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Interview: Artist Melvin Edwards on da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Sonny Rollins

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Last weekend, the Nasher Sculpture Center opened a major exhibition of works by the artist Melvin Edwards. Born in Houston in 1937, Melvin Edwards sculpts like the anti-John Chamberlain. Whereas Chamberlain twists colored steal from automobiles to create light, graceful sculptures that seem to expand in the air and defy the physicality of their material, Edwards' metal sculptures are dense and laden, twisted and welded together in a way that makes them seem bound by some internal gravitational force. He incorporates a variety of materials into his small, wall-hanging sculptures, The Lynch Fragments, including scissors and gears, pad locks and metal shards. Other works incorporate

barbed wire into linear, minimalist-leaning installations, or flat plates of steel that recall both furniture and modernist masters like David Smith. What is perhaps most intriguing about Edwards' work is the way its materiality manages to maintain a dialogue with both a formal aesthetic tradition and a social-political discourse, leading to pieces that are dynamic, visually satisfying, and yet difficult to pin down. We sat down to talk to Edwards about his Texas roots, his emergence in Los Angeles in the 1960s, and how his affinity for music informs his process.

FrontRow: What does it feel like to come back to Texas, where you were born, for a major exhibition like this? You've been in Los Angeles and New York for so many years, do you still have a connection to this state?

Melvin Edwards: Well, I'm a known sentimental person, and my family goes back more than 100 years in East Texas. We still own family land, I go to reunions. I'm just absolutely sentimental about my family. It's just a natural part of me. I was never alienated to those aspects.

FR: When did you leave Texas?

ME: I left Houston in 1955 at age 18 because you couldn't do what I needed to do to try to be an artist and further my education. I was a fairly good student and a fairly good athlete with some scholarships offers to places like Prairie View A&M. But that was the period of segregation. That part wasn't as much why I really left as none of the black colleges had significant art programs, and art was what I wanted. They said you can take home economics at Prairie View. My aunt and uncle in Los Angeles offered for me to come and live with them, and it cost $9 a semester to go to junior college in L.A. So that's what I did.

FR: What was Los Angeles like when you arrived there?

L.A. was a good place for me to go to school, for me to evolve into an adult. There were limits in L.A.'s dynamics, but it was better for me to go there than New York when I was young. I went to New York at age 30 or so and there were too many distractions. L.A. had the educational dynamics that I needed. L.A. allowed me to grow. It allowed me to make mistakes, reconsiderations. L.A. is where I learned to be an artist. It is where I had evolved from a painter to a sculptor.

F.R. At what point did you make the jump from paper to metal?

ME: I would say it was just intuition and interest that took over at that moment. I like Goya. I like people who said something. All of those etchings about war, human beings abusing each other. I thought I liked Michelangelo a lot and I liked the muscularity, but there was something else about his work that I didn't care that much for. Da Vinci I like more because of his curiosity, his interest in a variety of scientific and anatomical dissections and stuff like that. I worked in a meat department of a large size supermarket in Houston for four years so I knew how to dissect a chicken. I was dissecting them so they could be fried [laughing], but you know what I mean, anatomically taking apart things. Walking in with a full quarter section of piece of beef and you know hanging it and stuff. And then so when I got into Rembrandt and anatomy and analysis of the painting of a carcass of beef and stuff, I knew what a carcass of beef felt like all the way around.

F.R.: So you're interest in physical forms comes from an interest in anatomy?

M.E.: About 1962, I worked in the Los Angeles County hospital delivering patients' charts from section to section. And one of the sections I had to go through was where they dissected cadavers. I always thought, "Oh, Da Vinci—I need to learn how to do some of this." When I went past that room and the smell, no way I wanted to you know dissect a human being [laughing]. But in an intellectual sense it was the same stuff you know. And once you know what muscles and tendons do for a chicken's leg to his foot, or when you chop up 500 pounds of oxtails in an afternoon joint by joint with a cleaver, you understand the meaning, the functioning, the intersection of forms and stuff. And I think a lot of that experience assists me in my thinking. How to connect forms. I have a notion that forms can connect that may not otherwise have a relationship. Because when you see bone tendons and stuff without meat or anything, sometimes they look very logical, like they go together, and other times you can't figure out. Every time I get a piece of steak that has a bone in it, I keep it an extra week, just the bone, even though I've seen them a thousand times. It's just an abstract form, except it's real. It's something I have a sensitivity for.

