

The Dallas Morning News

February 16, 2015

Art review: A Texas-born sculptor's career retrospective at the Nasher

<http://www.dallasnews.com/entertainment/columnists/rick-brettell/20150215-art-review-a-texas-born-sculptors-career-retrospective-at-the-nasher.ece>

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Published: 15 February 2015 10:37 PM, Updated: 15 February 2015 10:41 PM



Ben Torres/Special Contributor

Curtain for William and Peter is made of barbed wire and chain. It is included in a retrospective of sculptor Melvin Edwards' work at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

The Nasher Sculpture Center has opened its most important retrospective of a living sculptor in several years. He is Melvin Edwards, an African-American born in Texas, whose five-decade career has taken him to California, New York and Africa.

He is not as yet a member of the modernist canon of post-World War II American sculptors. This survey and its highly intelligent and well-written book might well change that.

Edwards' sculptures are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Studio Museum in Harlem, but they are rarely included in permanent collection installations and, hence, are little-known to the larger public.

The exhibition, curated by the Nasher's Catherine Craft, is ambitious, beautifully selected and installed on two floors of the center's building and in its beautiful garden. For that reason, the visitor must devote sufficient time for the outdoor installations and the windowless downstairs galleries, which contain some of the most memorable work.

The major part of the show focuses on Edwards' small, wall-mounted sculptures called the Lynch Fragments series. These were started in the 1960s, begun in response to Ralph Ginzburg's 1962 book *100 Years of Lynchings* and gaining momentum after the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles.

Edwards returned to the series irregularly in the ensuing decades, and the final work in the exhibition, *MOZ-OK*, is a contribution made in 2012. There is a useful and free gallery-guide brochure concentrating on this series.

Most of Edwards' sculptures are welded steel, and he uses found materials that include hammers, axes, plows, horseshoes, barbed wire, shears, springs, chains, hooks and bars. These are conjoined in compact, yet highly charged and evocative welded constructions in which each form retains its original identity and gives it — almost like words in a text — to the whole.

Generally, modernist sculptures sit on a horizontal surface like the floor, a table or a pedestal. The Lynch Fragments are unusual because they are all mounted on the wall like paintings. The Nasher Center has had to construct temporary painted-wood walls in the stone-walled galleries designed by Renzo Piano to accommodate them.

What is interesting about the Nasher is that each time there is a temporary exhibition, the curators reinstall the permanent collection in adjacency so that one can experience the exhibited sculpture in the larger context of the history of modern sculpture.

Here, works by Julio González, David Smith, John Chamberlain, Jean Tinguely and Richard Stankiewicz rhyme in fascinating ways with Edwards' work, making clear his particular contribution to the modernist tradition of welded sculpture. Sadly missing are any of the Nasher's pieces by Anthony Caro, the British sculptor who developed similar concerns and worked in the same manner.

The pedestal, floor and corner sculptures selected by Craft to fill out our knowledge of Edwards are of unusual high quality, particularly *The Lifted X* of 1965, acquired last year by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and *Chaino* of 1964.

Downstairs are drawings, sketchbooks and small prototypes for monumental sculpture projects and a room re-creating his extraordinary barbed wire installations of 1970 for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

In these works, Edwards approaches the reductive serial aesthetic of minimalism in an utterly original, even profound manner, and no one would be blamed for thinking they were made by a different artist — so airy, open and light they are in contrast to the concentrated, weighty aesthetic of the steel sculpture upstairs.

I confess to finding certain of the large sculptures of painted and polished steel on the terrace and in the garden somewhat derivative and less than compelling compared with the works inside the museum.

The book published by the Nasher in conjunction with the exhibition is absolutely beautiful and carefully considered. The essay and interview by Craft are exemplary and have a truly comparative dimension. The two commissioned essays are brilliant and original, as is Leigh Arnold's catalog of the monumental sculptures.

Rick Brettell holds the Margaret McDermott distinguished chair at the University of Texas at Dallas.