

Melvin Edwards' steel sculptures reveal a history of racial violence

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Melvin Edwards: Five Decades



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What can one material say about the history of race in the U.S.?

Melvin Edwards gives dozens of answers to that question in a new exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art. His works, made primarily of welded steel, address social issues and civil rights in abstract pieces that call on the viewer to interrogate racial violence and oppression.

Edwards was born in 1937 in Texas and spent five years in Dayton, Ohio, during his childhood. At the time, “Ohio wasn’t segregated legally as Texas was,” he said. “It had its discriminatory realities, but it was a more open place and experience than Texas was.”

He is best known for a series of works called the Lynch Fragments, of which he has constructed 200 since 1963. Roughly the size of a human head and made from twisted steel parts, each piece directly engages with the viewer, according to Tyler Cann, curator of contemporary art at the Columbus Museum of Art.

“You are caught between this sense of empathy with it, of feeling like it is another person, but then a sense that this is a violated body,” he said.

Cann said he hopes that the exhibition will force the viewers to come to grips with the objects’ combination of beautiful craftsmanship and the pain they represent.

The exhibit is on view at the Columbus Museum of Art through May 8.

Video produced by Jackie Shafer. This report originally appeared on PBS member station [WOSU](#). [Local Beat](#) is an ongoing series on Art Beat that features arts and culture stories from PBS member stations around the nation.