F.R. Was there a point in your practice when you realized that to explore these kinds of abstract forms you had to work with material and not just painting or drawing?

ME: I don't know if there was a moment. I had already evolved in painting towards the idea of abstraction and the idea of both creating forms that didn't exist and logically connecting them to each other, just in space or environment. The paper to the material wasn't that big a jump. I mean it was, but what I mean is, it's steel so it's going to be different. But, the learning to weld was important. I saw a couple of graduate students welding, and thought that would be interesting. I got one of them to teach me a night class how to weld, and that was all. They did nothing aesthetic. He laid out six pieces of steel and showed me how to weld them, melt them down, and then said leave me alone. There was nothing aesthetic just the technology was all I needed.

F.R. You were talking about Goya and also you're talking about abstraction, and what is so interesting about your Lynch Fragment series is that you figure out a way to make abstract objects that are at the same time responding to a history that's very specific, the Civil Rights movement, L.A. in the early 1960s, the Watts riots. Did these forms come out naturally from that context, or were you trying to react specifically to what was going on around you?

ME: Both. I think the path had more to do with that period. The art world's rhetoric was art for art's sake. I was one who was never on one side of the fence, I knew about the argument between Greenberg and Rosenberg, but I wasn't in the East. I was in California. The argument took a long time to get there, and it didn't make it to my neighborhood [laughing]. You didn't drink scotch in west L.A. I lived in the North End of the city. My late wife grew up and lived in Watts, and I knew it, but it wasn't a home base for me. I lived in a typical African American community, but California-style. It wasn't Houston or Fifth Ward. Many of the people there were from immigrants, you know, from Texas. The people were natural to me and more intense. I'd always felt the bullshit, that the promise of California was not lived up to by the government and the society, both in terms of employment and other things. But California looked like it was all beautiful and stuff. It had the appearance, and so when you arrive there, people arrive there with a lot of hopes. And you know, some did well and that kind of thing but not to the level. And the abusiveness and oppressiveness of the official circle starting with the police department was going

to get a response sooner or later. Looking back it was the most logical thing in the world. The pot was boiling.

F.R. And so you wanted to try to capture some of that feeling, the pot boiling, in your work?

M.E. I think I understood early on, early on in my art life, that if you didn't express the thoughts and ideas you had, they would never exactly get expressed. Everybody has similar thoughts, but whatever your own thoughts are, whatever is particular about them if you didn't. I was never in the Pollock realm of letting the material go loosely. I like independent, broad brush strokes of paint, kind of calligraphic looking but oil paint. The one thing I'm sure about me and my approach to things is it's the work in front of me. You know, if it's not in front of me and coming out of me, it'll never get there.

PS: When you look at a lot of your work, and especially the Lynch Fragments, there is that sense of palpable physicality that comes from the feeling that the material has been worked.

ME: It's like a musician concentrating. It's between him and the instrument, and when he gets that voice that's him and his instrument with you know, what it is. I think that's a part of music and I can't say it influenced me but I've always thought it's a corresponding way of thinking and working. Often I've tried to compare the improvisation of music to the way I work, but of course music and improvisation is instantaneous. Improvisation in this can take three weeks, three months, but I haven't drawn out what I'm going to make. I've got to improvise as I go. But what's the difference between a Beethoven symphony and somebody who improvises on saxophone for a half an hour? Well the difference is the time interval between thought and execution. With a symphony, you have to write it down. Whereas a jazz musician or Indian musician or whoever improvises, you have the instrument in your hand, and the thought in their head, or the breath in their body.