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ISHMAEL REED

STEPHON ALEXANDER

WALTER L. GORDON, III

E. ETHELBERT MILLER

remembers poet,

JUNE JORDAN

LYDIE DIAKHATÉ

on sculptor,

MELVIN EDWARDS

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Melvin Edwards

The Poetics of the Blacksmith



By
LYDIE DIAKHATÉ



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PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM KHALIL

Melvin Edwards
in his studio
in Plainfield,
New Jersey

≡ The sun is high. The light is slightly foggy. A dry mist is dispersed by the last breaths of the Harmattan.

It is March 2014, two o'clock, on a Saturday afternoon. I am driving to Dakar from the small village of Yene Tode, located on the eastern coast of Senegal. I am meeting with the renowned African American sculptor, Melvin Edwards, in his Senegalese studio. Born in 1937 in Houston, Texas, he grew up in the segregated South of the United States. He is a pioneer in the history of contemporary African American art and sculpture. Edwards has made a significant contribution to American art, in terms of aesthetics and the restitution of knowledge and patrimony. Several of his works are in permanent collections of major museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts in Texas, and the Los Angeles County Museum in Los Angeles.

As I pass the city of Diamniadio, thirty kilometers from the capital, sitting at the heart of an ambitious expansion project called Millenium Plateform, I can see, by the side of the road, women lying down behind multicolored stalls and their masses of papayas, oranges, avocados, corosols, lemons, konkorongs, watermelons, tomatoes and greens.

The way this continuous dialogue between tradition and modernity builds contemporaneity within the social, visual and cultural context in African cities is always fascinating to me. I remember one of Edwards' small circle pieces titled "Diamniadio." In Serer — the third most spoken language out of thirty-six in Senegal — Diamniadio means 'return in peace'. For Edwards, this phrase resonates with ideas of memory, of coming and going, cultural and creative movements, and cross-pollination between cultural and social realities. Edwards views Dakar as a crossroads — metaphorically, literally, as well as autobiographically.

Melvin Edwards' steel sculptures fuse the political with the abstract to address his African American heritage. As a black internationalist, a pan-Africanist, and a prime witness to modernist innovations in the New York art scene from the era of abstract expressionism to the current wave of conceptual art, Melvin Edwards is one of the few African Americans, who has a particularly strong connection with Africa beyond his African origins. He is deeply rooted in Africa, not only because he has a house and a workshop in Senegal, but also because he has visited the country regularly for years. In the booklet for his last exhibition at the Alexander Gray Associates gallery in New York in the autumn of 2014, Edwards stated:

I was born in the United States, but this identity always felt compatible with African life. Naturally, I didn't know as much until I started travelling to Africa. But my interest in what was happening there was present throughout my life. Together, they have always served a purpose. That purpose is, of course, the mixture of how I think about art. I am trying to develop something new out of old ideas and experiences. (...) Discovering and re-discovering Africa, in the sense of family, in the sense of societies. It's all part of the modern world. [3]

A few kilometers after leaving Diamniadio, I take a sliproad in the direction of Dakar. At this time of day, the highway is empty, but since its opening in 2013, despite local authority controversies and high tolls, it has transformed the landscape and traffic of Dakar and the surrounding regions. Along the road, a myriad of housing programs are flourishing and numerous interchanges, bridges, and railroad crossings have been built, during Abdoulaye Wade's presidency.

I met Melvin Edwards and his wife, the late poet Jayne Cortez (1934–2012), for the first time in Paris in 2000, the year they acquired their house in Dakar. Since then, I have had the pleasure of conversing with them about art, Africa, the history of black people, and many other topics. In 1970, thanks to a scholarship from the University of Connecticut, Edwards visited Africa for the first time accompanied by Jayne Cortez. The six-week trip took them to Ghana, Togo, Dahomey (today's Benin), and Nigeria. Since then, they have travelled widely in Africa and built strong relationships with artists, craftsmen, and friends all over the continent. Senegal became their primary choice to settle, and Edwards once explained to me:

Our first real stay in Senegal was 1981. We had a very nice week. The notable Senegalese painter, Souleymane Keita, took us around, to the tapestry factory in Thiès, to his home and studio in Gorée. We had Thieboudienne¹. That trip was an introduction. (...) Senegal was special, but all Africa has been special. This is not like saying this is the best place or better than others but certainly has everything we need. Other people will go to Paris, which was the place to meet with the young art history. We were interested in traditional and modern life. I became mature and more interested specifically in our culture. The creative people of my generation, we seem to have the same intentions — working in different environments, but the same basic intentions, to improve the world we have inherited, which has its problems and imperfections. Artists might be able to do that.²

