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Review of 'Melvin Edwards: Five Decades' at the Nasher Sculpture Center

An introduction to an unruly Constructivist whose work bridges African and Modernist sensibilities.

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By Lance Esplund, March 31, 2015 6:00 p.m. ET

If you've never heard of Melvin Edwards, the contemporary African-American sculptor known for making industrial, visceral abstractions out of welded steel, you are not alone. "Melvin Edwards: Five Decades," a traveling survey of about 90 sculptures, maquettes and drawings, is the first retrospective of the artist in over 20 years. Organized by the Nasher Sculpture Center's Catherine Craft, this compelling, beautifully installed exhibition is as good a time as any for an introduction to the socially charged, knotty and sometimes troublesome concoctions of this unruly Constructivist.

'Benefane' (2004) *PHOTO: MELVIN EDWARDS/ARS/ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES/STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY*

‘Begin Again’ (1979) *PHOTO: MELVIN EDWARDS/ARS/ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES/STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY*

‘Mamba’ (1965) *PHOTO: MELVIN EDWARDS/ARS/ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES/STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY*

Although I had encountered Mr. Edwards’s art before, I first felt its impact in 2011 in the Hammer Museum’s “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980.” It was part of the Getty’s “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980,” a collaborative exhibition spread among more than 60 institutions across Southern California. There, seen alongside more than 1,000 artists, Mr. Edwards’s

primitive-yet-Modernist sculptures, born of the scrapheap—suggesting creatures, totems and implements of torture—were like nightmares amid the California dream. Yet “Five Decades” reveals a much richer, wide-ranging artist, one who combines African tribal sensibilities with those of European and American Modernism; one who moves comfortably among surrealism, expressionism and minimalism.

Born in Houston in 1937, Mr. Edwards acquired his BFA from the University of Southern California, where he received a football scholarship. In 1967, he moved permanently to New York and New Jersey (for three decades he was on the faculty of Rutgers University). He first visited Africa in 1970. And he maintains a studio in Dakar, Senegal.

I learned these facts after I gleaned that some of Mr. Edwards’s floor-based sculptures, such as “The Lifted X” (1965)—which greets you like a menacing host just inside the exhibition-proper—look like football tackle and blocking dummies, mounted on sleds. They also reminded me of ritualistic traditional African “Power Figures.” These carved-wood African figurative sculptures are symbolic, tightly packed, ornamented and medicinal. They are collaged together from an assortment of things, such as bird beaks, feathers, sticks, bones and stones. Sometimes riddled with spikes and nails, they conjure Western depictions of St. Sebastian. Often enclosed with resin, knots and nets, to convey a sense of contained forces, they are imbued with sacred power.

Most of Mr. Edwards’s sculptures feel equally active, distressed, symbolic and confrontational. “The Lifted X,” from the collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, is 5-feet-5-inches tall. It comprises a contorted vertical mass of welded scrap steel—bars, blades and balls that feel fused and transformed, as if into an animal, perched like a bird-of-prey on its angle-iron base. The creature’s butting head resembles a medieval armored helmet. More imposing, however, is a two-pronged set of meat hooks. They dangle between the sculpture’s legs like testicles, like weaponry at the ready.

Viewers at the Nasher are reminded of some of his influences. Mr. Edwards’s “Lynch Fragments,” the powerful continuing series of sculptures for which he is best known, are informed, according to the exhibition pamphlet, by the “social and political turmoil of the civil rights movement.” Small-scale wall reliefs, roughly the size of mounted trophy heads, the “Lynch Fragments” were begun in Los Angeles in 1963. About 30 of these dynamic, gnarly sculptures are on view. They are made of chains, ax heads, railroad spikes, hammers, padlocks, shackles and blades. But the sculptures’ strength resides in their uncanny ability to transcend their origins in loaded subjects.

Although they employ the heavy-handed language and tools of oppression, the “Lynch Fragments” neither browbeat viewers nor exploit the subject of slavery. Mr. Edwards begins with the obvious; but he focuses on transformation.

His “Lynch Fragments” retain their roots as recognizable objects—scissors, crowbars, chains, the spade of a shovel—and they deal in remains, things tortured (they are wrenched, broken); but they are also reconfigured, reborn. Metaphorically, they extend beyond suffering and captivity. They impress primarily as masks, shields, windows, heads and monuments—bodies in transition, conflict, motion. Mr. Edwards is not manipulating the shock of violence but, rather, exploring notions of regeneration.

Certainly, the “Lynch Fragments,” reminiscent of everything from cages and chastity belts to eviscerated torsos and impaled, severed heads, can feel vicious. “Ace” (1963) yaws like a tiger. “Some Bright

Morning" (1963) resembles a porthole that has been spiked and pried open; a macelike clump on a chain suggests an eyeball hanging from its socket by its optic nerve. "Katutura" (1986) is a bear trap, a vagina dentata. "Djeri Djef" (c. 2004) is a crown of thorns. And "Benefane" (2004) is like a mouth, turned inward, devouring its own shell.

At their best, the "Lynch Fragments" come alive. Twisted into tongues, beaks, pincers, horns and entrails, their amalgamated forms naturally join and move, in concert, like muscle, bone, ligament and tendon. "Mamba" (1965), made of stacked concentric forms, speared by a phallic form, is erotic, almost comical. It conflates the act of crucifixion with that of copulation as it awakens associations with hitch, spigot, door knocker and key. "Begin Again" (1979), as taut as a flexed bicep, is like a wall sconce waiting for a sculpture. And the plangent "Chitungwiza" (1989), primarily heart-shaped, feels broken; opening like a flower, it sprouts a cleaver.

What's surprising here is that Mr. Edwards's range has always extended much further, beyond the well-known "Lynch Fragments." At the Nasher, where he rubs shoulders with his Modernist influences—masters such as Julio González, Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Isamu Noguchi and David Smith—he holds his own as an original voice.

Mr. Edwards is able to be spare. In a sculpture series called "Rockers," he joins half-moon shapes of metal to suggest broken wheels missing their cannons and wagons; adult rockers missing their seats; children's rockers missing their horses. The smaller maquettes for these works resemble discarded shackles.

Not everything here completely jells. Occasionally, especially with barbed wire and machetes, literalism trumps metaphor. A large basement gallery is devoted to the re-creation of a show of Mr. Edwards's barbed-wire environmental sculptures, originally exhibited at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. Sparkling curtains and pyramid faces, their material's undertones overpower the sculptures themselves.

Yet there are also works here such as the gravity-defying, wind-whipped "Ways of Steel" (1988), an abstract acrobatic bird with a sword for a beak and a heavy chain for a tail; and the minimalist sculpture "To Wilfredo Lam" (1982), a modest planar metal archway, with a hinged, open door larger than the doorway itself. These and other works are representative of the expansiveness of Mr. Edwards's multifaceted, multinational vision, which sees each artwork not as the sum of its recognizable parts, but as a portal—a universal lens through which he is able to fuse and to reimagine diverse art forms, histories and cultures.

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