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A THREE-DIMENSIONAL DIALOGUE

Diana Al-Hadid, Melvin Edwards, and Eva Rothschild discuss contemporary sculpture and the selection of Doris Salcedo as the inaugural Nasher Prize recipient.

There is a solemnness to the room where Doris Salcedo's sculpture, *Plegaria Muda*, is installed at the Nasher Sculpture Center, leveling the mood to ceremony. Loosely translated as "silent prayer," Salcedo's piece is an examination of cultural tragedy, with traces of the piece's conception dating back to a 2004 trip to Los Angeles, where she worked on the issue of the city's massive death toll, mostly young people dying to gang violence. The resonance of *Plegaria Muda* is built inside a room on the top floor of the Nasher filled with many brown tables, those used in schools of yesteryear, stacked on top of each other, two to a set, each a different color, creating a sandwich effect of left-behind materials of wood and dust separated by concrete and earth.

The tables are installed with purpose; you must tread through them as a maze, as they are charged with the energy of coffins, each one embedded with loss and memory of forgotten people. As the viewers maneuver around the tables, they must acknowledge each one, as if in remembrance. Poetically, the organic matter, the clumps of cemented dirt between each wooden table, its legs driving through the air like stakes, hold life within them yet. Small blades of grass poke and push themselves through the cracks of the upside-down tables. Proclaiming their existence, tense little blades of green grass remind us that life, even within the most brutal of circumstances, endures. The piece is about layers. Layers of violence, and the people it is performed against, each one as unique and precious as a blade of grass.

The genocide of people is linked to Salcedo's practice of preserving authenticity of history, no matter how violent. She is a champion of the voiceless, an artist who uses her medium to discuss a human being's capacity for both love, and hate. It's a brave choice for the Nasher Prize jury to grant the inaugural award to an artist working amid the dealings of such harsh truths. Yet, in a way, it makes sense. The Nasher Prize itself is a declaration of the malleability and subjectivity of sculpture as an art form. Its potential is limitless, and many artists over time have evolved its definition to what sculpture means.

To further investigate this artistic notion, *Patron* reached out to three living artists, each with a past exhibition tie to the Nasher, who are challenging the notions of what sculpture can be. Diana Al-Hadid, Melvin Edwards, and Eva Rothschild each express their thoughts on the medium, its potential, and how the questions a sculpture raises are more interesting than the answers.

Syrian-born, Brooklyn-based sculptor, Diana Al-Hadid, feels like she is still figuring out what it means, personally and theoretically, to work in sculpture.

"I guess I'll be thinking about that until the day I die. It has a lot to do with how a space or an object lives and relates in real time with a person, both in its creation and in its appreciation. It has a lot to do with history and material, spatial and societal, and it has a lot to do with how something relates to the floor and contends with gravity."

Al-Hadid was featured in the Nasher's *Sightings* series, exhibited



Syrian-born, American artist, Diana Al-Hadid in her Brooklyn studio. Photography by Jason Acton.

from October 2011–January 2012. She connected her approach to sculpture from the Dadaist idea of “error.” “I love randomness and chance because it lets you work without having to have an idea. All you have to have is an itch to react.”

For Al-Hadid, it helps her to think through an exploration of materials. “Space is built up and drawn out with materials. Time is reflected in material, both in narrow terms, as in processes such as pouring, heating, dripping, and repetition, as well as in broader terms, as in current technological innovations. Place is evidenced through materials—it gives you access to things and stuff to work with.”

She sees her practice as putting her material through the ringer, exploiting it, and pushing it to its physical limits. “It’s important to see an idea as far as it can possibly go, by driving forward its core properties.”

In her practice, Al-Hadid uses fiberglass and steel, exploring the temporal, time, and deconstruction. Her work resembles mystical architecture, like looking at a city within a 10-year time-lapse, where you see the building and demolition of a place all at once, depending on perspective. These sculptural architectures can be seen as holy places—spiritual objects charged with sensuality. They exist outside of a specific time, within a world forged from the creative genesis of Al-Hadid. She says, “I actually construct as much as I deconstruct; I zoom in and fuss with details after I’ve made some big-picture breaks and gashes in the work. The work may look deconstructed at times, but in fact, it’s all built up, constructed from nothing, all handmade, and I rarely use found objects directly.”

So much of the work revolves around the evolution of an idea, as much as materials. “Perhaps what I focus on more is a transformation of forms, movement in space, moving materials, and a stopping still of an event. I am fascinated by how something like plaster, which begins as a powder, combines with a liquid and becomes a solid, and can then be broken into smaller fragments. The evolution of this very material is simple and extremely elegant. Steel and fiberglass can create big robust forms with very little mass, so something that is indeed very strong, can appear very slight.”

There is a collection of “marks” in Al-Hadid’s work—a gestural landscape she pulls from and returns to, while progressing in her work. There is subtle referencing to the depth of detail and minutiae of early Renaissance-period work, which is then “obliterated” by the time she is done breaking down and reconstructing any such call-back. “I tend to think in terms of lines and planes, or drips and puddles, poured or thrown; my work is often porous or transparent in some way, but constructed with mostly opaque parts.”

