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Melvin Edwards' Nasher exhibit inspired by social upheaval

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"My work is social expressive, no question," says sculptor Melvin Edwards, with *The Fourth Circle*, 1966. "But within human beings, social expressive can go many ways."

Standing in the center of the main gallery at the Nasher Sculpture Center is a sculpture made of steel, one that carries a story.

"I call it *The Lifted X*," says Melvin Edwards, whose retrospective, "Five Decades," opens at the Nasher Center Saturday.

The Lifted X is a tribute to slain civil rights leader Malcolm X, who inspired Edwards, who on Feb. 21, 1965 — the day Malcolm X was assassinated — had already begun hammering and forging the piece that endures as its own kind of monument.

Born in Houston, the 77-year-old Edwards graduated from Phyllis Wheatley High School, which produced such fellow alumni as U.S. Reps. Barbara Jordan and Mickey Leland, and internationally renowned jazz musician Illinois Jacquet.

Upon graduation, Edwards moved to Los Angeles to live with relatives, beginning his higher education at Los Angeles City College, where back then you could enroll for \$9 a semester. He laments the fact that higher education is, for many, no longer affordable.

He lived in Los Angeles from 1955 to 1967, during a period of fierce turbulence and change. He was there in 1965, when the Watts riots resulted in 34 deaths and more than 3,400 arrests. His sculpture, *August the Squared Fire*, now on view at the Nasher, emerged from the memory of living near the epicenter of the riots.

“Something had to happen,” Edwards says of that time. “California had so much promise ... and reneged on so many of its promises.”

Social change has long influenced Edwards as an artist, steering his evolution from painting to sculpture and broadening his experience from Texas to California to New York, where he now lives, to Africa, where he also has a home in Senegal. He’s a frequent visitor to Cuba, a country he loves for many reasons, one being its lasting embrace of art and music.

“Los Angeles just didn’t have enough of an art world of opportunity, compared to New York,” he says.

Edwards is the master of a compelling body of work that Nasher officials say has done nothing less than help redefine the modernist tradition of welded sculpture.

“It’s all steel,” he says of his work, albeit “different configurations” of steel crafted into the statements they represent. In his *Lynch Fragments* series, Edwards has, according to the Nasher description, “created sculptures that fuse tools and other objects into powerful evocations of protest.”

Nasher director Jeremy Strick, who brought the retrospective to Dallas, says Edwards’ work “serves as a natural expression of our mission and history.” Edwards’ work, Strick says, “is rooted in the values of freedom, individuality and humanism that lie at the heart of the Nasher collection.”

The work carries with it Edwards’ individuality, which in his case was shaped by Texas. Much of his extended family hails from Panola County in the Piney Woods of East Texas, near Carthage. They migrated there from Alabama and Georgia in the early 1900s, seeking post-slavery opportunity on affordable land they could farm.

It’s a region of East Texas that gave birth to such talents as Scott Joplin and Lightnin’ Hopkins, who grew up not far from Panola County.

Edwards’ family is no stranger to art and literature. His mother, Thelma Felton Edwards, is 95 and just last year published a memoir titled *Silver Tracks and Running Roses: Memories of a Goose Creek Girl*.

Edwards’ wife, Jayne Cortez, who died in 2012, was a renowned poet and activist.

His work carries a force and power that many may interpret, he concedes, “as protest art,” but it’s not necessarily so. “My work is social expressive, no question,” he says. “But within human beings, social expressive can go many ways. Protest is only one aspect.”

Plan your life

“Melvin Edwards: Five Decades” opens Saturday and continues through May 10 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas. Edwards will give a lecture at 2 p.m. Saturday. \$10, with discounts. 214-242-5100, nashersculpturecenter.org.