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## ART: MELVIN EDWARDS

# Steelyard Blues

### A Black sculptor wins recognition

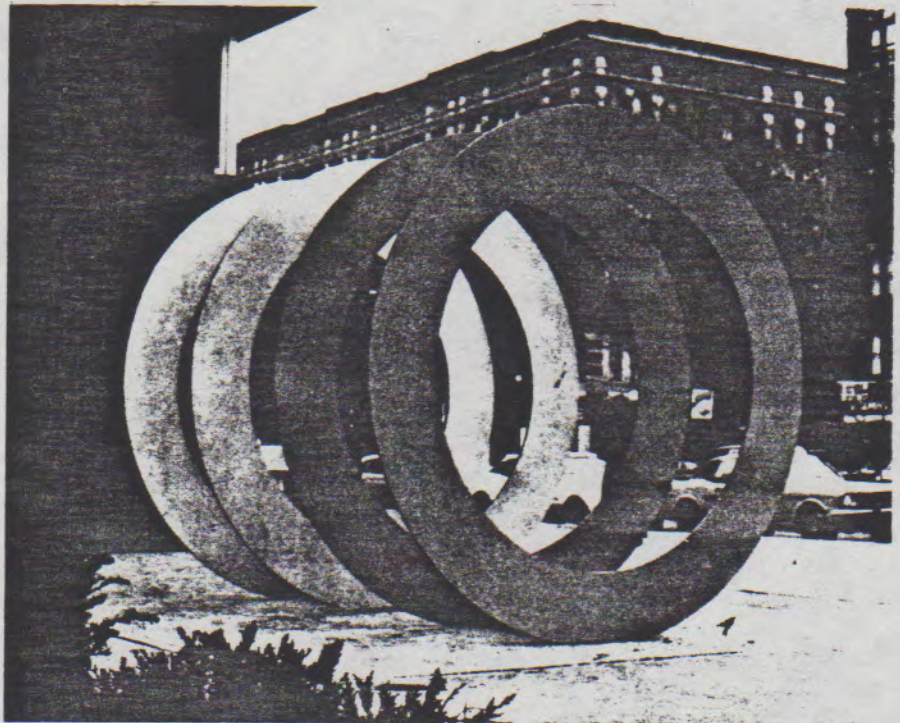


Melvin Edwards

by April Kingsley

BY NOW IT IS OBVIOUS TO everyone that African sculpture was a major factor in bringing about the revolution we call Modern Art. But less well known is the fact that the work of one Black sculptor in America today—Melvin Edwards—is central to the latest “revolution” in art—the fusion of Modernism and ethnic cultural traditions. Edwards is the major Black sculptor of this movement, which is not, however, limited to Black artists; Hispanic, Native, Oriental, and various Euro-Americans are also involved. Nevertheless, it is the most important recent development in Black Art. No longer content with acceptance into the White mainstream, Black artists have come to see during the last decade that they can express their pride in their cultural heritage as African-Americans without compromising their work in terms of generally accepted standards of quality by making this Modernist/Ethnic fusion. Edwards’ many visits to Africa, combined with his long-held, profound belief that African-American artists “must make works that use our lives and our feelings as their basis for existence,” put him at the forefront of this movement at its inception and have kept him at its head.

From the time of his beginnings as an artist—just after his student days at the University of Southern California and before the Watts riots—Edwards has used his life as a Black American