When it comes to exploring a space for exhibition, her approach is to first study the space beforehand, then create a work in response to its particular idiosyncrasies. She looks at things like ceiling heights, rafters, and obstructions, or in the case of her show at the Nasher, street-front windows, to gain an idea of how viewers will interact with the work within the space.

“I always imagine how a person will experience the work, because I am a person. And I am experiencing the work as I make it. Sometimes my appetite is bigger for a project than others. I may be in the mood to work on something I have to climb and jump on. Other times I want to work on something closer to my body. Usually the space has the most say at the start of the project. A lot of the decisions about the scope of the projects have to do with my temperament. If I am working on something big and expansive and I have a need to indulge some fussy anxiety, I may move to a

drawing or a detail on the work for a while.”

Through working with the museum in the past and having an understanding of its mission, Al-Hadid sees the Nasher Prize as an opportunity to widen Salcedo’s work even further. “(Salcedo’s work) is brilliant, (the award) really well-deserved; it sets a great precedent. When I first learned about her, I realized I had seen images of her powerful work. Hopefully this award will bring younger artists to her work sooner.”

American sculptor, Melvin Edwards, was born in the Fifth Ward in Houston, Texas, in 1937. For his work, he has received the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, as well as a retrospective show at the Nasher Sculpture Center last year, titled, *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*. Edwards says early entry points into sculpture involved manifesting meaning out of tools and discarded items around his neighborhood, making wheelbarrows out of apple crates. “The first sculpture I made was a tomahawk,” Edwards explains. “I would tie sticks together and throw them at stuff. They weren’t as good as actual tomahawks, but I made something.”

At an early age Edwards had the opportunity to visit museums in school, where he became fascinated by exhibitions featuring armor, horseback equipment, and varied styles of paintings. “When I was in high school I was one of six students from three different black schools picked to go to a class at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston on a Monday, when it was closed. The great thing about the museum was walking around and seeing art from all different areas of the world. There was a Picasso from the Blue period. We thought it looked funny because it wasn’t realistic, and we didn’t understand art that didn’t have that approach. That understanding came later.”

Once he received his formal education at the University of Southern California, he began to take night courses where grad students in the art program, who taught him how to weld, tutored him. There’s a manual laboring with regards to sculpture that set the foundation for Edward’s initial growth in practice, leading to an evolution of his theoretical framework to his art. “In 1963 I began to come up with work that was unique to me and my thinking, and it didn’t have implications of what other people had been doing. That moved me. I was a young father at that time, laboring to put food on the table. I would get home around 7 p.m. and work at home in my garage, which was my studio, till 11 p.m.”

Edwards was also painting at this time, always interested in multiple vocations. He decided to focus on sculpture because he “liked exploring with those materials; sculpture, being a three-dimensional, tangible process, and the product seemed to pull me.”

For his practice, Edwards parallels sculpture to poetry in its experimental nature. “The most creative poets start with a blank piece of paper. I have an empty space in front of me for ideas and concepts. When I come across ideas that are curious to me, I rethink them. I rethought everything from God, to the Devil, to the guy next door. When you’re inventing your own game, you invent your own rules. I am taking on that freedom.”

The work that would come out of this period in the early ‘60s would come to define the issues and themes of Edwards’ career. The artist was working during a time of turbulent racial strife. He decided he wanted his practice to address and challenge accepted historical narratives on America’s relationship to race and slavery. Out of this came a body of work known as *Lynch Fragments*, demarcating forms embedded with symbolism from slavery to the Jim Crow South. Chains, nails, and sharp objects protrude from browning metal, leaving rusty, mental scars on any possible



Organized by Nasher Sculpture Center and Associate Curator Catherine Craft, *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades* traveled to the Columbus Museum of Art. Photography by Meghan Ralston.



Eva Rothschild in her London studio. She created *Why Don't You (Dallas)* featuring painted piping snaking through the Nasher Sculpture Center in 2012 for the *Sightings* series. Photography by Nicky Sims.

possible viewer's ambivalence.

"With my pieces, like *Cotton Hangup* and *Chaino*, the principle of suspension is the dynamic. Most lynchings weren't hung; the dynamic ones were. The truth is people were just killed and dumped in rivers or shot in the head on the street, all kinds of s***. It was about the inventive ways of killing people. Part of my intention is that people look at things as they are and not be intimidated. There's a problem? Fight it."

Edwards uses welding to tie things together, to achieve a final form. He is attracted to the hammering—forging something out of nothing. "Welding is just a way to get things together. It's not about adding. You might add all day and then cut it apart tomorrow morning. You can develop things from the parts. I don't work on one piece at a time. Generally, the thoughts come and go. There are pieces I have finished six months before an exhibition and something doesn't feel right, so I cut it open and start fiddling with it again."

