance found often in the series.

The raw intensity of *Texcali* is understandable in light of the time: the sculpture was made in 1965, the year of the Watts Riots. But its density and that of the others belonging to the sequence also suggest that the constructions are not without hope, even if that hope is based on anger and rebellion. Another example from this year, *Nite Work*, makes use of tools such as a wrench and small saw, placed in a rough spiral that opens toward the viewer. In its middle are a chain and a bent horseshoe. The imagery can be thought of as having two readings—one interpretation views the work as pushing back oppression, while the other sees the tools as constructive implements. Other works in the show are more abstract: *Ways of Steel* (1988) nicely celebrates its own materiality, and here the chain that extends away from the sculpture's open center is a formal element quite free from political overtones. And the massive stainless-steel work *To Listen* (1990), nearly 90 inches tall, also has a chain. Draped along a diagonal edge of the

*Curtain for William and Peter* (1969/2012), a drapery of sorts, is made with barbed wire bordered at the bottom with heavy chains. This piece functions like another model of resistance—the violence of the materials cannot be denied. Political art in America has often, arguably, been weakened by over-involvement with its own posturing. It is clear, however, that an artist like Edwards found the right vocation working with steel, in order to propose an alternative to esthetic meekness. It is strange but true that sometimes the material itself carries a resonance that speaks to social frustration. And Edwards has made things even more complex by pouring his anger into work that is highly skilled. Edwards represents a unique combination of a close-to-modernist esthetic and a sharp eye for historical implications.