



# BLOUIN ART+AUCTION

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1990s  
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SHAKE-UP  
CHRISTIE  
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SURREALISM  
AT  
LONDON  
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METAL  
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MELVIN  
EDWARDS

DAVID LEPPAN  
AT HOME WITH  
OLD MASTERS





# TESTED METAL

After 50 years, the steel sculptures of **MELVIN EDWARDS** still stir viewers' emotions and compel curators to take a second look

BY JULIET HELMKE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

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"THE WHOLE WORLD is welded," Melvin Edwards states. "After paper, steel is the most common material we use. And your friends, well, once they know you use steel, they start throwing things at you." Such friendly generosity has resulted in three work studios bursting at the seams with scraps, chains, barbed wire, railroad spikes, bolts, padlocks, ax heads, and irregular pieces of sheet metal that the septuagenarian has been fusing into abstract forms of various shapes and sizes for more than 50 years.

Although he's well known for the small, powerful assemblages of cast-off parts that compose his "Lynch Fragments" series, which began in the 1960s, being an African-American artist of a certain age has endowed Edwards with a few historical superlatives as well: He was one of the first to show at the Studio Museum in Harlem shortly after his arrival in New York in 1967, and he had the first solo exhibition by a black sculptor at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1970. Although celebrated periodically—with a 1978 survey at the Studio Museum and a 1993 retrospective at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York—Edwards was largely overlooked by the market. That, however, is changing. In December he completed his third outing at Alexander Gray Associates, known for its representation of politically and socially engaged artists of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. When we meet at the gallery, the artist has work headed to Dallas's Nasher Sculpture Center in his native Texas for a retrospective, "Melvin Edwards: Five Decades," running January 31 through May 10. The aggregate impression of the works at Gray leaves no doubt of Edwards's formal innovation and ability to tackle racially charged motifs while transcending simplistic readings. His general mode of practice is to experiment freely with forms and materials, intuiting the moment when the object is complete. For public commissions, he makes models and drawings to help those with whom he is collaborating understand his intentions, considering the site and the purpose of the piece. "But that doesn't





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Melvin Edwards  
takes stock on his  
five-acre property in  
Accord, New York,  
while resting on  
*Before Words*, a steel  
sculpture from 1990.





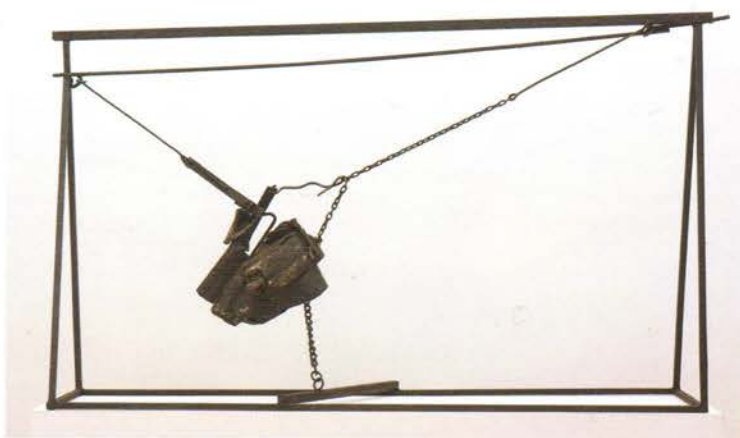
mean I'm not feeding off of ideas that I'm having already for the conceptual spark," he says.

Born in the Fifth Ward of Houston in 1937, Edwards remembers having a fascination with art from his earliest years, rivaled only by his interest in athletics. Football, basketball, baseball, swimming—at one point or another Edwards was on every team. His football prowess won him scholarship offers from the University of Washington and the University of Denver, but the desire to study art and the

allure of Los Angeles won out. Edwards studied painting at the University of Southern California, but "sculpture became a more serious interest just as I was leaving college," he says. He had seen some students welding, and one of them, George Baker, who would go on to a successful career as a sculptor and educator, gave him a simple lesson in joining metal forms.

Edwards describes the transition from painting to sculpture as easy, almost no transition at all. His real introduction to three dimensions, he says, was the physicality of sports, along with his years working in a butcher shop breaking down beef and scaling fish—"the art world way to say it: dissecting forms," he jokes. "All of these side things were places I found information for understanding what structure is; what anatomies—plural—are."

