

Melvin Edwards

03.09.15



View of “Melvin Edwards: Five Decades,” 2015. Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas. Photo: Kevin Todora

Over fifty years’s worth of work by sculptor Melvin Edwards is now on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Well-known works from his ongoing “Lynch Fragments” series, 1963–, hang next to surprises—a rolling, hanging tumble of metal titled Cotton Hangup, 1966, for example, which was used as a prop in “Crazier than Cotton,” an episode of the anthology TV program Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theater. “Melvin Edwards: Five Decades” runs through May 10, 2015.

BETWEEN THE AGES OF SEVEN AND TWELVE I lived in Dayton, Ohio, home of the Wright Brothers. In those years the headquarters of the United States Air Force—or its closest approximation—was housed at Wright-Patterson Field. It was like our NASA, and I enjoyed anything that had to do with experimental flying. The reality of that time, during World War II, was that everybody was conditioned to look out for planes in the sky—it was part of living. It sensitized me, possibly, to these feats of engineering. Obviously, I don’t make sculpture that looks like airplanes, but seeing the planes on exhibition at the airfield helped me understand how three-dimensional things in the world were designed, that the planes were sculptural in some way. That experience ended in 1949 when my family moved back to Houston.

I don’t tend to use the word *influence*. If we were talking about football you could say I was influenced by Lou “The Toe” Groza, by watching him kick. I learned technique from him—how to hold your toe when you kick. But no one talks about influence in that way. With my sculpture, I’ve evolved independently. I understood that abstraction meant to take form and develop something else, or just start from nowhere—but also that these are all your developments and you keep it personal. My work doesn’t look like it came from another source; I make my own music.

For example, I continue to push my ideas by creating circular rooms. This is actually an old idea of mine, and it came from a book I was reading about the aesthetics of perception and how people who live in round architectural spaces are less attuned to optical illusions than those who live in square spaces. In Oklahoma I designed an exhibition with one room that was an equilateral triangle, one that was absolutely square, and one that was octagonal to approximate the idea of a circle. The difference was nothing I could describe, but it was different, without question. Factually, the experience was different.

I have a capacity to dip back into the past, whether it’s four days, two years, or forty years. This is why I returned to the “Lynch Fragments” series I started in 1963. Seeing my work hung in the Nasher makes me consider how I would group it differently. Again, a feeling but not something I could describe. In that sense, your life is just as old and just as new. Yesterday always proposes tomorrow.

— As told to Andy Campbell