

Stephen Friedman Gallery opens solo exhibition of new and historic works by Melvin Edwards



Melvin Edwards, 'Untitled', 2016. Pigmented cotton on pigmented abaca, 152.4 x 101.6 cm (60 x 40 in). Framed: 110 x 160.5 cm (43 1/4 x 63 1/4 in). Copyright Melvin Edwards. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

LONDON.- Stephen Friedman Gallery presents a solo exhibition of new and historic works by Melvin Edwards, a pioneer in the history of contemporary African-American art. Spanning five decades of Edwards' career, this is the artist's second show at the gallery and follows his recent solo exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland (2019-2020) and MASP, São Paulo (2019). Edwards' exhibition at the gallery is accompanied by a booklet with a newly commissioned essay by Eric Booker, Assistant Curator at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Edwards' work currently features in the new hang of the collection at MoMA, New York. His work is included in the touring exhibition 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power', initiated by Tate, London, and currently on view at de Young Museum, San Francisco. Public Art Fund will present the first major survey of the artist's outdoor works at City Hall Park, New York in June 2020. In April, he will exhibit at Glasgow International in Scotland. Edwards was recently awarded the prestigious US Artists Fellowship 2020.

Edwards is celebrated for his distinctive sculptures and three-dimensional installations created from welded steel, barbed wire, chain and machine parts. While the artist's formal language clearly engages with the history of formal abstraction and modern sculpture, Edwards' work is born out of the social and political turmoil of the civil rights movement in the United States. Comprising new and historic works, the exhibition focuses on the artist's use of industrial materials and their symbolic associations to explore themes of race, protest and social injustice.

The artist's career began in southern California with a solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1965. In 1970, Edwards went on to become the first African-American sculptor to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, presenting a ground-breaking installation of work made from barbed wire.

Toying with the duplicity of meaning and contradictions embedded in objects, the artist states in the accompanying catalogue: "I have always understood the brutalist connotations inherent in materials like barbed wire and links of chain and my creative thoughts have always anticipated the beauty of utilizing that necessary complexity which arises from the use of these materials in what could be called a straight formalist style."

This dynamic is evident in 'Coco Vari Providence' (2017), the largest work in the exhibition. Executed in steel, the work rests delicately on a base comprised of two large hemispheres linked by draped lengths of barbed wire. Permeated with political content while eschewing straightforward figuration, this is one of two iterations that belong to Edwards' ongoing 'Rocker' series which the artist initiated during the 1970s. Inspired by his grandmother Coco's rocking chair, the structure engages in a graceful rocking motion that counters the hard-edged industrial materials. Recalling the rural South where the artist grew up, Edwards' use of barbed wire alludes to the enclosure of farm animals as well as his personal experience of segregation.

The exhibition also features works from Edwards' renowned 'Lynch Fragments' series. Inspired by the practices of modernists such as Julio González and David Smith, the series spans three distinct periods from the artist's life; the 1960s, during which work evolved in response to racial violence in the United States; the 1970s, in protest against the Vietnam War; and from 1978 to the present, during which work for the artist became a vehicle to honour individuals, consider nostalgia and explore his interest in African culture and artefacts. Both the materials - metal objects such as hammers and chisels forged together - and the titles of individual works refer to hard physical labour and the history of brutality against the black body.

Other works in the exhibition include a series of pedestal works from the late 1970s that address the legacy of slavery; a number of drawings in muted colours on handmade paper that capture the stark shadows of tools associated with the art of blacksmithing; and a number of sculptures that demonstrate Edwards' ability to transform utilitarian objects in his ongoing exploration of abstraction.

Melvin Edwards was born in 1937 in Houston, USA and lives and works just outside New York, USA and Dakar, Senegal.

Notable solo exhibitions include: 'Melvin Edwards: Crossroads', Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland (2019–2020); 'Melvin Edwards: Lynch Fragments', MASP, São Paulo, Brazil (2018); 'Melvin Edwards: Festivals, Funerals and New Life', David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Rhode Island (2017-2018); 'Melvin Edwards', Oklahoma Contemporary, Oklahoma (2016); 'Melvin Edwards: Five Decades', Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas; which travelled to Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Jersey; and Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio (2015-2016); 'Melvin Edwards', Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, England (2014-2015); 'Melvin Edwards: Lynch Fragments', Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan (1998); 'Melvin Edwards Sculpture: A Thirty-Year Retrospective 1963-1993', McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas (1995); 'The Sculpture of Melvin Edwards', UNESCO, Paris, France (1984); 'Melvin Edwards', The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1979); 'Melvin Edwards', Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1970); 'Melvin Edwards', Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (1968); and 'Melvin Edwards', Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California (1965).

Edwards' works are featured in many prominent collections internationally including Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.