I take the airport exit and cross gigantic roundabouts. Taxis, street peddlers, trucks, carts — everyone is trying to get somewhere. I pass the stadium and the Art Village. Driving over and under bridges, I have to concentrate so as not to miss the sliproad that will take me to Grand Yoff, Edwards' district. One last turn and I finally enter Edwards' neighborhood. Here, the streets are quiet. Uncontrolled urbanization took over the blueprint of the city. The houses — white, yellow, pink, brown, some tiled — are packed tightly together, avoiding any vacant space. During independence in 1960, Dakar's population was only 300,000, barely ten per cent of the country's population. Today, with more than three million inhabitants, almost a quarter of the population of Senegal, Dakar, like many other capitals in Africa, is booming.

Edwards has been extremely busy over the last four years. He has participated in several major group and solo exhibitions in the USA and abroad that have reinforced an already substantial reputation, including, among others: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC (2012); Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (2012); Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (2012); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2013); Parque de la Beneficiencia, Santiago de Cuba (2013); the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2014); Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris (2014) and his first solo exhibition in London at the Stephen Friedman Gallery (November 2014 – January 2015). His second retrospective, *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, has been organized by the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (2015). It will be presented at the Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey, from 1 September 2015 to 3 January 2016; and at the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio (2016). Edwards has been selected for the 56th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale (9 May – 22 November 2015), curated by Okwui Enwezor. In 2014, he received an Honorary Doctorate from the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston.

I park the car along a burnt sienna wall. Edwards' house adjoins [the late] Souleymane Keita's — a long-term solid and respectful friendship unite[d] the two artists. The security guard gives a friendly wave to indicate I can turn the engine off. He is preparing *ataya*, one of my favorite beverages in West Africa, made out of green tea leaves brewed with sugar and mint. A three-cup ritual that you sip all afternoon and night.

"Salaam maalikum [Peace on to you]," he says and opens the gate.

"Maalikum salaam [Peace returns to you too]," I answer.

"Mr. Edwards is not here yet. But, please, come on in. You know your way," he says.

"Djeredjef [Thank you]," I reply going through the door. In fact, I had arrived earlier than expected, in case I got lost or delayed on my way.

I enter the house, cool and like a small museum. Each room is an open space where art works are displayed. It was always Melvin and Jayne's intention to exhibit art in the home. I take the stairs up to Edwards' studio at the top of the house on the third floor. Several artworks he produced in Senegal for the *Lynch Fragments* and the *Disk* series hang on the white walls.

Melvin Edwards is most known for his *Lynch Fragments* series. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, these small-scale, welded metal wall reliefs were developed during three periods: 1963 to 1967, in response to racial violence in America; 1973 to 1974, in protest against the Vietnam War; and from 1978 to the present, where they became a vehicle to honor individuals, explore nostalgia and investigate his interest in African culture. There are now more than 200 pieces in the series. For the first time, these pieces completed in Dakar have been displayed in a solo exhibition in New York, at the Alexander Gray Associates gallery.

His smaller, freestanding and hanging works are made out of a variety of objects collected in different regions: scissors, pieces of railway, knives, chains, padlocks, nails, locks, shoe maker's hammer, trowels, interiors of motor vehicles, and agricultural or carpentry tools that are usually cut or shortened then fused together into a compact shape. In a conversation we had in New York³, Melvin Edwards clarified:

You can apply the term anatomy or mask to my work. But it's an application; it is not a reality. Because, on purpose, I don't do masks. It's a great creative history in doing that, but I want to do something unique in a different way.

The sculptural aspect in African sculpture, the way they handle the foot, next to the leg, the circle knee, the zigzag position, that's far more dynamic than anything going on with the head.

A lot of Melvin Edwards' public art ideas came out of these compact works that are then interpreted into their most pure and refined form.

The stairs lead directly into Edwards' studio. Large windows flood the room with natural light. The fairly large space looks like a *bric-a-brac* shop, but Edwards knows every piece of paper, piece of iron debris, tool on the studio floor, on his workbench or stacked on impromptu shelves. I grab a stool made out of a container and sit down. For Edwards, it is crucial to be involved with local artists and craftsmen.

