

Metal Sculptures Are Powerful

John Brandenburg | Modified: March 6, 1991 at 12:00 am | Published: March 6, 1991

THE medium is welded steel and the message is universal yet powerful, particular and gut-wrenching in a show of metal sculpture by Melvin Edwards at the Oklahoma City Art Museum on the Fairgrounds, 3113 Pershing Blvd. Assorted found objects fuse and become expressive sculptural elements in some 34 wall-mounted works from Edwards' "Lynch Fragment Series," begun 30 years ago by the Afro-American artist.

Inspired most directly by the struggle and sufferings (including lynchings) of black people in America, the series suggests, more broadly, a wide range of human endeavors, emotional conundrums and problematic situations.

Forms from the series are compressed, giving them the impact of small, tightly composed paintings, and titles are evocative yet open to multiple interpretations, depending as much on viewers' associations as the artist's.

Several links of chain seem to flow from the handle of a hammer-like instrument after it has pierced a rounded shape _ suggesting the power of "Law" to compel and constrain as well as bind us together in a 1990 work, for example.

A large vertical clamp or vise bisects the two sides of Edwards' "Algebra," and a small lock and barred face mask, similar to a baseball catcher's, create an effective barrier between us and our recollection of "Early Time." There is something organic, almost sexy, about the repeated, intersecting heart-shaped planes which dominate Edwards' "Sankota" of 1985, and plumbing takes on figurative-portrait properties in his "For J. C." of 1982.

Edwards' 1989 "Heart" appears to be broken by bent rods with a chain attached to one side while a central coil gives a slightly more whimsical Caribbean rhythm and increased openness to his 1980 "Haitian Combo." Sinister chained inner workings emerge from a diamond shaped ground container like a Viet Cong landmine about to explode in our faces in Edwards' "Nam" of 1973.

"The Hook" shapes welded into a 1980 sculpture are more ambiguous and can be interpreted as either lyrical or threatening, however.

"Ngangula" of 1980 is one of Edwards best efforts bringing to mind a wall crucifix turning into a primitive, almost funky phallic totem.

Standing on metal bases, like strange cubistic busts, three other sculptures are no less effective.

Evoking memories of slavery with great economy of means, "Remember" suggests a grimly masked face, topped with chain-locked "hair," and "Old Song," with its barbed wire dreadlocks, brings to mind a grotesque profile.

Most topical and thought-provoking of all is "Meditations: Peace Is Better than War," an apparent direct reference to the Persian Gulf War installed by Edwards' prior to the opening of his show on Feb. 15.

Striking elements include dark links of chain, painted red in places, as if blood-stained, and hung from strands of barbed wire, plus two giant red and black disks, presiding like Fate over the monumental installation.

Born in 1937 and described by The New York Times as "one of the best American sculptors," Edwards is a faculty member at Rutgers University. His show runs through April 28 at OCAM at the Fairgrounds.

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