

HYPERALLERGIC

The Pioneering Painted Sculptures of Melvin Edwards

Edwards's sculptures, on display at Alexander Gray Associates in New York, establish him as a master of his various crafts with with an acute sense of rhythm and movement.

[Laura Raicovich](#) [December 9, 2019](#)



Melvin Edwards: Painted Sculpture, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY (2019) (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

Melvin Edwards learned to weld at the University of Southern California in 1960 and the world has not been quite the same since. Currently, several of his painted welded-steel sculptures from the mid-1970s and early '80s are on view at Alexander Gray Associates, alongside a selection of works on paper, in the exhibition *Painted Sculpture*. While I have always found Edwards's dense, wall-mounted conglomerations of muscular machine parts deeply evocative, these larger, lighter, freestanding works address similar issues in spite of their formal

divergence. A lyrical sense of movement, both literal and metaphorical, perhaps related to Edwards's own peripatetic migrations from Texas to Ohio to California, emerges in the exhibition, as well as his political affiliations, including the civil rights movement in the US, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism internationally, histories of Blackness in America, and abiding studies of Africa.



Melvin Edwards: Painted Sculpture, installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY (2019) (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

In a fascinating 2014 interview in *BOMB* magazine, Edwards spoke of his move from painting to welding:

I was working relatively flat or in relief much of the time, but the welding had a real reciprocal relationship to where I already was in painting, in terms of the complexity of form within the process: both flat and three-

dimensional. It's almost like my sense of abstraction had an abstract figuration, I don't mean in the imitation of figure, but in the sense of mountains, backs, shoulders, muscularities.

The sculptures on view reflect these characteristics via assemblages combining recognizable elements, like ladders and chains, with scrap metal forming S shapes and arabesques; these are painted in red, yellow, blue, and a silvery gray. The chain, a key feature in Edwards's renowned late-1960s *Lynch Fragments* series, appears amid the folds of the deep red "Luxor Top" (1983), as well as in a series of works on paper collectively titled "'Lines' for John Coltrane and other Creative People" (1974). The latter features five broadsheets from 1974 newspapers overlaid with red and silver spray paint revealing a ghostly negative of the chain. Some fragments of readable text contain telling messages, such as "It's not creative unless it sells." These works, alongside the sculptures, establish Edwards as a master of his various crafts with an acute sense of rhythm and movement, and the ability to embed a narrative punch in all his forms.



Melvin Edwards, "Tan Ton Dymnins" (1974), painted welded steel in 2 parts. Part 1: 84.5 h x 36 w x 37 d in. Part 2: 66.36 h x 78.5 w x 34 d in. (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society)



Melvin Edwards, "Felton" (1974), painted welded steel in 2 parts. Part 1: 23 h x 95 w x 80 d in. Part 2: 59.75 h x 68 w x 64.5 d in. (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)



Melvin Edwards "Lines' for John Coltrane and other Creative People" (1974), detail, spray paint on newspaper in 5 parts. Each: 22.5 h x 29.13 w in. (Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)