In Dakar, Edwards works with local carpenters, scrap merchants and ironworkers. Introduced by a friend, he began working with the welding company, Youssouf N'Diaye Frères, in Mermoz, a district of Dakar. He bought equipment, which he installed at the welding company's workshop, and since then, a respectful complicity and steady collaboration with the team unites them. "It is like an extension of my home studio," he claims.⁴

While in Senegal, Melvin Edwards has expanded his public artwork to include tapestry and has also developed a close partnership with the *Manufactures Sénégalaises des arts décoratifs*, the national tapestry factory in Thiés, and its accomplished craftswomen and men in the art of making tapestries. The *Manufactures Sénégalaises des arts décoratifs* was founded in 1966 by President Léopold Sédar Senghor. Senghor requested that designs for brightly colored tapestries should be chosen from paintings submitted by Senegalese and other African artists. The goal was to experience a modern revival of African artistic traditions and aesthetic in the early years of independence. Elizabeth Harney reminds us:

This new institution, run by the painter Papa Ibra Tall, took the tapestry-making school in Aubusson, France, as its model, but it used what Tall believed to be authentic African themes, colors and designs. (...) As grandiose works, they were positioned as ultimate embodiments of a Negro-African-Aesthetic, and therefore, as the flagship of the École de Dakar. 68

The abstraction style embodied by the École de Dakar was very appealing to Melvin Edwards. In his work, the notion of abstraction contains realities such as the history and oppression of African people that is very perceptible but go beyond this feeling. We can also say in terms of aesthetic that his work itself goes beyond Picasso's cubism, even though the resonance is visible. This new medium in Melvin Edwards' career emphasizes the way he experiments with the conceptual and artistic symbiosis between sculpture and tapestry, as envisioned by Léopold Sédar Senghor's theory of Négritude. In his tapestries, echoing his sculpture, Edwards conceives a new aesthetic vocabulary and redefines the notion of a "black soul" beginning from its African-American history. In so doing, Edwards revisits European tradition and African modernity and helps us look at African heritage with new eyes. He drew his inspiration from the European concept for tapestry:

What I am getting at is that it was sculpture that was architecture, that had a function that was important to people. The idea of tapestry in Europe was to keep the cold walls from radiating the cold for people. It was like rugs to insulate the floors. But they made them in beautiful forms. Some were topical stories, or heroes, or people or whatever. And when they developed the contemporary tapestry in Europe [1940-50], Senghor was affected by them. He appreciated modern art, Picasso, other people who took interest in Africa. Then developing a tapestry became a modern idea so he supported its development in Senegal.⁵

Edwards read extensively about architects like Gaudí, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Architecture and urban environment have always been fundamental in Edwards' realizations. For him, creating large-scale works is to make real change to specific public sites.

As early as the late sixties, Edwards put into practice his ideas about public art by completing wall paintings. He joined the Smokehouse painters, a group organized for a short period (1968-70) by his comrade in arms, William T. Williams, to paint abstract hard-edge murals on building exteriors in Harlem, New York.⁶ Edwards explained to me.⁷

We decided that they would be absolutely abstract. So not like the mural that told people what to do; but murals that actually change the space. Thus, we were doing a real change in urban environment. That's what I mean by making the space more functional for people, and they can do what they want with it. A good example of that is what happened on 121st and 1st Avenue. It was a small city park that the drug dealers took over. The city never bothered to repair it. We did the walls on this corner, here and there, and we did these two walls, and people started to come back; and the city did the seats. The guys dealing the drugs went somewhere else. It was a wonderful microcosmic idea. The arts can be used to change places, not to decorate, but to *change* places. Then it has a much more dynamic function. This is when you are building cities; you do it with an aesthetic option.



Éclair et Chaîne, 2009
Melvin Edwards in the
*Manufactures Sénégalaises
des arts décoratifs*,
Tapestry (198.1 x 292.1 cm)
Material Fiber
Collection of the artist.

Melvin Edwards in front of
Diamniadio, 2010
FESTMAN III, Dakar,
December 2010
Tapestry Material Fiber
Collection of the artist.



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Adama, Edwards' housekeeper, enters the studio. She hands me a plate with a tiny glass of *ataya*. The glass burns my fingers. A thick layer of foam covers the dark liquid. I like the contrast of the bitter green tea with the softness of the foam. The sweet taste of sugar isn't apparent yet.

