

AMONG US

Heavy Metal

New Jersey
Sculptors Melvin
Edwards and
Robert Cooke
Bring Life to Steel
and Bronze

By Nora Odendahl

A group of barracks-like metal buildings lies at the edge of Rutgers University's Livingston College campus. Outside one building are multicolored bales of garbage (for the study of recycling), and outside another are some large, rusting steel shapes—a clue that the unaesthetic structure actually houses the college's sculpture studios. Here two sculptors, both professors at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, have worked side by side for many years. But as a recent joint exhibit demonstrated, these two artists have markedly different styles, the one public and the other introspective; and different imagery, the one quasi-mechanical and the other organic.

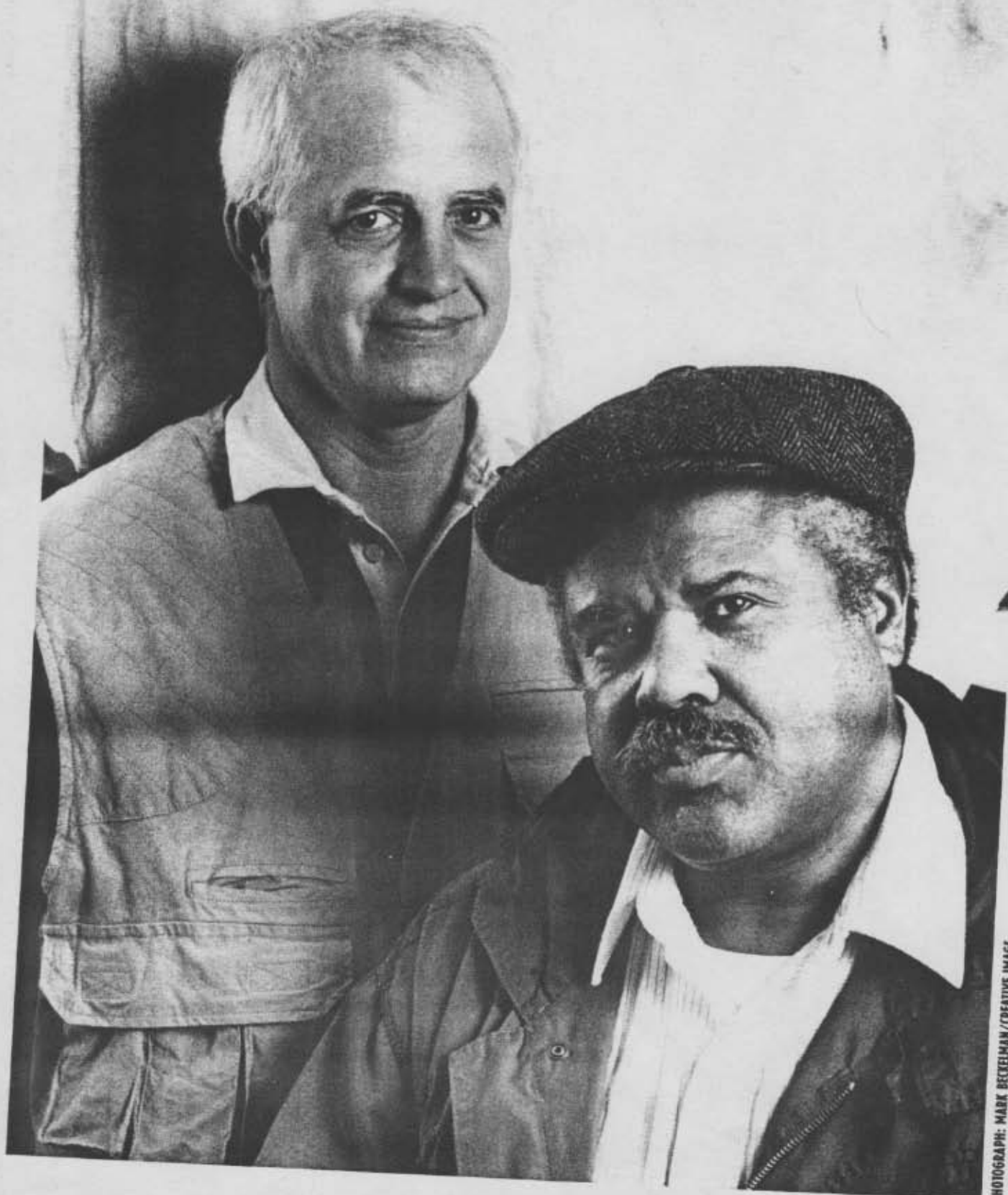
Sculptor Melvin Edwards, who has taught at Rutgers since 1972, creates both monumental and small-scale steel pieces that combine abstract expressionism with African-American political themes. Robert Cooke, at Rutgers since 1971, is currently working in bronze with forms based on nature. He says that although the two sculptors do not influence each other stylistically, they do offer each other "a generous sharing of information that is political, social, artistic, and an openness to a lot of the cultural forces

that make an individual what he or she is." In separate interviews, the two sculptors talked about their works in "Steel and Bronze," a show arranged by the Princeton Gallery of Fine Art and held at New York City's Pyramid Gallery.

