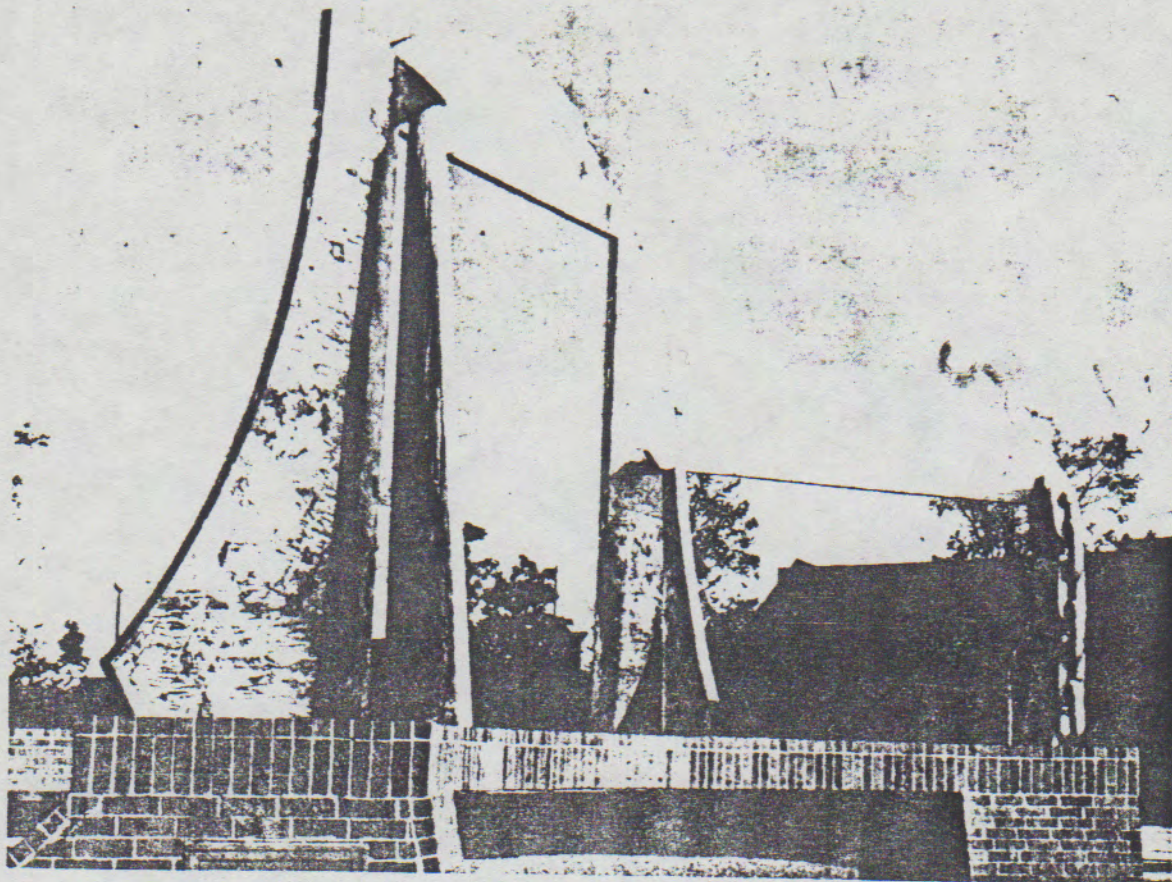


DIALOGUE

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Mel Edwards, Untitled, 1982, Mt. Vernon Plaza, Columbus, steel.

Mel Edwards's *Poetics*

By Jeanne Fryer-Kohles

Mel Edwards' Mt. Vernon sculpture has been referred to as a focal point for that environment, a piece ostensibly meant to embody the classic Black theme of identity, its past and future. Before discussing Mr. Edwards' interpretation of this theme, it is necessary to recognize the exertion of will by a network of people determined to cap the Mt. Vernon enterprise with a monumental work by an artist whose work would reflect the distinctive character of that community. Their efforts represent a mature grasp of the role of public sculpture: that shared values be affirmed and accessible to the community being served.

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Their choice, Mel Edwards, is a Black artist of national reputation, now in mid-career. He has made eight pilgrimages to Africa within the past ten years and is more convinced than ever of art's transcultural nature. This awareness permeates Edwards' work, giving it an anchor in history on both a broad and personal level. According to the artist, it is part of a cycle that includes the 1969 *Homage to My Father and the Spirit*, presently in the collection of the Herbert Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University.

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The Mt. Vernon sculpture pays tribute to the importance, in Black culture, of the community as extended family and religion as a galvanizing force. It also exemplifies that culture's need to participate fully in American society. Built of steel, it is an economic assembly of abstract shapes, relieved only by a hanging chain. The sculpture's placement in a newly completed plaza seems, at first, to declare an allegiance to the spirit of entrepreneurial pride, that is, a belief in initiative and the alluring possibilities of the future. The sculpture also seems to pose as a kind of seal, the imprimatur thought necessary to add official lustre or authority to the plaza site. But the sculpture eludes these definitions and even transcends its Janus-like symbolism, simultaneously referring to the future and the past, by its felicitous placement and its own stylistic history, a combination of African and American sources. The work's rather slender profile, its adherence to a planar, nearly two-dimensional aspect, suggests an ideal, frontal viewing position on the opposite side of a sunken fountain. From that position, one can visually appreciate the manner in which Edwards connects the plaza complex with a distant view of the neighborhood. The sculpture's large and small portals incorporate views of an older home and two church buildings, symbols of home and God, which are active components in the sculpture's meaning.

As one turns 180 degrees from the "ideal" viewing position, the work's meaning as a gate or link becomes apparent. From this new vantage point that now incorporates a dual pathway, one can recognize the expansion of the sculpture's symbolic sweep into the neighborhood. The deliberate inclusion of these surroundings acclaims the present in all its immediacy and tangibility and breaks the mold of duality, the abstractions of past and future. Yet the past, here symbolized by the chain, is effectively presented: the chain no longer binds or restricts but is positioned vertically, placed to one side of the sculpture, thereby transforming its meaning of enslavement to that of a higher order: the chain has become a spine, upright and potentially active.

The choice of a brushed steel surface for the entire piece (one of the stylistic references to David Smith) is more than a practical one. It is also the means by which light, glistening and refracted, is made to work on the sculpture's behalf by enabling it to seize the colors of earth and sky in a symbolic embrace, not only for its own animation but as a declaration of possibilities that quicken the classic Black motives, presenting them as a poetic moment in an otherwise practical setting.

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