

## Melvin Edwards Stephen Friedman Gallery London review



In a break from railing against Walt Disney, pop-culture curmudgeon Theodor W. Adorno wrote, in his 1949 essay 'Culture, Criticism and Society', that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Though he later doubted the statement, its staying power as a cultural adage was ensured by a universal conundrum compactly expressed. How can an individual return to the rarified pursuit of art after significant tragedy, extreme violence or forced subjection? If we shift the focus from post-Holocaust Europe to black America in the 1960's, then a host of alternative horrors present themselves to derail reality and thwart creativity, daily. How can an individual create art after slavery

lynching, segregation, police brutality and omnipresent racism? In his first UK solo exhibition, Houston-born, New Jersey-based sculptor and painter Melvin Edwards provided an answer: art and politics have to fuse, formally and conceptually, in the art object.

Spanning five decades, from Edward's emergence within the early 1960's Los Angeles art scene to the present day, the exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery presented a modest and surprisingly traditional retrospective- a digestible, and, at times, too comfortable survey of the recurring themes and forms that have predominated in the artist's striking *oeuvre*. Abstraction, Modernism, African American and West African cultural histories were fused together in sculpture, drawings and a large installation, spot lit and discreetly placed.

In each instance, the works achieved a mode of double address by simultaneously considering two fields: the development of a language of formalist abstraction in welded steel, which begins for Edwards with Julio Gonzalez and David Smith; and political concerns as they relate to the African American community's collective struggle for equality, their ongoing battle against domestic cultural and historical erasure, and severance with African heritage. This most emphatically realized in Edwards's welded agglomerations of industrial tools that speak directly of physical labour and thus of the making of the modern US. In larger, free-standing sculptures like *Monochromo* (1964-65) and *Standing Hang-up #1* (1965) objects are bent and mangled together like aleotric Modernist forms exhumed from a junkyard scrap pile. Presented on plinths, their chaos of angles and edges recalled Cubism's all-per-spectives-at-once approach, the jumble of viewpoints in Pablo Picasso's wooden sculpture *Mandolin and Clarinet* (1913) and the disorientating puzzle of angles in George Braques' painting *Bottle and Fishes* (c.1910-12).

The impressive installation *Then There Here and Now - Circle Today* (1970/2014), visible from the street through the gallery's large windows, is an attempt to explicitly politicize Minimalism's largely phenomenological concerns by using the symbolically charged material of barbed wire. Consisting of two forms - a large wall-mounted barbed-wire

circle and another collection of barbed-wire lines hung from the ceiling – the quiet and subversive intensity the work aimed for when first conceived in 1970 has lost much of its impact over time. The difficulty for Edwards is that his political focus remains trained on socio-cultural dynamics of the 1960s and '70s. Viewers can check off references and allusions to the civil rights movement and other coeval events and struggles, but the powerful affects these associations once provoked are now dampened by the spectator's historical distance from them.

The same fate befalls Edwards's wall-mounted series of reliefs titled 'Lynch Fragments' (1963-ongoing). Nine works from a series numbering over two hundred were displayed. Each *Fragment* is a variation on a single formal theme: industrial equipment, chains, hammers, railroad spikes and other miscellany from the smithy are welded together to form reliefs attached to a circular, square or triangular base. Begun in 1963, the 'Fragments' have extended to incorporate the artist's interest in West African sculptural traditions, techniques and tribal masks. Whereas Western Modernism is acknowledged through formal references to industrial forms, the accelerated rough and readiness of West African Modernity (presumably familiar to Edwards, who spends time in Senegal each year) is bypassed in favour of nods to pre-modern art, creating a closed referential circle.

Perhaps it's unfair to demand Edwards's work stand up to the strange and insidious world of contemporary metropolitan racism, with all its micro-aggressions, including the perennial, insistent question of national identity, which demands an essentializing response: 'No, but where are you *really* from?' But it is because of the initial power of his works from the 1960s and early '70s that the desire to see this approach updated presents itself so strongly.