

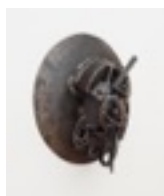
Melvin Edwards

October 30 – December 13, 2014

"The use of African words as titles of my sculpture is to extend the practical and philosophical values of the large quantity of esthetic possibility in creative art for now and the future." —Melvin Edwards

Many of Melvin Edwards' works reflect his engagement with and influence of Africa. Edwards' first visits coincided with a key moment in the region's history as recently independent countries defined their postcolonial national identities. Since his first trip in 1970 to Ghana, Togo, Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), and Nigeria, Edwards has consistently traveled to Africa, often returning to Nigeria and Ghana and making repeated trips to Senegal and Zimbabwe. He eventually established a studio in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. His experience of and engagement with this region and its traditional and contemporary art scene has nurtured Edwards' investigations of metalwork and its formal qualities, abstraction, history, language, exchanges between cultures, and the significance of personal relationships.

Ground Floor Gallery



MMOZ, 2005

Edwards has created many works in his Dakar studio in homage to the urban landscape of the city. MMOZ is an abbreviation of the Dakar district Mermoz, where the metalworking company N'Diaye Frère is located. Edwards works closely with the director Yusuf N'Diaye to create many of his Dakar-based works.



Wayou Tugge, 2014

Language, its manipulation, and its influences and variations across regions and cultures is of great interest to Edwards. The title of this work can be translated to "Song of the Blacksmith" in English from Wolof, a widely-spoken language in Senegal and one of the country's six national languages. Edwards has titled multiple sculptures after the word "blacksmith" in several African languages, including the Lynch Fragment *Nunake* (1993) also in the exhibition. Edwards has found both stimulation and confirmation for his work in the blacksmithing traditions of the regions he visited.



Kasangadila: For Francisco Romão de Oliveira e Silva, 2004

Francisco Romão de Oliveira e Silva (also called Francisco Romão) was a key figure in the Angolan War of Independence against Portugal and later became an important politician. Edwards met him in New York in 1995. During the independence conflict, Francisco Romão participated in uprisings against the Portuguese. After the war, he became governor of Luanda, the capital of Angola, from 1977 to 1981, ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1981 to 1986, and ambassador to Brazil from 1987 to 1993. At the time of his death in 2004, Francisco Romão was serving as Deputy Minister of Foreign Relations. "Kasangadila" means "thank you" in Kimbundu, a widely-spoken language in Angola. Created the year of Francisco Romão's death, the work serves as a memorial.



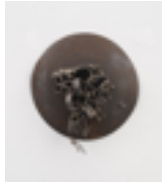
Untitled Portrait of Jayne, c. 1974

This work is a portrait of Edwards' late wife and artistic collaborator Jayne Cortez, a poet, activist, and performance artist. Together, they traveled extensively throughout Africa and across the world. Behind Cortez's silhouette, which comes from a photograph taken by Edwards, he depicts chains, which he has incorporated into many sculptures and works on paper since the 1960s. Edwards' use of chains stems primarily from formal concerns, as he explores the aesthetic qualities and historical meaning behind this material. For the artist, chains speak to the history of slavery and oppression while also representing the links between people and cultures.



Diamnaidio, 2004

"Diamnaidio" translates into English as "return in peace" from the original Serer, a widely-spoken language in Senegal. For Edwards, this phrase resonates with the ideas of the memory of coming and going, cultural and creative movement, and the cross pollination between cultural and social realities. Edwards views Dakar as a crossroads, metaphorically, literally, and autobiographically. As a modern city, Dakar is one of the most important seaports and airports in West Africa. In 2000, Edwards established a studio in the city, where he continues to work.



Rouie Rufisque, 2005–2012

Route Rufisque is one of many works Edwards created in Dakar in homage to the urban landscape of the city. Rufisque is a historic port city to the Southwest of Dakar. Overshadowed by Dakar's port in the twentieth century, it eventually became absorbed into the city as an outlying district.

