

Art in America

MELVIN EDWARDS

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ALEXANDER GRAY
by saul ostrow



NEW YORK This exhibition of 14 welded-metal sculptures, reflecting Melvin Edwards's work over the last four decades, contained many pieces not previously exhibited or not shown for quite some time. The earliest examples—*Chaino* (1964), *Five to the Bar* (1973) and *Machete for Gregory* (1974)—exemplify Edwards's abstract planar syntax, reminiscent of techniques used by Anthony Caro and Isaac Witkin. Edwards, however, also employs elements with intense historical and psychological connotations. *Five to the Bar* consists of two semicircular steel plates joined by a section of flat steel stock to form a rocker. In the '70s, this combo could easily have been presented as a finished sculpture. But instead, Edwards strung five strands of barbed wire between the two plates, suggesting a cradle turned into a torture device.

In contrast, the densely compact works from the well-known series "Lynch Fragments" (1964-present) bear the influence of David Smith's cast bronze pieces of the 1930s and '40s. Edwards's assemblages—most of them frontal, wall-mounted and head-size—often incorporate spikes, chains, hand tools and other implements. These pieces have remained fairly consistent in format, conception and patina (a dark, oily graphite gray) over the years. Yet the work does not become formulaic. Edwards consistently endows his "fragment" compilations not only with references to slavery, race, ethnic heritage and the struggle for freedom but also with a sense of self-assurance and, at times, humor. *Bayou Talk* (2005), featuring a weeding tool and several horseshoes, suggests that the reparations offered to the victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 echo the post-Civil-War-era promise of 40 acres and a mule. Another such amalgamation can be found in *New Cult* (2007), whose overall diamond shape recalls Congolese and Yoruba masks, while the roughly welded-together mass of bolts and scrap steel conveys both angst and a fine sense of compositional balance.

Though Edwards's work has long been seen as a product of African-American indignation and pride, today we are able to recognize his sculptures as something more varied. Shaped by no one exclusive concern dictating either content or form, they occupy a space between sociopolitical narrative and personal expression.

Photo: Melvin Edwards: New Cult, 2007, from the series "Lynch Fragments," welded steel, 15 by 14 by 7 inches; at Alexander Gray.