

Rediscovering Someone Recognized



Melvin Edwards in his studio, a former foundry, in Plainfield, N.J.

Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

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Plainfield, N. J.



“WALK around, but don’t hurt yourself,” the sculptor [Melvin Edwards](#) advised on a recent rainy afternoon as he led visitors through his studio. He was only half-joking. Mr. Edwards has worked in this former foundry since 1976, nine years after moving to New York from Los Angeles, and its 3,600 square feet is so crazily cluttered with towering piles of metal, tools, half-finished sculptures, duffel bags, yellowing newspapers, plastic Halloween skeletons and the like that people who have already visited tend to warn others away. (His dealer, the New York gallerist Alexander Gray, calls it, “a cross between ‘Hoarders’ and ‘Sanford and Son.’”)

Hanging near the entry were a group of sculptures from his Lynch Fragments series, the small welded-steel wall reliefs he has been making on and off since 1963, several of which can be seen in the survey “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980,” which opens at MoMA PS1 on Sunday. From afar they suggest the sort of gestural abstraction associated with John Chamberlain or David Smith, but up close they reveal themselves to be of assemblage, made with half-submerged objects like chains, hammer heads and spikes that seem to struggle against one another.

It was hard to imagine how any art could have emerged from the chaos of the studio. “This was theoretically the wood room at one time,” Mr. Edwards said, walking past a table saw piled with lumber and cardboard boxes. In the cavernous metalworking room, he stopped to point out a group of rusty artillery shells, a row of dust-encrusted football and welding helmets, and a junked lawn mower, one of several he has on hand.

Any object — or any question — can prompt Mr. Edwards, 75, into a dizzying string of anecdotes, like the time he visited the original World Trade Center site, or how he keeps finding little chunks of aluminum from the army coffee pots that were made in the building long ago. A warm, burly man with a ready laugh, there is nonetheless an undercurrent of intensity to everything he says.

For instance, when he showed off a spade and shovel from Dakar, Senegal, where he and his wife, the poet Jayne Cortez, have lived part-time for 12 years, Mr. Edwards suddenly turned serious. Like many of the other objects here, he explained, these tools might be used to make a piece, or they might be transformed into sculpture themselves.

“In my world, anything might become something,” he said. “And if you stand there too long,” he added, laughing heartily, “you might, too.”

Today, the somethings the artist has produced during his half-century career are being rediscovered. Although he achieved early fame, with four solo museum exhibitions by age 33, including a project show in 1970 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, he didn’t have his first commercial gallery show until he was 52. By then his career had already gone under the radar, much to the dismay of critics.

“Melvin Edwards is one of the best American sculptors,” wrote Michael Brenson in *The New York Times* in 1988. “He is also one of the least known.”

But now Mr. Edwards’s profile is quickly rising, partly because of his prominent role in “Now Dig This!” When the show opened at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles last fall, one of the *Pacific Standard Time* series of exhibitions, it re-established him as a pioneer whose early success helped open the door for a somewhat younger generation of African-American artists like David Hammons and Senga Nengudi.

“Mel Edwards was really an art star in Los Angeles,” said Kellie Jones, the Columbia University art historian who is the show’s curator. “The kind of career markers he had created visibility for African-American artists.” But until she began research, Ms. Jones added, “I had no idea.” (The discovery was especially jolting because she had known Mr. Edwards since childhood, when he ran in the same bohemian and political circles as her parents, the poets Amiri Baraka and Hettie Jones.)

Interest in Mr. Edwards’s more recent work is also bubbling. Alexander Gray Associates in Chelsea, which has represented him since 2010, will open a show of old and new work on Oct. 31. And the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas is planning a retrospective in 2015. Catherine Craft, a curator at the Nasher, said she decided to organize the show after seeing the welded steel sculptures in “Now Dig This!” at the Hammer. “Having seen Mel’s work in reproduction I was so struck by how powerful they were” in person, Ms. Craft said, “and how incredibly fresh they seemed.”

