

ART

Sculpture, Drawings and Paintings, Too

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

THE sculptor Mel Edwards made news last month when his "Holder of the Light," a 12-foot-tall work in stainless steel, was unveiled in Lafayette Gardens, on Grand Street in Jersey City.

Commissioned by the Jersey City Tenants Affairs Board with Federal and local grants, the sculpture comprises a large disk mounted on one curving support buttressed by another. Cascading from its underside are three smaller geometric forms and a single zigzagging shape.

To celebrate the installation, which is part of the local Housing Authority's modernization project, the Jersey City Museum has mounted a small show of Mr. Edwards's drawings and maquettes. It will continue through Aug. 23.

Some of these items pertain to the new piece, others to monumental sculptures at a plaza in Columbus, Ohio, and the campus of Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina.

Meanwhile, at the Robeson Center Gallery at Rutgers-Newark, a selection of Mr. Edwards's small works in welded steel is on view, together with an exhibition of paintings by George McNeil. This show continues through Sept. 13.

A professor of art at Rutgers's Mason Gross School in New Brunswick, Mr. Edwards has two distinct

artistic personalities. The more conventional of them is apparent in the monumental pieces, which derive from the work of the late David Smith; the other is in the drawings, especially when they are done in a thick brush line.

There is a vigor and a sense of commitment in the drawings that recall African sculpture. Two studies for "Holder of the Light" can actually be read as squat, totemic figures.

The drawings, nevertheless, are no preparation for the force unleashed in the Newark show, which is entitled "Lynch Fragment Series" and spans the last 10 years.

Working with found objects, including hammers, nooks, bolts, spikes, chains, clamps and the occasional large-caliber bullet, Mr. Edwards welded them into compact square masses averaging 12 to 18 inches across.

The sculptures hang close together at eye level, running in an unbroken line around the walls of the small gallery. They could almost be medieval torture instruments, except that there is no sign of romanticism on them.

On the contrary, they protrude from the walls, seemingly lubricated and ready for action, some with titles that allude to Grenada, South Africa and Paul Robeson.

This Expressionism comes from an artist with something to express, but it makes the skin crawl. David Smith

serves as a pattern for Mr. Edwards's public sculpture, but in these vast, superior works he becomes the technical means to a very powerful, emotional end.

Not that Mr. McNeil's Expressionism is not also impressive, but its source seems to be passion for the act of painting, which naturally makes it easier to live with.

For a recent 33-year survey of his work at Artist's Choice Museum in New York, Mr. McNeil wrote a catalogue statement, "One Man's Expressionism," in which he explained that he came to the mode through "the back door" of 19th-century English watercolors.

"Thus by the greatest luck," he wrote, "I learned at an early age to paint vigorously and freely in response to my feelings," as opposed to taking the normal art school route of "copying" the antique and figures.

As a result of this unorthodox beginning, Mr. McNeil was able to encompass Cezanne, Matisse and the Abstract Expressionist teachings of Hans Hofmann without giving their contradictions a second thought.

Evidently, Mr. McNeil's own contribution has always been semifigurative, not unlike those of Cobra, a group of Expressionists who emerged in Europe after World War II. It also has intimations of Dubuffet, whose "art brut" was derived from the drawings of children and the insane.

Labeled "landscape abstractions" and "abstract scenes" for the most

part, the Robeson Center Gallery work seems nonobjective at first glance, on a few rectangular panels of various forms that seem to be speeding through space.

The paint is the thing. Drained of its oil vehicle, it is applied in twisted ribbons of impasto, scumbled thin over thick, dribbled and splashed. Pentimenti abound, and so do passages that look like crumpled cloth.

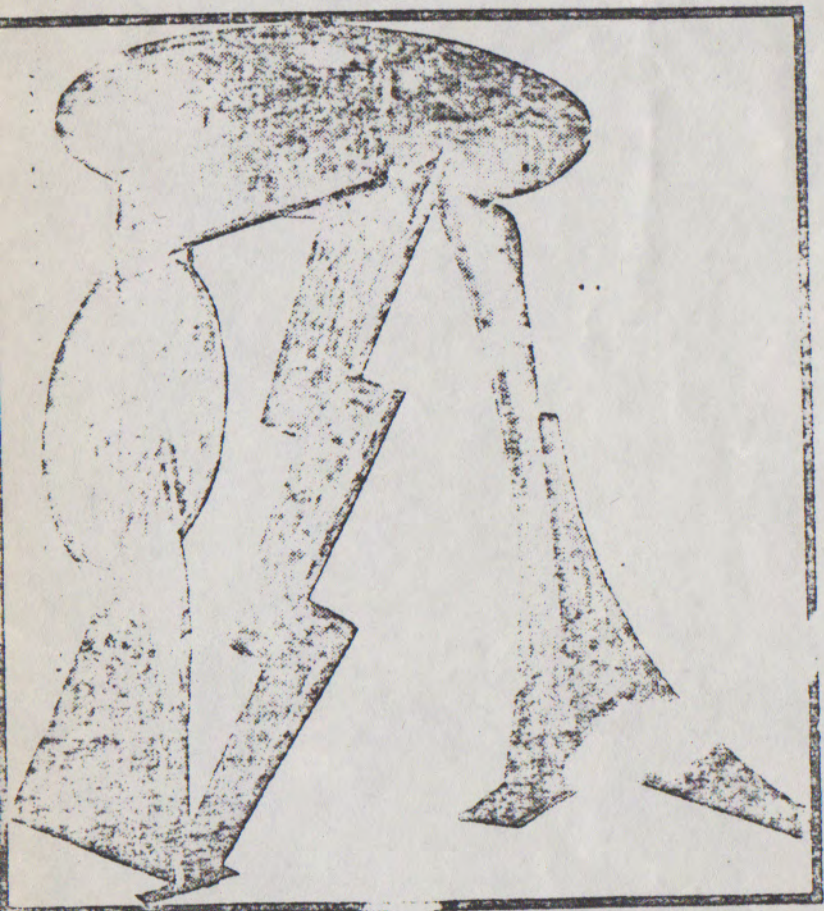
Eventually, recognizable forms emerge. These include the houses in "Earth-Air Abstraction No. 2," above which floats a huge mass roughly striped in lemon and blue that could be a cloud, and the oval part of "West Athens Landscape" that seems to be giving onto a view of a building facade.

Mr. McNeil handles his paint like an automatist. However, he chooses his colors like a German fauvist, using a lot of them and savoring juxtapositions such as blue and yellow orange and green.

This is heady stuff from an artist who, born in 1903, was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists, saw action in the Work Progress Administration's Ease Division and for many years was an influential teacher at Pratt Institute.

Had he not remained true to nature in his fashion, Mr. McNeil might have made it as a major Abstract Expressionist.

As it is, his painting is returning to the incoming tide of figurative Expressionism, which only goes to show



"Holder of the Light," by Mel Edwards

how right he was when he said:
"If you make a mistake in art and
carry it far enough, it works for you."
The Jersey City Museum is at the

corner of Jersey Avenue and Mont-
gomery Street, and the Robeson Gal-
lery is at 350 Dr. Martin Luther King
Boulevard.