Today, Edwards' tapestries are the syncretism of decades of his thoughts and approach to his artistic, political and spiritual commitments he has developed over five decades. The size, the three-dimensional aspect, and his minimalist aesthetic concept in art combining abstraction and figuration are present in these works.

"*Éclair et Chaîne*" (2009), Edwards' first tapestry was displayed at the Museum of Art and Design in New York in 2010. It incorporates references to chains and lightning, two important symbols in Edwards' aesthetic language. During a visit to Thiès, he explained to me:

Chain symbolically, it's Aretha Franklin's "Chain, Chain, Chain..." I wish I could sing it like her; or it can be chains of love. You know, there are a lot of things that refer to this material, poetically as connections. And, of course, the chain of linkage of the family.

The other identified symbol in the tapestry is lightning, the symbol of electricity, an extraordinary dynamism. I am supposed to develop things that are a bit unique and ask people to look at things in more than one way. So, lightning is luminosity, the illumination of the mind. Creative capacities that we have developed. We have all to remember that. We don't get over-fascinated with the objects of our creation. They are something to move humanity somewhere else. (...) Tapestries in Senegal are for expressing the creativity of the society.⁸

The second tapestry bears the same name and ideas as Edwards' circle piece, "Diamniadio." In addition, the graphic on the tapestry emphasizes the mechanical aspect of industrial engineering, which Edwards uses in his sculpture-assemblages. The designs and colorful patterns on these two tapestries, in particular, also create a dialogue over centuries with the "ancestral-modernism" found in the cut-outs and *appliqué* imagery from Ivory Coast, Ghana and Benin, all the way to Haïti.

This year, Melvin Edwards is working on his third tapestry. Before leaving Senegal in a few days, he will meet with the team at the tapestry factory to finalize the drawing that has been enlarged to the final size of the tapestry, approximately ten feet long and eight feet high. He will make any revisions and confirm the color palette. For this tapestry, the drawing is made out of Edwards' collage painting. His portrait of Jayne Cortez comes from a photo he did in Nigeria, in 1974; the chain imagery comes from a poster he did for his watercolor exhibition. Behind Cortez's silhouette, Edwards depicts chains, which he has incorporated into many sculptures and works on paper since the '60s. The chain is associated with the memory of slavery and human segregation, but also refers to the links between human beings and cultures. Here, they present a visual rhythm as well as a reminiscence of Cortez's pulse. You can imagine the beats and the clicking of the chains breaking and dangling. The colors are restricted to white, black, and fine shades of gray. It brings together the notion of strength, gentleness, and achievement. This outstanding work serves as Edwards' compelling homage to Jayne Cortez, the late poet, the spoken-word performer, the avant-garde musician, the activist, and to the woman and wife.



Point of Memory, 2005
Steel
Comptoirs des Fleuve Square,
Saint-Louis, Senegal

In 2012, Melvin Edwards and Jayne Cortez were named honorary citizens of the town of Saint-Louis, the former capital of Senegal. Edwards' sculptural tapestries and sculptural assemblages are vehicles that expose his "black consciousness" to both local and global audiences, impacting the collective consciousness. In 2010, Edwards presented the town of Saint-Louis with a sculpture, "Point of Memory" that involves the use of chain, chain-column and column of memory. The sculpture was put up in the Comptoirs des Fleuve Square on the banks of the Senegal River, not far from where the river mouth opens into the Atlantic. For Edwards the choice of site to display his public sculptures is crucial. He is attracted to places where there is an entrance or exit, into or from a country, a world or a community. For him:

In Saint-Louis, in Senegal, that was the place of exit for people to the Diaspora, to the Americas, to Alabama, Texas, North Carolina, to Santiago de Cuba, Havana, to Mexico, Salvador in Brazil. People came out of there, out of the Senegambia region.⁹

The columns indicate connections, a reciprocal relationship. They remind us that each place is different, because Africans came and contributed to the culture. For example, Edwards likes to tell a story of the famous poet Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784):

The high school I went to was named after her. At nine years old she was taken into slavery and brought to the Americas. She became fluent as a poet and very recognized. So, I and my poet wife came to Senegal, where Wheatley is from. It is a reciprocal relationship, because by now we come and go. In coming and going, these columns of memory, points of memory, are meant to do that.¹⁰