Second Floor Main Gallery



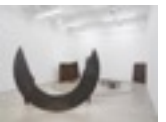
Ginou Tabaski, 2006

Edwards created *Ginou Tabaski* entirely out of Senegalese objects, including the grid-like base that he commissioned from a local metal workshop. Its title refers to the Islamic Senegalese holy day Tabaski, a Muslim holiday, also called the Feast of the Sacrifice and known as Eid al-Adha outside of Senegal. It occurs at the end of the Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), and commemorates Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his only son at Allah's command. As Ibrahim lifted his blade, Allah replaced the child with a sheep. In Senegal and across the Islamic world, the holy day is celebrated by feasting with friends and family. Edwards sees Tabaski as "a day where human beings come to grips with mortality, and with the importance of sacrifice in order to accomplish a sense of fulfillment in life." For Edwards, *Ginou Tabaski* is a summation of life, death, and looking towards the future.



Untitled, 2004

Edwards created Untitled entirely out of materials sourced from Dakar. The grid-like element was made by Yusuf N'Diaye, a metalworker with whom Edwards works closely. Edwards developed the idea for this form when he saw N'Diaye working on drain gutters. For Edwards, the form resonates with Dakar's vernacular architecture of wrought-iron window bars. A recurring element in Edwards visual vocabulary, a pair of scissors, is emblematic of the dual significance behind a single object. The scissors speak to Edwards' friendship with the Inneh and other families of Benin (Nigeria) bronze casters, as the object is symbolic of good luck among Benin metalworkers, and also allude to Edward's mother's profession as a seamstress.



Homage to the Poet Léon Gontran Damas, 1978–81

Edwards was introduced to the French Guianese poet and politician Léon Gontran Damas in 1969 through his late wife and artistic collaborator Jayne Cortez, a poet, activist, and performance artist. A co-founder of the Negritude movement in the 1930s, Damas was active in anti-colonial politics and developed a style of poetry that creatively eschewed the standardized French of the former colony and embraced African Diasporic influences from the jazz scene of the Harlem Renaissance to Caribbean calypso. At the time of Damas' death in 1978, the two had plans for Edwards to create a sculpture for Damas' house in Cayenne, French Guiana. Instead, Edwards created the monumental *Homage to the Poet Léon Gontran Damas* (1978–81). The sculpture uses the sun as a compass that dictates the orientation of the sculptural elements of the installation that encourage seating and mediation facing East, looking towards Africa.



Ile Ogun, 2003

Ile Ogun translates into English from Yoruba as the "house of Ogun" or "home of Ogun." Ogun is the Yoruba *Orisha* (deity) of the woods, hunting, politics, creativity, truth, accidents, and war. He is also related to tools and metalworking, which resonates with Edwards' artistic practice. In *Ile Ogun*, Edwards incorporates a mallet, one of the multitude of tools that are associated with Ogun. Edwards created the central element of the piece, made of parallel nail-like materials, to contain the space and reflect the idea of creating a home or a space for Ogun.



Kikongo si, 1992

Kikongo (also called Kongo) is a language spoken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, and the Republic of Congo. Through the Transatlantic slave trade, it has come to influence many languages and cultures in the Americas, including those in the United States. Edwards pairs the name of this language with the Spanish word “si” (yes). For the artist, the work is an affirmation of how language and culture can flow across regions.



Ibadan Oke, 1992

When Edwards traveled to Nigeria in the early 1970s, he often visited the city Ibadan. The urban landscape of the Yoruba city stimulated Edwards’ interests in architecture and urban design, which he further developed through his close friendship and collaboration with Nigerian artist and architect Demas Nwoko. Edwards created *Ibadan Oke* as a result of his fond memories of his time in Ibadan. He was taken by the intellectual and creative environment of the city; the renowned and historic University of Ibadan attracted many Nigerian and visiting intellectuals and artists. In Ibadan, he met the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, the Nobel Prize-winning playwright and poet Wole Soyinka, and the Jamaican writer Lindsay Barrett. He also met Omoruyi Nomayo, who became a lifelong friend and introduced Edwards to Benin City and his family of Bronze casters.



