

Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days opens June 1st at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum

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Melvin Edwards, "Song of the Broken Chains", 2020

deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum announces its newest outdoor exhibition, *Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days*, opening to the public on June 1st, 2022 and on view through May 8th, 2023. *Brighter Days* showcases six monumental, abstract sculptures by the acclaimed contemporary artist Melvin Edwards (b. 1937). This traveling exhibition, first organized by the New York City based nonprofit Public Art Fund for City Hall Park in 2021 ([link](#)), constitutes Edwards' first thematic survey of outdoor sculptures.

Shown across the two front main lawns at deCordova, the exhibition offers a focused look at Edwards' accomplishments in large-scale sculpture and public art through five sculptures from 1970 to 1996, and a sixth commissioned in 2020 for *Brighter Days*. These six works elaborate on his examination of race, identity, and the African diaspora, and feature his signature use of abstract, representational icons like chains. To the artist, the chain possesses numerous meanings, ranging from its function as a "welded rope" for pulling, its use for bondage and constraints, as well as its more metaphorical association to linkage and connectivity. In the words of the artist:



Melvin Edwards, "Homage to Coco", 1970

“The idea of making chains, originally, was to make a stronger and more flexible rope to connect things. Often when people talk to an artist of African American descent, they presume chains have to do with slavery. That’s a limited idea of the chains. I don’t say it’s not there, because it is, but it doesn’t start there.”

By manipulating the chain’s rendering, whether by fragmenting or breaking its links, Edwards offers nuanced interpretations of the form. This motif is seen throughout all six sculptures, ranging from the earliest work *Homage to Coco* (1970) to the newest commissioned piece *Song of the Broken Chains* (2020). In reimagining and recontextualizing the chain, Edwards addresses the metal object’s historical association to slavery and violence, while simultaneously noting its relation to liberation and connection.

Two sculptures featured in the exhibition also embrace Edwards' exploration of the rocker motif. Inspired by the rocking chair of his grandmother Cora, whom Edwards nicknamed *Coco*, *Homage to Coco* marks the artist's first venture into his "rocker" series. It features a red steel curved frame with suspended chains, offering the illusion of back and forth, swaying motions. This rocker, along with *Before Words* (1990), is imbued with personal symbolism, yet alludes to communal collective practices, particularly the ways in which culture disseminates in domestic spaces and often through storytelling.

"Melvin Edwards is peerless in his ability to evoke deeply resonant conversation through abstract sculpture. His use of the chain motif across nearly five decades of work is evidence of his enduring brilliance," states Jessica May, Artistic Director, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, and Managing Director, Art and Exhibitions at The Trustees. "All of us at the deCordova are honored to showcase *Brighter Days*."

Public Art Fund Adjunct Curator Daniel S. Palmer, original curator of the exhibition, elaborated stating "Edwards has chosen to title the exhibition *Brighter Days*, suggesting that while we remain mindful of the past, we must also look to the future with optimism." All at once, *Brighter Days* opens doors for mutual understanding, inspires contemplation of our history, while encouraging resiliency, overcoming, and connection.

Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days was originally presented by Public Art Fund in New York City at City Hall Park, from May 4, 2021 – November 28, 2021. Exhibition funding generously provided by donors to the Sculpture Park Endowment Fund.

Images: Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London © 2021 Melvin Edwards/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Presented by Public Art Fund at City Hall Park, New York City, May 4 to November 28, 2021. Photo: Nicholas Knight, Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY

About the artist

A pioneer of abstract sculpture, Houston-born Melvin Edwards began his career in the 1960s after studying at the University of Southern California. Edwards gained notoriety from his first solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1965, where he uniquely blurred abstraction and symbolism to comment on social justice issues – an approach distinct from his Minimalist and Post-Modernist contemporaries. At this time, he initiated his renowned, ongoing body of work *Lynch Fragments*, a sculpture series investigating themes of racial violence, anti-war protest, and Edwards' connections to Africa. Shortly thereafter, he exhibited at the Studio Museum of Harlem in 1969, and by 1970, became the first African American sculptor with a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Edwards has produced over 20 public works throughout his career for universities, public housing projects, and museums. Now living and working across multiple studios in two states and Senegal, Melvin Edwards continues to be a leading voice in sculpture, exhibiting nationally and internationally.

Related exhibition programming

To welcome visitors to *Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days* and view new additions to the Sculpture Park, deCordova will host a Lincoln town-wide open house and offer outdoor curatorial tours on Sun., June 5th. DeCordova will also be holding an "African American Read-In" on Sun., June 19th from 12:00PM to 2:30PM to honor Juneteenth and the literary influences on Edwards' works. This celebratory, reflective program will include poetry recitations by Boston Poet Laureate Porsha Olayiwola and musical performances. On Fri. August 19th, Melvin Edwards and Public Art Fund Adjunct Curator Daniel S. Palmer will be in conversation at deCordova to discuss *Brighter Days*. Learn more at thetrustees.org/brighterdays.