Soon after that first lesson with Baker,



Edwards was experimenting with joinery, figuring out how to make new metal forms. He produced a fairly small sculpture about 14 by 9 inches and extending 5 inches from the wall on which it was mounted. A hollow, circular shape with sharp shards jutting from the center and a chain falling from one side, *Some Bright Morning*, 1963, would be the first of many of this size—and meant to be mounted on the wall at eye level—which make up the "Lynch Fragments" series. "As a young sculptor I was teaching myself to weld, and I was working in a relief manner," Edwards explains. "I don't draw for these pieces—I make them direct." Apart from a few brief breaks, he's been creating these forms ever since.

The earliest were shown in his first one-man show, at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in March 1965, mere months before the Watts riots that erupted in Los Angeles. Edwards notes that, contrary to what has often been reported, neither the riots nor any other single incident during the turbulence of the Civil Rights movement inspired the creation of the "Lynch Fragments" works. "It was a syndrome across the history of the United States that I decided to take on," he says. Edwards's art resonated with its moment. By the time of the 1970 Whitney show, institutional collectors had started



In the studio, the sculptor experiments with welded forms and other materials. In 1963, above left, is an early work from the artist's ongoing "Lynch Fragments" series, which offers symmetrical rigor in welded metal. Below left, a 1964 work, titled "Chain," is an early manifestation of his recurring chain motif.



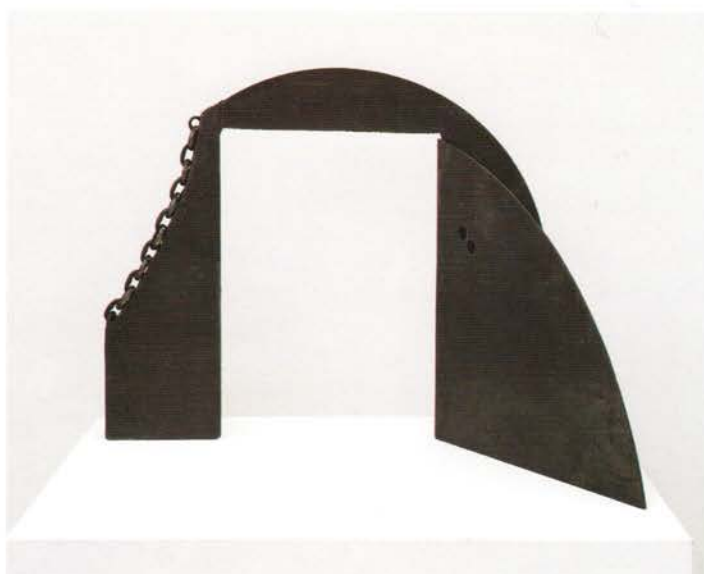
paying attention to the work. New York's Museum of Modern Art; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Studio Museum in Harlem; and the Brooklyn Museum are among those that now hold pieces by Edwards.

But while he received institutional interest early on, the market was slow to follow. "For decades Mel was known more as a museum artist than a gallery artist. He didn't have a show in a commercial gallery until about 25 years into his career," says Alexander Gray. "He's an artist who is influential with other artists, respected and known by scholars and curators, but quite overlooked by the market. And in the market we can certainly say that generation, race, and geography play a role."

But the last few years have seen quite a change. Stephen Friedman notes that his gallery show, also this past

December—Edwards's first in the U.K.—was "a commercial and a critical success...with a tremendous level of interest in the work resulting in a high number of sales." Although few works by Edwards have gone on the block, the ones that have consistently sold for more than their estimates. In 2003 Christie's New York sold a "Lynch Fragment" work, *A song that comes to mind*, 1992, for \$8,635; seven years later *Endura*, 1989, another piece from the series, sold for \$13,750.

Gray attributes much of the change to recent art-historical reexamination of the legacies of African-American art. Exhibitions such as "Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties" at the Brooklyn Museum last spring, and the 2012 Pacific Standard Time initiatives—especially "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980," curated by Kellie Jones and shown at the Hammer Museum, MOMA PS1, and the



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Williams College Museum of Art—all positioned Edwards's work and contributions in a significant way. "The market noticed, and more than that, the overall ecosystem noticed," says Gray.