Melvin Edwards

On the shelves of Mel Edwards's studio are boxes and jars of sculpting tools and paintbrushes, as well as busts and small clay pieces; on the floor are lengths of barbed wire that look like trailing vines and some steel sculptures that rock on C-shaped plates; on the walls are a couple of animal skulls and, below an African mask, a welder's mask. Edwards first became interested in welding while he was a student at the University of Southern California, from which he received a B.F.A. in 1965. When he moved to New York in 1967, the minimalist style predominated, and Edwards liked its "movement to a larger scale as a general approach to sculpture." He himself made environmental pieces, connected with rods and chains, that "activated the space" of a room.

At the same time, though, he was working on what would become an open-ended series of small-sized



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relief sculptures, examples of which appeared in the Pyramid Gallery show as well as in this year's "Traditions and Transformations" show at the Bronx Museum. Edwards says that since beginning the *Lynch Fragments* series, he stopped it, "but it came back—twice." These sculptures are black-painted, densely massed assemblages of shapes that sometimes are, or appear to be, objects such as chains, hammers, spikes, pipes, knives, bolts, and hooks. As in Edwards's other ongoing series, *Rockers*, many of the pieces have titles drawn from the artist's frequent visits to Africa. *Chitunquiza* (1989), for example, is named after a suburb of Harare, the Zimbabwe capital, where Edwards met a number of artists; and *Always Umoya* (1985) after the Zimbabwe word for wind, or the spirit.

New York Times art critic Michael Brenson has described some of the *Lynch Fragments* as containing "the tools of oppression," and as being "inspired by African masks and their ability to express powerful feelings of fear, violence, vigilance, sexuality, and play." But Edwards himself sees this interpretation as only a partial one; as he says, "I like to play with dualities."

For example, says the sculptor, "the metaphors with chain are multiple, not just slavery. Chains are links, connections, chains of loves, if you will. In traditional blacksmith work, in African terms, to be able to make a chain is a certain kind of skill. The chain is a metal rope, and I'm a metal worker." Edwards's own heritage emphasizes the idea of "links"—long after becoming a sculptor, he found out that one of his ancestors had been a blacksmith brought to America as a slave. Edwards points out that chains, hammers, hatchets, and so on are forms that exist in an everyday context, but their meanings change in his sculpture's context, which "is closer to a poetic order." He adds, "But don't make any mistake. I've titled the whole group *Lynch Fragments*. Lynching is a destructive human practice, and the way African Americans know it is in racial terms."

The sculptor of the *Lynch Fragments* says that although these pieces are not based on African masks, they do have an affinity with African sculpture. He recalls that as a student in a class on Renaissance art, he often

sketched an African figural sculpture that sat by the lectern. For Edwards, the sculpture's exaggerated muscular form and facial expression "added up to something that was strong, and I think I always wanted sculpture to be that, no matter what it is about."

Edwards, who has always worked in the abstract mode, points out that traditional African sculptors "seemed to be concerned to a significant extent with abstracting—isolating, abstracting, recomposing so that things aren't where you expect them to be or how you expect them to be." He admires "the plasticity, the freedom of sculptural composition and innovation that the traditional African artist seemed to take with very given kinds of forms—the figure, symbols, anything." In Edwards's own work, too, the viewer has to see abstracted shapes as something new. Edwards says that his sculpture is based "on improvisation and a sense of the ability to handle steel in many ways. The forms that you see may not at all be the forms in which they were found."

Working on *Lynch Fragments* has been a way for Edwards to bring together politics and art. On one level, the titles of his works refer to specific events and people. For example, *Palmares* (1988) is the name of an independent Brazilian colony maintained by runaway slaves during the late 17th century (Brazil celebrated the centennial of its slaves' emancipation in 1988). Edwards readily agrees that liberty is a theme in his work, and adds, "It's a theme in my life."

Yet, as Edwards talks about the sculpture *Aginanagin* (1980), he explains that he equates the political with the creative on a deeper level, "not just a game of this party versus that party. The politics of being creative in the world rather than destructive is significant." As the sculpture's title suggests, "sometimes you think there is progress, then you realize you have to do it again. I think it has to do with the perennial nature of life, and the perennial nature of opposition. For an artist, even if you finish something good that you're very happy with, you've got to start again—and again. It's true in all

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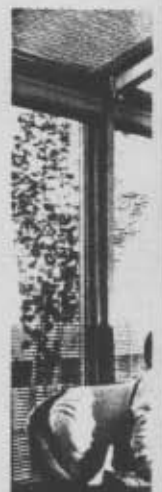
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spheres of life." In these ways the artist sees Lynch Fragments as works of both self-expression and collective expression.