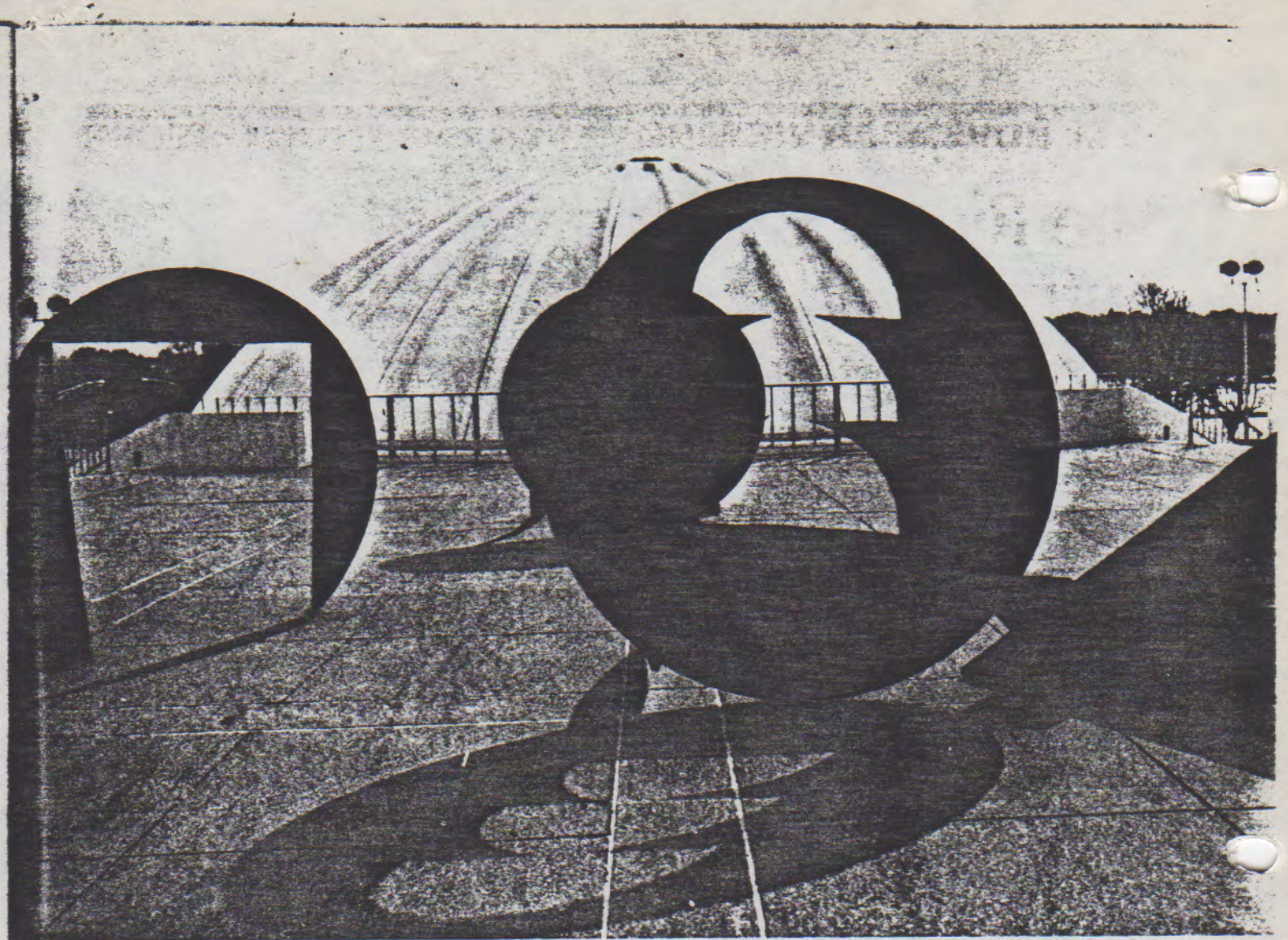
Harlem Double Circles (1970)

as the content of his art. He uses materials with brutalist connotations such as iron and steel, barbed wire and chain that refer directly or indirectly to enslavement, incarceration, and man’s “inhumanity of other men” in works that are straight forwardly Modern. The dramatically crunched-up “found” materials that look like the residue of a car crash in (August) “The Squared Fire” of 1965, for instance, are held in careful suspension between the rectangular bars of a very stable looking “window” frame. The early barbed wire pieces, such as the double pyramid structures in his 1970 Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition, were geometrical drawings in space that you couldn’t run your hand along without hurting yourself. The contradiction between the real-life meanings of the materials he uses and the sensuous and intellectual art he makes out of them creates a shock in the viewer that is a little like a punch in the gut—it gets one’s attention.

As one can see in such large scale

works as “Mt. Vernon” and “Homage to Billie Holliday and the Young Ones of Soweto,” African architecture has had a strong effect on him ever since his first trip to that continent in 1970. One may walk around, on, into or through many of Edwards’ sculptures, a fact which imparts to them their strongly architectural quality. One feels safe within their bounds and honored passing through their portals; one may even feel a part of some imagined ceremony in them. They are all made of dark, oiled steel and have a commanding, even awesome, presence. “Dancing in Nigeria” is an exception; it was an early response to the more playful or improvisational aspects of African architecture and he chose to paint it a bright, cheerful yellow.

The fact or intimation of movement is just another way of involving people with the work. For Edwards and other aware and committed Black artists it has never been enough to simply make good, white-Art-World, mainstream



Homage to Billie Holiday (1976-77)

art; they also want to make art that will mean something more to their people than its mere acceptance by the establishment. Edwards dedicated his pieces to Black heroes and heroines; he pays homage to significant events in current Black history with his titles; and he pays his personal debt to teachers, friends and—most importantly—family by making monuments to them. His way may not be as obvious as painting their portraits, but it's one way an abstractionist can work to close the gap between artist and audience. Mel Edwards may look like a jovial football player, and chuckles may punctuate his sentences the way pauses do most poetry, but he is a sternly moral man, passionately committed to the cause of Black and oppressed people. His determination to make art that is of and for his people has the same kind of tensile strength as the steel he uses to make that art. □

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