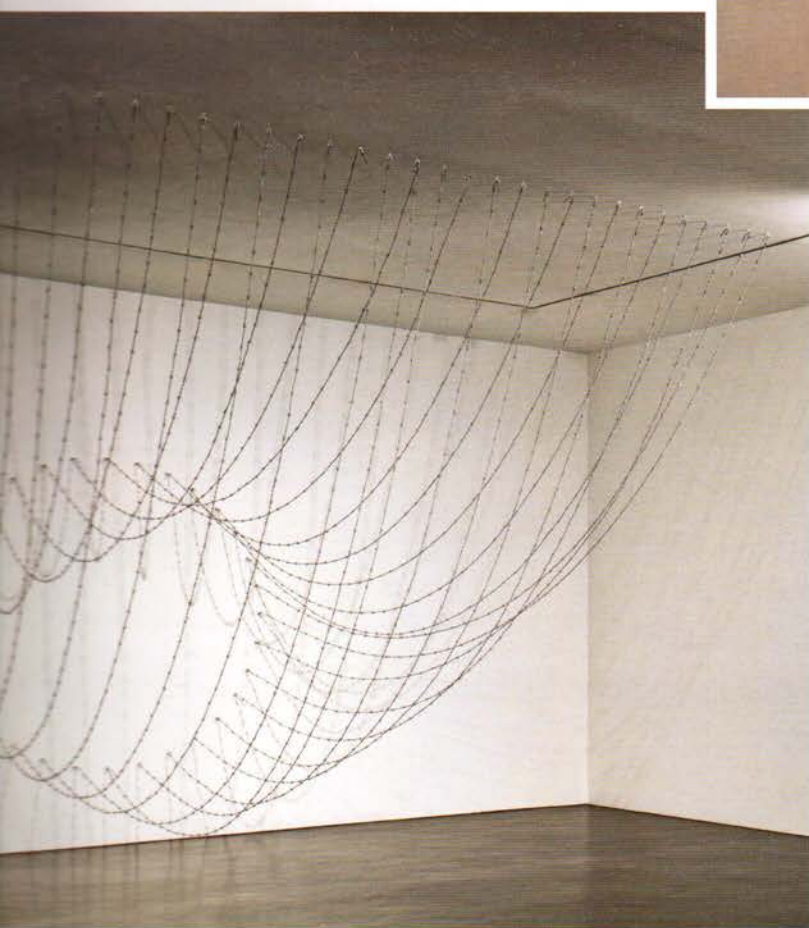
It was in "Now Dig This!" at the Hammer that Nasher Museum of Art curator Catherine Craft first saw a group of Edwards's "Lynch Fragments" in person. "I was floored by the intensity and quality of his work. I kept circling back through the exhibition to look at it again and again," she says. With a background in art of the mid 20th century, Craft was "very familiar with artists who work in assemblage with found objects and those who weld, but [I] just hadn't seen anything like his work." It was "incredibly concentrated, impassioned yet disciplined, and richly associative." Craft's curatorial effort examines work beyond the known 1960s pieces, including Edwards's barbed-wire installations, his kinetic "Rockers" series, and his many public sculptures, as well as the "Lynch Fragments" pieces of his later years, which center on the artist's connections to Africa. The Nasher retrospective will travel to the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio.

The artist's engagement with Africa was also the focus of his show at Alexander Gray, featuring works that were titled in Yoruba, Wolof, Kikongo,

and other languages; named for artists and friends from across the African continent; and incorporating objects either sourced or in common use there. As he does with many things, Edwards describes the integration of African themes into his work, inspired by his travels, as very natural. "I had always wanted to go to Africa. An African-American wants to see Africa, just like a European-American wants to see Europe." He made his first trip in 1970 with a group of teachers (including the late poet and writer Jayne Cortez, who would later become his wife), at a time when independence movements were emerging in a number of countries. "Over there, everybody's thoughts had something to do with



York, 2012, is a later Lynch Fragment. Examples of the series are on walls in a installation space artist's studio, along with an edmaquette location is an Book and untitled, ed works. He ed Then There And Now, 2014, below, ed wire pencil, for his ber show hen Friedman y in London.



the question 'What will we do with our future?' Which was the same thing that was happening in the U.S. We were fighting through that phase of Civil Rights...and also asking ourselves, 'What do we want from this?'" Edwards set up a studio in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. He spends several months a year there, in addition to the considerable time he spends in his Plainfield, New Jersey, space, which he's had since 1976, and at another home on five acres in Accord, New York, which he acquired in 2002, upon retiring after 37 years of teaching.

Upstairs at Alexander Gray, Edwards points out a 1998 "Lynch Fragment" titled *For Makina Kameya*. "This was named for a man I met in 1986 or so, who was one of a group of sculptors who carved stone," he says of an African excursion. "He was very good, but his life had been spent working as a farming laborer. I bought a small piece of his sculpture. When I went back and asked about him, I was told that he had just died. A large piece of stone he had been working on fell over on him and crushed his hip. So this was dedicated to a fellow artist, a man who worked hard trying to do something."

At age 77 the artist's productivity hasn't flagged. Ever humble, Edwards feels lucky for the attention his work has received, which now includes two career retrospectives. "The first was 30 years, this is 50, maybe I can do an 80-year retrospective," he muses with a smile. "I'd be a lot older and shorter if I got to that stage, that's for sure." ▢