

Viewers steel themselves for a gritty look at art

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Sculptor Melvin Edwards is known for his creation of powerful abstract sculptures from common materials, including scrap metal and barbed wire. [photo provided]

Scrap metal, heavy chains and barbed wire are strong materials, and they are used with gritty integrity, in a show by Melvin Edwards.

The exhibit by Edwards, originally from Houston, is on view through Dec. 27 at Oklahoma Contemporary, 3000 General Pershing Blvd.

Particularly striking are works from his “In Oklahoma” series, created on site or at the studio of David Phelps, using materials from scrapyards.

Art review

Melvin Edwards show

Hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays; and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, through Dec. 27.

Where: Oklahoma Contemporary, 3000 General Pershing Blvd.

Contact: Call 951-0000 or go online to www.oklahomacontemporary.org.

Welded steel chains hang from or drape across steel uprights, reminding us of the legacy of slavery, in four “In Oklahoma” works which greet visitors.

Chains attached to ceiling girders also seem to keep a dull, silvery plane or plow-like blade, safely suspended above our heads, casting wall shadows.

Reinforcing these are a leaning, steel, ladderlike object, two steel circles on a disk, and a lighter welder’s mask on the wall, as if to protect us from sparks.

Barbed wire is another material he uses to fill spaces dynamically, and offer us a pointed commentary on still unresolved historical and social issues.

Suspended from a chain on a girder, a barbed wire creation, called “Oklahoma Circle,” occupies about the space of a large, empty, upside down Christmas tree.

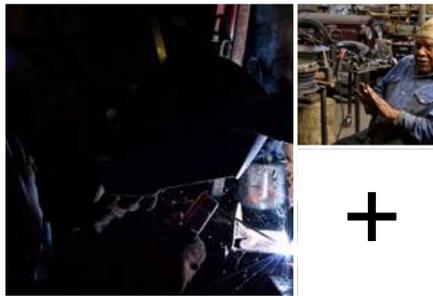
Other spiky barbed wire works enclose walls coming to a corner, as if waiting for some unwary prey to venture into them.

Most dramatic of all is “The Arch,” reminiscent of the ancient Romans, made up of multiple loose strands of barbed wire, piled up over an enclosed space.

Harder hitting is “Vietnam,” containing a pair of bloody looking stretcher-like wall pieces, plus a barbed wire cot, an empty cot, and one covered with red rags.

A gallery note informs us that the installation, first created in 1972, is dedicated to a family friend who “only lasted six weeks in Vietnam before he was killed.”

A bit more subtle is “Three In One,” consisting of three strands of silvery barbed wire, draped between small, compact, welded steel, object-studded sculptures.



These latter sculptures supply a transition to 16 wall pieces from his “Lynch Fragments” series, begun in 1963 in Africa, on the intimate curving walls of the Circle Gallery.

Viewed as a whole, these succeed in compressing both sharp and mundane objects — ranging from work tools to hooks, locks, chains and spikes — into totem-like wall sculptures.

Supplying the show with a two-dimensional element are two preliminary sketches in graphite and ink, as well as four larger, forcefully direct works of “pigmented cotton on abaca.”

Curatorial and exhibits director Jennifer Scanlan described the latter as being where “sculpture and graphics come together,” said Edwards, who has studios in New York and Senegal.

The show by the internationally known artist is highly recommended in its run at Oklahoma Contemporary, with supporting jazz, dance and poetry events planned.

— **John Brandenburg, for The Oklahoman**