Edwards's 2015 exhibition at the Nasher covered a survey of his artistic history, as well as the last 50 years of America's social and racial issues. "I've grown old during all this s***. I have matured during the experiences of my lifetime. Recently, someone asked me what I thought of the events in Ferguson. I said there was nothing new to me about it. These things happen periodically. Most times they don't receive the attention they deserve. People being abused by police—that's very common. That's nothing new."

Edwards cites the Nasher Prize as a vehicle for recognition within sculpture, recognizing different forms and styles of the medium, embracing the limitlessness of it all. "Different artists are more personally directed. With the *Lynch Fragments* I see it as a personal conversation. You have to be within three to five feet to see them. If not, they're just things on a wall. There's work that's a more personal expression, and there's work that works like a public speech. When a President makes a State of the Union speech, he has to address the needs of the public. Doris Salcedo's work seems to have implications of those important things. Sculptures deal with space and the ideas of space. As soon as you move any significant distance, it involves relationships with other people, other communities. Any artist that grapples with human conditions has two sets of responsibilities: address the problem; express possible solutions. With the Nasher Prize, I wish someone could get support for 10 years, but it's very important the Nasher initiated this prize, and I'm happy they were international in its selection. It doesn't have to be someone from my neighborhood. We live in the world of several thousand languages. Let's open it up."

London-based, Irish artist, Eva Rothschild, exhibited as part of the Nasher's *Sightings* exhibit in 2012, installed her slithering, snake-like, aluminum sculpture piece, *Why Not You (Dallas)* amongst the soft interior of the museum. "For me, sculpture generally means being in the presence of something that is experiential and present in its materiality. Having said that, it is a very expansive term and can in many ways take on a much wider engagement with the world."

This piece was a persisting dialogue with space, as well as audience, continuing from her show at the Tate Britain in 2009 where her sculpture stretched nearly the full 70 meters of the space, causing viewers to walk under, around, and over the work. There is a minimalistic approach to material, a certain thinness, within the physicality of both sculptures that is deceiving. Appearing

fragile, both works have the strength to hold the room, even bend its dynamic, while changing the energy of the particular space into something reinforced, vital. Rothschild sees materials as an expansive palette: "Nothing is excluded; new materials open new possibilities of making and reference."

Rothschild works in reaction to a space, similar to Al-Hadid; she examines the architecture of a room beforehand, then builds based off the nuances of the room. "Much of my work is made in response to a space; the room often leads where the work goes and how it develops. Creating a whole exhibition is like creating an ideal environment for works to be in conversation and counterpoint to each other. The works may move on and have other lives after the show, but that initial coming together is a very specific moment of connection and actualization."

Scale can be used as a vehicle for ideas and responses within a work, a concept not limited to sculpture. Rothschild, at the Nasher and Tate, utilized it as a mode for interaction between maker and viewer. "Scale dictates how work relates to the body and to the eye, and these are the primary ways in which we experience artworks; scale and the rhythm created within a group of works is extremely important."

It's critical to investigate the tension of these relationships, room to work, scale to material. For Rothschild it is not a relationship of vulnerability, rather precariousness that comes from a referencing to Minimalism. "I am interested in archaic and geometric forms that have a history and frame of reference that can often be at odds with the materials available to us at this moment in time."

This acknowledgment of what came before exists within her work, while also looking steadily forward through her own lenses. "I feel you can hold the two in tandem. I have a huge respect and abiding interest in the whole breadth of Modern, Minimalist, and Post-Minimalist sculpture, as well as in classical forms and architecture. In terms of the contemporary and looking forward, that is just where we are; we are in this, this moment; we are going forward."

The decision to grant Salcedo as the inaugural Nasher Prize winner held a special meaning to Rothschild. She believes Salcedo is "working in a politically engaged way with intense material." Both have shown at the Tate as well; Salcedo's piece, *Shibboleth*, like Rothschild's piece, used the space of the museum to explore the tensions of the room, viewers, and ideas. "Her piece *Shibboleth* at Tate Modern was totally unexpected, both beautiful and critically engaged."

Rothschild believes that awards like the Nasher Prize raise the profile of sculpture, because they are coming from an institution like the Nasher, renowned for its investment and commitment to the art form.

As the first Nasher Prize winner, Salcedo sends a powerful message on the evolution of sculpture as a medium, thus promoting a healthy dialogue around the potential of sculpture, in all its forms. It's also a comment on the sociopolitical concerns that sculpture, like the history of Modern art, has been in dialogue with. Salcedo's work in particular is about acknowledging otherness and embracing it. In their own ways, the practices of Salcedo, Rothschild, Edwards, and Al-Hadid are challenging the notions and expectations of the medium they work in. The quiet, motionless room where *Plegaria Muda* is installed isn't just a place for mourning. Each little blade of grass that pokes its head out from under the unforgiving wood towards the sky, is an act of life. One worth celebrating. **P**