Mali, 2007

Edwards created this work the same year he traveled to Mali with a group led by educator and collector of African art Jerry Vogel. They visited the city Mopti and the Cliff of Bandiagara, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the Dogon people have lived since the fifteenth century.



Tengenenge, 1988

Tengenenge is a village in Zimbabwe, founded in 1966 in order to foster a community of stone carvers. Edwards first visited Tengenenge in 1986 and met many of the sculptors working at the time, including Makina Kameya, for which another work in the exhibition is dedicated. This Lynch Fragment was created in Zimbabwe when Edwards returned in 1988 on a Fulbright Scholarship.



Djeri Djeff Papa Tall, 2008

This work refers to Papa Ibra Tall, a Senegalese artist. He is the founder of the influential tapestry workshop Manufactures sénégalaises de arts décoratifs (MSAD) in Thiès, Senegal, and a key figure in the establishment of modern Senegalese cultural and educational systems. Tall and Edwards met in Senegal in 1999 and had, as Edwards describes, “a meeting of minds.” Through Tall, he began producing tapestries in MSAD. The work’s title references the phrase “jërë jëf” or “thank you” in Wolof, a widely-spoken language in Senegal. This sculpture is Edwards’ way of thanking his friends from the region for opening a bicultural dialogue.



Poetry, 2012

Edwards created *Poetry* as a memorial to his late wife and artistic collaborator Jayne Cortez, a poet, activist, and performance artist who passed away in 2012. The two often collaborated together, and Edwards has illustrated several books of Cortez’s poems. As an extension of their relationship, poetry and literature have been important influences in Edwards’ artistic practice. Through Cortez, Edwards met many writers and poets from Africa and the Diaspora, including Léon Gontran Damas.



At Crossroads, 2004

The artwork’s title directly references the township of the same name in Cape Town, South Africa. When the Apartheid government issued eviction orders to the community in 1975, the residents resisted, and the eviction decision was successfully overturned in 1978. Crossroads became a key symbol for the anti-Apartheid opposition movements. Edwards visited the township in 1995. The work’s title also alludes to Yoruba religious practice, particularly Eshu, the *Orisha* (deity) of the Crossroads. Edwards likens Eshu to Gabriel at the Gates of Heaven in Christianity; when one addresses any of the *Orishas*, one must first address Eshu.



24 Sud Foire, 2003

Edwards has created many works in his Dakar studio in homage to the urban landscape of the city. The title of this sculpture refers to the Dakar neighborhood Sud Foire, where his studio is located.



Route des esclaves, 1995-99

The title of this work references an UNESCO initiative aimed at ending the historical silence that has long surrounded transatlantic slavery and investigating the cultural dialogue created by the forced movement of people. Launched in 1994 in Ouidah, Benin, it consisted of a series of symposia and colloquia in cities effected by the Atlantic Slave Trade. Edwards attended two of these colloquia: one in Lamentin, Guadelupe in 1997 and the other at New York University in 1999, co-organized by Edwards' late wife Jayne Cortez. The most significant impact of these events for Edwards was meeting and speaking with fellow participants and attendees, which included scholars, politicians, writers, and artists. The conversations he had stimulated his own interests in African history and culture.



For Makina Kameya, 1988

Makina Kameya was a stone carver in the village of Tengenenge in Zimbabwe. Edwards met him during his first trip to Zimbabwe in 1986, and purchased one of his small sculptures. In his seventies, Kameya was much older than his fellow sculptors in the community, and by the time Edwards returned to Zimbabwe on a Fulbright scholarship in 1988, Kameya had passed away due to an accident in his studio. Kameya was originally from Eastern Angola, and came to Zimbabwe as a migrant farm laborer.