She met Mr. Edwards last June at Art Basel where, to much acclaim, he recreated one of the four pieces from his 1970 Whitney exhibition as part of Mr. Gray’s presentation. Called “Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid,” it uses strands of barbed wire and the delicate shadows they cast against a wall to create two airy polyhedrons that allure even as they repel. As well as showing sculpture from the ’60s to the present, Ms. Craft now hopes to devote one gallery to replicating the entire Whitney show.

“I think that a lot of people in the art world are looking back at recent art history,” said Mr. Gray, whose coming gallery exhibition will also reproduce another Whitney piece employing barbed wire and chains. While collectors and younger curators love to discover unknowns, he added, these days they also seem to glean a thrill from “rediscovering the recognized.”

Introduced to abstraction by his high school art teacher in segregated Houston, Mr. Edwards went to Los Angeles to study art in college, as “it was the only way to get out of

Texas at the time.”

For some years he bounced between schools and took time off to work after starting a family with his first wife; he ended up at the University of Southern California on a football scholarship.

He became involved in the burgeoning civil rights movement. He was also fascinated by California’s midcentury European intellectual refugees, like the Hungarian painter Francis de Erdely, his mentor at U.S.C. Although Clement Greenberg’s belief in art for art’s sake held sway at the time, Mr. Edwards was unconvinced. “That was what people were pushing, that your art had to be what they call ‘pure,’ ” he said. “But all my art history said art had been made all over the world for all kinds of reasons.”

His own coalesced in the racially charged environment of the times, which in Los Angeles culminated in the 1965 Watts riots. One event leading to that moment came in 1962, when the police raided a local Nation of Islam mosque and killed a worshiper. Mr. Edwards produced his first Lynch Fragment the following year. Called “Some Bright Morning,” the wheel-shaped piece sprouts a triangular blade and a biomorphic lump dangling from a chain, subtly suggesting both oppression and revolution.

While he had been showing sculpture for three years it was “an epiphany moment,” Mr. Edwards said. “I realized I had come onto something rooted in what I was interested in, politically and aesthetically.”

His first solo show, at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, came in 1965, just before he graduated from college. Three years and several shows later, he left for New York, where he was promptly included in the second exhibition of the newly minted Studio Museum in Harlem and chosen to create the solo project at the Whitney — part of a new push on the museum’s part to embrace black artists.

About two dozen shows at regional and university museums followed, culminating in a 1978 survey at the Studio Museum. Yet his career in New York stayed somewhat on the margins. Although Mr. Edwards was in demand for public sculpture commissions, the resulting works usually ended up far from the art world, on university campuses or in housing projects. And his 30-year career retrospective in 1993 was at the Neuberger Museum of Art, a modest institution in Purchase, N.Y.

His longtime friend and supporter Lowery Stokes Sims, a curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, pointed out that when Mr. Edwards arrived in New York, Minimalism was the prevailing trend, and “the situation for black artists became inherently politicized,” she said. “There was a debate about whether black art should be abstract or figurative. The assumption was that if you made abstract art then you were copping out, that you were choosing to be with the mainstream.”

Yet at the same time, the Lynch Fragments were content-laden enough to be “tough stuff for the art world to take in.”

For years Mr. Edwards has felt deeply connected to Africa, where he has taught metalworking in several different countries. “They named me Grandpa Blacksmith,” he said, chuckling, of his time in Zimbabwe.

Then there is his longstanding commitment to public sculpture. At his studio, Mr. Edwards mentioned a piece he made in 1985 for Lafayette Gardens, a housing project in Jersey City. Called “Holder of the Light,” it involves huge discs of brushed stainless steel balanced against a zigzagging shape that suggests a lightning bolt.

Some years ago, hearing that the project had been torn down, Mr. Edwards assumed the piece had been sold for scrap. But to his surprise, it was soon reinstalled in the neighborhood. As he arrived to inspect it, a group of children emerged from a school bus screaming, “Yea, yea, the sculpture’s back!”

Recalling the moment, Mr. Edwards shook his head. “There’s no experience like that for making modern art,” he said.