

Published: April 29, 2012

Renowned sculptor selected to create Charlottesville's first commissioned work in decades

By **Graham Moomaw**

New York-based sculptor Melvin Edwards has been chosen as the artist who will build a monument to Charlottesville's Vinegar Hill neighborhood, according to a Sunday announcement from project organizers.

"Mel Edwards is both internationally and nationally renowned for his small and large work describing the African-American experience," read a news release from Elizabeth Breeden, chairwoman of the Dialogue on Race public art action team. "His large works are usually abstract and made of stainless steel."

Edwards, who'll turn 75 this week, was selected from a field of three finalists vying for the opportunity to build the monument to the historically black neighborhood leveled in the 1960s in the name of urban renewal and redevelopment.

The monument, expected to cost between \$100,000 and \$200,000, will be installed on the site of the renovated Jefferson School City Center on Fourth Street Northwest, possibly within a year.

City officials say the monument will be the first publicly commissioned sculpture since the 1920s, when philanthropist Paul Goodloe McIntire commissioned a number of statues to go along with parkland he donated to the city.

According to Edwards's [website](#), which touts him as "one of America's foremost contemporary sculptors," the Houston native has been featured in more than a dozen one-person exhibits and his works are included in the permanent collections at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art.

"Mel Edwards is known for creating sculpture that fuses the political with the abstract as it addresses his African-American heritage," his online biography states. "Drawing upon African sources, as well as the Western modernist tradition of welded steel sculpture, Edwards has created a profound and beautiful body of art."

Edwards's "Lynch Fragments" series — more than 200 pieces of welded metal intended for wall mounting

— is perhaps his most well-known work as an artist.

“A variety of metal objects including hammer heads, scissors, locks, chains and railroad splices, are employed as the raw materials for these works,” Edwards’s website states. “They are welded together in compositions that emanate intense visual and structural energy ... One critic noted ‘their brutish power conjures the instruments used to subjugate African Americans during centuries of slavery and oppression.’”

Efforts to reach Edwards Sunday were unsuccessful.

The city’s Dialogue on Race, an initiative intended to foster better race relations, has partnered with the Jefferson School Foundation to build an outdoor art project at the site. The monument is expected to be funded by donations, but the city government gave \$18,000 for the artist search.

The three finalists travelled to Charlottesville to give presentations on April 20, and a three-person jury selected Edwards after days of deliberation. The jurors were Carmenita Higginbotham, an assistant professor of American art at the University of Virginia; Sarah Tanguy, a curator for the ART in Embassies program at the U.S. State Department; and Frank Walker, a local artist who grew up in Vinegar Hill.

Andrea Douglas, director of the Jefferson School African-American Heritage Center, said Edwards was chosen due to the broad symbolism of his work and a “real association with African culture.”

“The way in which steel and metal are power objects there,” Douglas said. “His use of chains and those kinds of things refer to an African-American experience. So while you can’t read specific images in them, the symbolism that he brings in his material and the way he constructs those objects are wholly relevant and wholly transcendent. And can speak to multiple people in ways that we weren’t sure, ultimately, that the others could.”

The other finalists were Chicago-based sculptor Preston Jackson, who works largely in highly detailed bronze reliefs, and the New York-based team of architect Rodney Leon and author/artist Lorenzo Pace, who designed the African Burial Ground monument in Manhattan.

Organizers are now in the process of working out the logistics of a contract with Edwards, who is expected to come up with a more detailed monument proposal within three to four months.

“I think that, thus far, we’re on the right track toward making something meaningful,” Douglas said.
