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Saturday Spotlight – Art as a Tool of War Melvin Edwards At The Nasher: Man of Steel

<http://artandseek.net/2015/01/31/melvin-edwards-at-the-nasher-nice-guy-with-some-wicked-steel/>

Jerome Weeks January 31, 2015 8:06 PM



Melvin Edwards and the 1989 welded-steel ‘Lynch Fragment’ called *Zhakanaka*, a word from the Shona language of Zimbabwe which translates roughly as “travel well and live a beautiful life.” *Photo: Jerome Weeks*

No one really noticed, so perhaps it’s a sign the Dallas Arts District has started to do what it was designed to do: This past weekend, the District held three world premieres, all within 24 hours, all within blocks of each other. That may be a first for Dallas not just for the District.

Friday, there was the Dallas Opera’s *Everest* at the Winspear (here’s [Bill Zeeble’s Art&Seek story](#)), while that same evening, the musical *Stagger Lee* debuted just across the street at the Dallas Theater Center ([our digital project](#) has tracked its development). And then, the next morning, the [Nasher Sculpture Center](#) opened a major exhibition on the sculptor Melvin Edwards — his first career retrospective in 20 years. The Houston-born artist is better known in the art world than by the public, which is one reason the Nasher-originated show is significant: He’s one of ours but we don’t really know him. KERA’s Jerome Weeks joined Edwards in the Nasher galleries to discuss art, anger – and football.

Melvin Edwards laughs easily talking about his sculptures. The 77-year-old from Houston happily recalls starting out in Los Angeles in the early '60s as an artist. In his workshop, he once heated a steel bar and then — in front of neighborhood kids who'd been sneaking peaks at what he was up to when they'd been told to stay away for safety reasons — he grabbed it with both his gloved hands and twisted it into a circle.

"And their eyes got *big*," he recalls with a laugh. "So for years, until they finally grew up, I was the strongest man in the world. I could bend steel."



'Some Bright Morning,' welded steel, 1963

With such an affable man, it's odd, standing at the Nasher, surrounded by his works. On the walls, there's a series of smaller sculptures called the Lynch Fragments. For anyone who's seen them only in photos, the fragments are surprisingly small, rarely bigger than an iPad or a dinner plate. They look like ferocious shrapnel — shards of machinery, hammers and chains, welded, broken and bristling. The sense of slavery and shackles, of racial violence and anger, is palpable.

But angry? No, Edwards says he wasn't angry when he started the series in the early '60s "Your real anger," he says, "you just can't spend it in your working time. If I'm angry, I'm more likely to hit someone with a hammer than create anything. But the sculptures — they may express situations that *deserve* some anger, that's true."

The first Lynch Fragment was made in 1963. It looks vicious, a spiral of razor edges and a dangling chain, but it has one of Edwards' loveliest titles, *Some Bright Morning*. It's from the chorus of an old Baptist hymn ("Some bright morning, some glad morning, We shall see the Lord of Harvest, by and by"), but Edwards took it from a threat a white Florida mob made to a defiant black family. He'd read about it in Ralph Ginzburg's 1962 volume, ***100 Years of Lynching***: Some bright morning, we'll be coming back with ropes to get you.

That tension between title and image, this fusion of abstraction and polemic was Edwards' breakthrough. Since the late '50s, John Chamberlain's **chunky, crushed-car sculptures** had famously pushed abstract expressionism into three dimensions — in a large-scale, scrap-metal way. But other than a generalized, industrial violence or a commentary on pop culture-transforming-wreckage, Chamberlain's works may be impressive and beautiful but they're relatively limited in emotional range.

For his part, Edwards welded and twisted his steel bars and plates and familiar tools — and he lent them this jagged, compressed, emotional and historical force. It's like drawing a few, simple, interlocking circles and have them evoke all the power of injustice. The Fragments made Edwards' name in the art world. Very few artists were devoting entire series of works to racial history in ways that were simultaneously oblique and brutally blunt. The Museum of Modern Art in New York alone owns five of the Fragments.



'Steel Life,' welded steel, 1985-91

But Edwards' sculptures are hardly limited to the Fragments. Or to ham-handed metaphors ("chains = slavery"). He points to a piece from the late '80s with a crowbar and a battered metal cup. It's called "Steel Life," and it was inspired, he says, by his father's funeral. His father was a waiter and later a scout executive, but basically, Edwards says, he worked at any job, manual or otherwise.

"They used the 23rd Psalm – 'Let my cup runneth over, surely goodness and mercy,' you know," he says. "That the qualities of our life could be measured by what happened in our cup of life."

Edwards says, his approach to sculpture is all about finding the strongest expression, the shape that carries the most force. He doesn't like his works being reduced to obvious social protest or empty formalism. That's one reason, he explains, the Lynch Fragments are called fragments. He wanted to forestall any of the early '60s, Clement Greenburg-style criticism about how an abstract work had no meaning, no wider reference other than its own materials, the artist's choices of shapes, colors and textures.

"He believed 'what you see is all there is,'" says Edwards. "And there's *always* more than just what you see." Yet in the '70s, Edwards moved away from his Fragments to big, simple shapes, sculptures of sizable circles and boxes. Instead of tight steel reliefs on a wall, his works opened up to contain public space. It looked as though Edwards had joined the pristine, geometric world of minimalists like Donald Judd.

Then Edwards started adding barbed wire to the pieces.

"Well, I'm smart, eh?" he laughs. "No, y'know, one of the discussions in modern sculpture was the idea of drawing in space, 'the line in metal,' if you will. With the barbed wire, you could have a fixed, thin line in space but it wouldn't be weak because you've got those barbs."

It's all about the strongest expression, and it's hard to argue with barbed wire defining a space. And Edwards is well aware of the larger implications of barbed wire – from his own childhood in Texas and from his time spent in Senegal, Africa. The Germans, he points out, set up their first genocidal concentration camps in Namibia in 1908.

There's something poignant or perhaps ironic about this major retrospective of Edwards' work being organized at the Nasher. Before he became an artist, Edwards excelled in football at the University of Southern California – he was good back when he was in high school in Houston. The appeal of bending and twisting metal, the sheer physicality was not lost on him – it's impossible to miss the sheer, compressive force in some of his artwork.

"Football was my sport, and I *did* like the violence," he admits with a grin. "It's one of the things I miss as an old man."

In fact, in 1954, Edwards' all-black Phillis Wheatley High School team from Houston played the then all-black team of Booker T. Washington High School.

And, of course, today, the Arts Magnet, is only five blocks from the Nasher.

"We beat 'em 21 to nothing!" Edwards cries gleefully. "So if there are any old guys out there listening, tell them Mel said hello!"



'Chaino,' steel, 1964