

Art

At Last, Melvin Edwards's Steel Abstractions Come to City Hall Park

The outcome of decades-long dialogues between Edwards and Public Art Fund, "Brighter Days" is bound to transform what we imagine possible with monuments.



by Alexandra M. Thomas
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Melvin Edwards, "Homage to Coco" (1970), painted steel and chain, 48h x 96w x 120d inches (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Starting May 4, *Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days*, a landmark survey of the artist's work from 1970 to 2020, will fill the lawns and walkways of New York's City Hall Park. Organized by Public Art Fund, the show will introduce the public to rarely exhibited large-scale sculptures made by Edwards, who is best known for his [Lynch](#)

Fragments, a smaller-scale series of welded, abstract sculptures that reflect histories of racial terror.

Amid the rebellions of the '60s and '70s, Edwards pioneered a sculptural language that blended politics and abstraction. Now, during another moment of uprising, his works will be installed in the Financial District park — a space haunted by its history as the burial ground of thousands of enslaved and free Africans.



Melvin Edwards, "Song of the Broken Chains" (2020), stainless steel, 3 sections (approximate): Section 1: 48h x 144w inches; section 2: 96h x 48w inches; section 3: 48h x 96w inches; overall dimensions (approximate): 96h x 216w x 144d inches (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

The exhibition is the outcome of decades-long dialogues between Edwards and Public Art Fund. Originally set for 2020, the show was postponed until this year in solidarity with Black Lives Matter protests against systemic racism, held at City Hall, and in observance of COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. Once completely installed, the exhibition is bound to expand our understanding of Edwards's work and transform what we imagine possible with monuments.

Each work has been realized in Edwards's signature steelwork style: he imbues sculptural abstraction with the material traditions and politics of the Black diaspora. The earliest included, "Homage to Coco" (1970) evokes the artist's grandmother's rocking chair and notions of Black domesticity, as well as the brutality associated

with steel chains. Perhaps another interpretation of the suspended chain design could point to the strength of familial and communal connection, which is ultimately broken down and left open-ended in the newly commissioned work, “Song of the Broken Chains” (2020). Alternatively, the huge, unfastened links might evoke a sense of freedom.

The four other works assembled, from the ‘80s and ‘90s, display the artist’s prowess in sculpting intricate, abstract forms into steel. Remitting the familiar notion of monuments as an homage to an individual person or event, Edwards’s towering sculptures are inspired by the connective tissues of Black diasporic communities.



Melvin Edwards, “Ukpo. Edo” (1992/1996; signed and dated), stainless steel; overall: 38.5h x 101w x 58.5d inches; chain element: 26h x 30w x 58.5d inches, circle element: 38.5h x 34w x 52d inches (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

“Edwards made the decision in 2020 to title the exhibition *Brighter Days*,” explained curator Daniel S. Palmer, “it illustrates a story of resilience and overcoming obstacles while highlighting bonds of connection.” To brighter days indeed.

Melvin Edwards: *Brighter Days opens May 4 at City Hall Park (Broadway & Chambers Street, Lower Manhattan) and will continue through November 28. The exhibition is curated by Daniel S. Palmer.*