A second "Point of Memory" was displayed in Santiago de Cuba, in November 2013, in Parque de la Beneficiencia, a park located on one of the highest points in the city. The sculpture, which is nearly eighteen feet tall, was erected close to a colonial building where the first slaves were brought at the beginning of the Sixteenth Century. "Point of Memory" dominates the city and faces the setting sun over the Caribbean. Since 1981, the date of his first voyage to Cuba, Melvin Edwards has woven important

links to a global artistic community — the miniaturist Gilberto de la Nuez, the poet Nancy Morejón, the sculptor Alberto Lescay, the filmmaker Rigoberto López Pego, and many others. It was important for him to concretize this long friendship and pay tribute to his ancestors from Africa.

Each column is different in small details — different dimensions, one is more square than the other, more mechanical — but they exhibit the same concept. In both sculptures, the painted raw steel creates an earth-colored patina. While maintaining the same uncluttered shapes and sobriety, Edwards moves away from the curves and contours of previous sculptures. "Point of Memory" is a series of rectilinear artworks, each consist of a large rectangular metal plate, flanked by a thick broken chain. The sculptures stand up against the sky tracing an imaginary line towards a meeting point between two distant coastlines — in permanent conversation across oceans, due to their carefully selected placement, but also through their aesthetic and lyricism.

The location of his minimalist and conceptual outdoor sculptures is always meaningful, as is his practice of naming his sculptures after African languages or specific events, which allow him to create an ongoing dialogue between continents, cultures and communities. For Edwards, it is important that African languages stay alive and circulate around the world, to be part of the language of modern art on their own terms. His monumental sculpture-installation "Asafo Kra No" (1993) is on permanent display at the Utsu-kushi-ga-hara Open Air Museum in the Nagano region of Japan. Located on a plateau 2,000 meters above sea level and covering an area of 40,000 square meters, the space hosts about 400 international classic and modern sculptures. Edwards' artwork consists of three parts of painted steel aligned along a diagonal, a broken chain sits on top of a larger red piece; a yellow rocking piece that relates to his kinetic works and a plain blue disk is placed on each side.

With "Asafo Kra No" Melvin Edwards uses the Twi language — a tone language spoken mainly in Ghana — to bring us to a ritual space:

It connects to the traditional society in Ghana, the Asafo society, the organization of younger men who are responsible to defend the community. But the Asafo shrine complex is usually the architecture, a fortress combined with human figures and painted in symbolic or appropriate colors and pull libations. Or they can make it also for boats for the war. It is a ritualistic place. These days, it is a football team ritual."

In 1976-77, Edwards created "Homage to Billie Holiday and the Young Ones of Soweto" displayed at the Morgan State University in Baltimore. Edwards establishes a link between Holiday's extraordinary vocal aesthetic expression and the rebellion of black school children in Soweto, South Africa, against education imposed in Afrikaans — the language of the oppressor. These metaphors and linkages are part of a process of deconstruction of the *habitus* established by imperialism and displacements, which are transfixed in memory; something Edwards has been working on for decades.

Adama comes back with another glass of tea. She takes back the empty one. The second round is sweeter. Now, I can savor the sugar and mint as I drink in little sips. Slurping tea is recommended. It shows that you like it and are an insider. I stand up and look at some archival photos around the studio. One catches my attention. I am not sure about the location, but Melvin and Jayne are sitting in a courtyard. They are both wearing very elegant tunics tailor-made in a colorful wax fabric. I could never imagine them not looking stylish!



Melvin Edwards discovered art early in high school. He left Texas to study in California at the Los Angeles City College. A talented athlete, he then received a football scholarship in 1959-60 to attend the University of Southern California, where he obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1965 and met the Hungarian painter, Francis de Erdely, who became his mentor. He joined the Los Angeles County Art Institute, before going on to a prestigious career as a sculptor. Professor Edwards has had a distinguished 40-year long teaching career. In 2002, he retired from Rutgers University, where he taught sculpture, drawing and Third World artists for thirty years.

In 1960, Edwards exhibited his first sculpture "Metal Sound" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It was a class in welding that transformed his artistic choices and put him on the path to becoming a sculptor. Working in the vein of the sculptor, Julio Gonzalez, and exploring different techniques of welding, Edwards discovered his own artistic language. In 1965 he held his first solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in California. Since then, he has held more than twenty solo exhibitions and has participated in countless group exhibitions. He has been the recipient of numerous prestigious grants and prizes. He moved to New York in 1967, and two years later, he created his first large-scale public artwork — today situated at Cornell University — "Homage to my Father and the Spirit," a stainless steel assemblage-sculpture painted in red, blue, orange, and olive green.