The Rockers series, ongoing since 1970, originated in a more personal way. As Edwards thought about introducing movement into his sculptures, he happened to remember his grandmother's rocking chair, which had been in his childhood home in Houston for many years, and on which he had once injured himself while playing. Working with the idea of rocking and of balance, Edwards has made pieces that move differently, with differently sized rocker units or differently placed weights. He mentions one rocker called *Conversation with Norman Lewis*, dedicated to a painter friend: "A conversation with Norman was very one-sided. So one side rocked and the other didn't—or one talked and the other didn't."

In addition to his small- and medium-scale works, Edwards has continued to make large abstract sculptures, often in the polished stainless steel that he chooses for its "light-modulating qualities." Recently installed near the library at Livingston College in Piscataway is *Education is an Open Book* (1988), a 14-foot-high work in gleaming stainless steel, positioned so that sunlight will reflect off the planes of a "book."

That sculpture is appropriate also for Edwards's work at Rutgers as a teacher of sculpture and lecturer on third-world art. Edwards tries to make his students open to more than their own immediate culture. This openness to other ways of perception—in a sense to other "languages"—is ultimately both cultural and aesthetic. "I didn't invent sculpture, but I reinvent it as I go along, each time," Edwards remarks. "As a modern artist, you work on the invention of an independent language, your own language of forms and symbols. Everybody else has to learn that language from you."

Robert Cooke

Unlike Mel Edwards, Robert Cooke has been moving away from abstraction toward a representational, although highly styl-

ized, sculpture. The works in the Pyramid Gallery show, all done during 1988, are variations on the idea of birds perched in branches or on tree fragments. Cooke had done a bird-in-tree sculpture in 1979, and pulling it off the shelf at the beginning of last year prompted him to develop the theme more thoroughly, in part by drawing on experiences of his youth and childhood. These cast-bronze pieces are one-of-a-kind, with carefully modulated patinas and with surface markings reminiscent of the hieroglyph-like scratches in Paul Klee's paintings.

Cooke says that nature has always been an important theme for him but that he downplayed it in the past. "I would make an effort to distill some of those points of reference out of the work, and to deal with large freestanding abstract sculptures," he recalls. "I found them successful but difficult and labored; there was a lot of effort at proving that I was thoughtful and intelligent. At one point, around ten years ago, I realized it wasn't necessary and I found a way of playfulness more appropriate."

A decade ago, Cooke also began to move from working in clay to casting in bronze. As a graduate student at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, from which he received his M.F.A. in 1969, Cooke had studied ceramics. He continued to sculpt in clay afterward, and still make busts and animal figures in this more "responsive" material.

Cooke does not want the viewer of his sculptures to be "conscious of techniques of the artist's hands throughout the work." (He does most of his bronze casting himself, either at his studio or at the Johnson Atelier foundry in Mercerville.) Yet as the organic imagery suggests, an awareness of the sculpture as part of a process adds to the viewer's understanding.

The lost-wax method that Cooke uses begins with a wax model, which in the case of the bird-and-tree sculptures often includes actual pieces of wood or branches (and in general often has a plaster-based core, fixed in place by iron pins). Cooke explains that he draws on the warm wax model with a pointed



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for example, use the filled-in pouring cup as a base for the entire sculpture. In the case of *Two Bird Tree with Long Branch*, Cooke even reattached some cut-away channels in order to extend the composition.

Thus, the casting tree and the sculpted tree may become difficult to distinguish. Ambiguity of form is recurrent in these bronze sculptures, especially in the shapes of the birds and leaves. Some birds are three-dimensional, some are reliefs, some are flat slabs, and some are only drawn on the surface of the tree trunk. The relief, flat, and sketched birds, triangular in geometry, often resemble leaves, as if the animals were camouflaging themselves, or as if leaves could take wing from their branches. Moreover, Cooke points out that the branch-like composition *Good Morning* contains hints of the figurative, with its dunce cap and spoon-shaped "arm."

Cooke's other chief concern is with the sculptures' balance and massing. For example, *Two Bird Tree* is a "balance piece" with a bird perching on a diagonal branch, as if on a seesaw. *Black Bird in Comfort* places a bird inside a hollow trunk's space, which Cooke describes as "a shelter, a nesting place, protection." This sculpture, says Cooke, "has a real sense of volume, a ponderable mass, a sense of density. But as you move around the piece you recognize that it's opened out, has access ways on the top and the bottom, and then into the center of the mass. So the piece has transitions—things that move in and out of the space, echoing similar shapes throughout. As a piece of sculpture it defines space, captures space."

In the future, Cooke plans to increase the scale of the bird-in-tree series, which means that he must deal with the problem of casting the sculptures in segments rather than whole. He is also experimenting with cast stainless steel and with plasma art, an advanced technique of metal layering that could be used for applying a colored surface to a sculpture. But, as he emphasizes, sculpting technology matters only in serving the work of art: "Information comes through me, rather than stops at me. In some ways I think that the artist, like a medium, is a vehicle for expression." □