

Visual Art

Melvin Edwards on Sculpture: 'It's Like Making a Baby.'

By [Lauren Smart](#) Mon., Feb. 16 2015 at 9:29 AM



Nasher Sculpture Center

Five decades is likely more than half a life. That's more than 18 thousand days and nearly a half-million hours. It's a long time to live. It's a long time to be creating art. To see an artist's work spanning 50 years is to stand in the presence of mastery; it is to see a life's meditations, trials, and triumphs naked on the walls for your perusal. In the case of *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades at the Nasher Sculpture Center*, it's a challenge to the viewer and a privilege to stand so close to the intricate, powerful work by one of America's greatest living sculptors.

The exhibition, curated with a visible dedication to Edwards' craft by Catherine Craft, offers both a seasoned and new viewer insight into his work. With his famous small-scale, sculptural reliefs, known as "Lynch Fragments," focused in one room, but present throughout the show's three main spaces, the work flows in continuous development and redevelopment. This is no tidy package containing a chronological Edwards, but a rich continuum of ideas flowing into and out of one another like an improv jazz piece, with a harmonic through-line singing of the sculptor's medium: steel.

"I approach all my ideas over and over again. It's not like my life is 1 years old, 2, 3, 4 to 74, I mean that's how you live it, but not the ideas," says Edwards, as we walk through the exhibition. "I may go back to something that was developed in 1970. I did that just last year actually, finally constructing a barbed wire piece I drew in the 70's."

In the 1980's *The New York Times* called Edwards one of the best American sculptors, although also one of the least known. And in recent years as his work has received due attention on both coasts, it's rarely seen in native state of Texas.

Houston born, Edwards studied painting at the University of Southern California on a football scholarship before transitioning to sculpture, attracted by the medium's physicality. He started to work in welding, utilizing art's weightiest material to craft forms compressed with narrative and meaning, demonstrating his immense capability to create gripping, often brutal and intimate compositions. His small, sculptural reliefs, often no more than 1 foot tall, "Lynch Fragments," made of found objects like padlocks, chains, or rebar fused with other elements of steel, comprise perhaps his most famous body of work and because of their name are often conflated with the civil rights movement, or more expansive issues of political and racial injustice in America and beyond. And though Edwards doesn't shirk from this interpretation, as he was creating the first in the series in the 1960's, he's quick to offer a simpler explanation.

"It's like making a baby. You don't think of a name and then try to make a baby. What comes first is the developing of the work. Then giving the work a name, that's secondary," says Edwards. "Since these works have an overall title, a lot of people go to what that title is. But the specific work comes from its own places, and there have been so many of them."

Walking through the exhibition's front room, which contains the greatest number of the "Lynch Fragments," Edwards can remember stories for nearly all of them. "Sekuru Knows," for example, is from the Shona language native to Zimbabwe, and refers to a time he was working in Africa and the young men assisting him were arguing about his work, and one ended the debate by pointing to Edwards and said, "Well, Sekuru knows," which means Grandfather knows best. When he tells the story, Edwards laughs and says, he didn't actually become a grandfather until the next year. Much of our interview goes this way: we plant ourselves in front of a piece, and after I admire the technical prowess, or reflect aloud on shapes I recognize like a hammer in one, or a mug in another, Edwards then tells a story about an old friend, a discovery he made in his work, or his home in Senegal. Halfway through our conversation he answers a phone call and I hear through the other line a voice asking, "Mel, are you in Africa?" No, he responds with a boisterous laugh, *Dallas, Texas*. A far cry from Africa, indeed.

For Edwards, there's a simplicity to an answer like that, a matter of factness to both his location, where he's being recognized in a major way for spending 50 years creating the art on display. But there's also a pragmatism when speaking of his work that can almost seem reductive, but perhaps it's exactly the development you might have in looking at his work. A first read of his work may deliver a story of a man portraying the tools leftover from oppression into these compact, angry steel forms. A second might see them as a beautiful way to silence said tools. And a third read may send you into the blacksmith shop with

Edwards, watching the powerful fusion of one material with another. For Edwards that process is simply reversed. He's there at the beginning, experimenting, creating and recreating his work.

"Welding is a fusion of the same material, steel to steel, and so sometimes to the viewer because they recognize the object they think that's the point. For me, it may have been that it's the right shape, the right form for what I'm doing," says Edwards. "You just keep an open mind about your own ideas. Not so much about the opinions of others."

You can especially see this sort of open-mindedness in his work, as he moves into larger, geometric ideas, like the room filled with the series of rockers. He's playing with form, weight, balance, and display. And he'll tell you this interest sparked from his grandmother's rocking chair. In the downstairs space, there's also a full-scale recreation of the barbed wire installation that took place at the Whitney Museum in 1970, one of the few pieces created from a drawing. It's work immediately recognizable as Edwards', but a departure from the weighty steel pieces upstairs.

Perhaps the greatest variation from his steel sculptures is "'Lines' for John Coltrane and Other Creative People," a gripping piece under the stairwell, created with red spray paint outlines of barbed wire and chains on a copy of the 1974 New York Stock Exchange readings in a newspaper. Here, like with "Lynch Fragments," the title casts a dark, politically-charged shadow over the whole piece. Edwards work, already powerful, become poignant statements bearing their given titles. And like the rest of Edwards work, it's this second or third view of the work, each time with new information or context that makes it irresistibly challenging.

The fifty years of work at the Nasher demands a second or third viewing to learn new bits and pieces of the visual language that Edwards spent decades constructing. It's a fresh conversation with the art every time.

See Melvin Edwards: Five Decades through May 10, 2015 at the Nasher Sculpture Center. Admission is \$10.