Homage to My Father and the Spirit, 1969
Stainless steel and painted steel, 96" by 0.5"
Cornell University Herbert F. Johnson
Museum of Art Lawn Ithaca New York



Asafo Kra No, 1993
Painted steel in three parts



In 1970, Edwards was part of the Whitney Museum's series of solo shows, "Contemporary Black Artists in America" along with Alvin Loving, Malcom Bailey, Jacob Lawrence, Betye Saar, and Minnie Evans. His presentation at the Whitney Museum of American Art was the first ever by an African-American sculptor.¹² Black artists and historians criticized the project for being poorly publicized and ineffectively displayed.¹³ Nevertheless, Kellie Jones states:

All twelve exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art between 1969 and 1975 were groundbreaking. After thirty years without a commitment to exhibiting a substantial body of work by a single African American artist, the Whitney Museum seemed dedicated to changing its dismal record by offering eleven solos and one group show in an extremely condensed period of six years. The fact that more than half of these single-person shows featured the work of abstract artists reflected a key current in American art of the period, but it also suggests a commitment to a broader notion of black art during the 1960s and 1970s. 415

During that period, due to the Civil Rights movements, public art in the United States underwent radical change. It became a way for minorities to stake a claim and achieve recognition in the public realm. It was through tenacious combat that black communities managed to assert themselves in the mainstream American art world. Working on projects for public housing and universities since the late 1960s, Edwards has a longstanding dedication to public art. Each sculpture-assemblage or sculpture-installation relates to historical events, mythical figures or African culture. Among them, we can cite "Homage to Poet Léon-Gontran Damas"¹⁴ (1978), responding to the death of the eponymous poet, one of the founders of the Négritude movement and Edwards' friend; "Out of the Struggles of the Past to a Brilliant Future" (1982) — Mount Vernon Plaza, Columbus, Ohio — sponsored by The Mount Vernon Focal Point Park, marks efforts to revitalize the neighborhood; "Breaking the Chains" (1995), commissioned for Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive¹⁵ in San Diego, California; "Gate of Ogun"¹⁶ (1983) — Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York — clearly evokes a relationship to the God Yoruba Ogun, the god of iron and blacksmiths found in the religions of West Africa, Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, and South America. It represents strength and transformation.

As can be seen in "Confirmation" (1989), "Tomorrow's Wind"¹⁷ (1989-90) and "Passage" (1990), many of Edwards' monumental sculpture-installations have large apertures. These create doorways for the viewer to interact with the sculpture, to find his/her own path, have his/her own reflection and reconsider history. "Confirmation", a 12 feet-tall disk, arch and bent parallelogram welded together, faces the entrance of the Joseph P. Addabbo Federal Building in South Jamaica, Queens, a regional headquarters for the Social Security Administration. It relates to two events that Melvin Edwards considers as key moments in terms of progress and accomplishment. The first law giving Social Security coverage to American citizens was passed in 1935. "Confirmation" is also the title of the famous tune composed by the virtuoso saxophonist, Charlie Parker. In "Passage", installed in Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, New York, Edwards invokes educational passages and corridors. The artist invites the viewer to walk and reflect, re-interpreting the river passageways that carried the slave ships to Long Island.

Homage to Poet Léon-Gontran Damas, 1978-81
Welded steel, in five parts



Last year, Edwards was commissioned to produce a large-scale sculpture for the historic Vinegar Hill neighborhood¹⁸, in Charlottesville, Virginia. It will be installed at the Jefferson School City Center.

By addressing a large public, Edwards' large-scale works are a powerful vehicle for peace, respect and dialogue between people, as well as the enhancement of democracy. They cement our stories and reverberate beyond borders in a collective consciousness.

I am on the terrace when Adama arrives with a third tea glass.

"Mr. Melvin just arrived," she says.
"He will join you in a few minutes."

"Thank you," I respond, stretching out my arm to take the tea-glass.

For the last round, a nice foam still sits on top of the now pale green tea. The tea is lighter but extremely sweet and tickles my taste buds. The flavor of the fresh mint prevails. I hear Melvin's footsteps on the staircase. I re-enter the studio.

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COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK; STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON



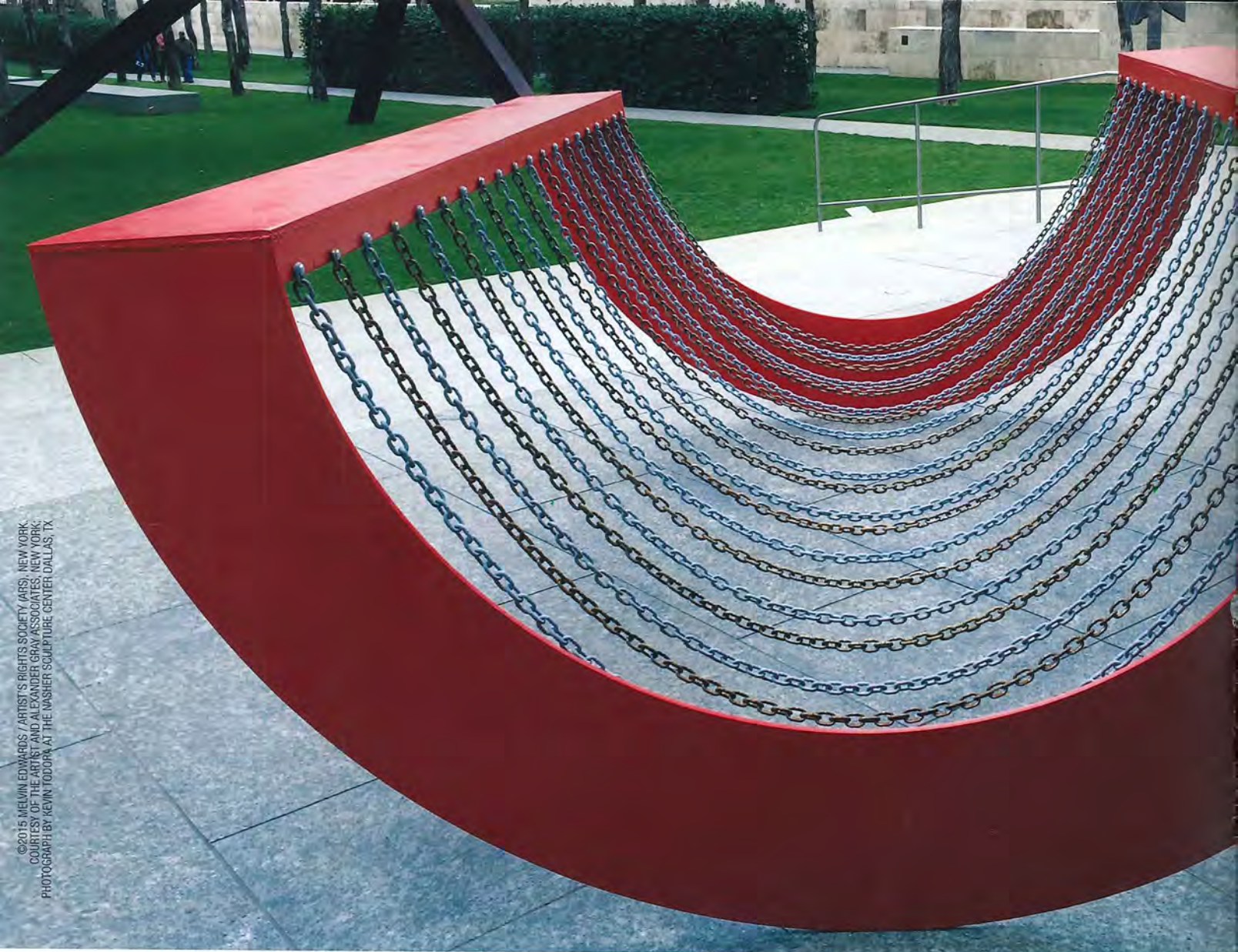
↑
Out of the Struggle, 1982

↑
Breaking the Chains, 1995
Stainless steel
Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Harbor Drive
& 2nd Street San Diego California

↑
Confirmation, 1989
Stainless steel
The Joseph P. Addabbo Federal Building
in South Jamaica, Queens

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COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK; STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON





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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK.
PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN TODORAK AT THE NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER, DALLAS, TX.

Epilogue

A few months later on 29 January 2015, I am blessed to be in Dallas for the opening of the retrospective *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades* presented by the Nasher Sculpture Center and curated by Catherine Craft (31 January 2015 – 10 May 2015). The exhibition features hanging artworks from his *Lynch Fragment* and *Disk* series, mid-size and large-scale sculptures including the recreation of the barber wired installations displayed at the Whitney Museum in 1970, maquettes reflecting his long career as a public sculptor, rarely seen drawings, and a selection of his sketchbooks. The exhibition comes with a richly illustrated scholarly catalogue.

Besides discovering and re-discovering Edwards' artwork, it was stirring to see the original "Homage to Coco." Made in 1970, it was the first in the kinetic series, *Rockers*. Edwards was inspired for this medium-size piece by the geometry of his grandmother Cora's oak Mission rocking chair, which he would go on to explore in several sculptures and paper works. Edwards also used the chain for the first time in this piece. Depending on the wind, the clinking of chains accompanies the chair's rocking, transforming "Homage to Coco" into an aural piece. For the retrospective, it has been restored to its original shiny carmine red and displayed outside on the terrace in the company of sculptures by major artists like Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, Richard Serra, and Mark di Suvero.



Homage to Coco, 1970
Painted steel and chain
48" by 96" by 120"

Lydie Diakhaté



Melvin Edwards is a prolific sculptor. He put in place an aesthetic language that denounces oppression and discrimination and celebrates liberty, respect and fraternity. Broadly exhibited, his work also inspires a younger generation of African-American artists. Displayed in public spaces from New York to Baltimore in the United States, passing through Saint-Louis in Senegal, Santiago in Cuba, and the Utsukushi-ga-hara Highlands in Japan, Melvin Edwards' large-scale sculptures link individuals, cities and continents. His monumental sculptures serve as markers in an urban landscape.

They are beacons that trace the path taken by the artist over the course of more than five decades and illustrate the transnational journey of his black consciousness. Edwards' public artworks are points of reference that revive our memories, give us strength, and remind us that if social change is possible, it remains an everyday commitment. ■

NOTES

- 1 The most famous Senegalese dish of fish, tomato, rice and vegetables.
- 2 Melvin Edwards in conversation with the author. New York, April 2014.
- 3 Extract from the film "Some Bright Morning: The Art of Melvin Edwards" by Lydie Diakhaté (49min., USA/France, 2016).
- 4 Melvin Edwards in conversation with the author. Dakar, March 2014.
- 5 Diawara, Manthia and Lydie Diakhaté. 'A Conversation with Melvin Edwards' *NKA*, Spring 2012, 127.
- 6 See Sharon F Patton. *African-American Art*. Oxford UP, 1998. 224.
- 7 Diawara, Manthia and Lydie Diakhaté. 'A Conversation with Melvin Edwards' *NKA*, Spring 2012, 120.
- 8 Melvin Edwards in conversation with the author. Dakar, March 2014.
- 9 Melvin Edwards in conversation with the author. Dakar, March 2014.
- 10 Melvin Edwards in conversation with the author. Dakar, March 2014.
- 11 Melvin Edwards in conversation with the author. New York, April 2014.
- 12 For his solo exhibition, Edwards showcased site-specific sculptures made of barbed wire and chains, strung in transparent planes. Preserved only in installation photographs, these site-specific sculptures have been re-created for the first time in forty-five years for his *Five Decades* retrospective, presented by the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas (31 January 2015 – 10 May 2015).
- 13 See Kellie Jones, 415; Michael Brenson, *BOMB Magazine*; and Catherine Craft's interview with the artist (41-42) and essay (20-23).
- 14 The work uses large naked discs of steel, representing blank pages ready to receive a poem. The concept comes from a sculpture that Edwards was to produce for Damas, for his house in Cayenne. Cayenne being situated on the most easterly part of South America, the sculpture would have faced the continent of Africa. It celebrates also the transition of life. It has been on display for the first time at the Studio Museum, in New York, in the spring of 1978.
- 15 Edwards chose to install his sculpture next to a quote from the charismatic pastor: "Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives."
- 16 It has been exhibited at The White House in 1998.
- 17 Located in Thomas Jefferson Park, East Harlem, New York.
- 18 Vinegar Hill was a thriving African-American neighborhood, until it was destroyed for economic development in the 1960s.

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