Sculpture, Drawings and Paintings, Too

By VIVIAN RAYNOR

THE sculptor Mel Edwards made news last month when his "Holder of the Light," a 12-foot-tall work in stainless steel, was unveiled in Lafayette Gardens, on Grand Street in Jersey City. Commissioned by the Jersey City Tenants Affairs Board with federal and local funds, the sculpture comprises a large disc mounted on a curving support buttressed by another. Cascading from its underside are three smaller geometric forms and a single zigzagging shape.

To celebrate the installation, which is part of the local Housing Authority's urban renewal project, the Jersey City Museum has mounted a small show of Mr. Edwards's drawings and sculptures. It will continue through Aug. 33.

Some of these items pertain to the new piece, others to monumental sculptures at a plaza in Columbus, Ohio, and the campus of Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina.

Meanwhile, at the Kibosen Center Gallery at Rutgers-Newark, a selection of Mr. Edwards's small works in welded steel is on view, together with an exhibition of paintings by George McNeil. This show continues through Sept. 13.

A professor of art at Rutgers's Mason Gross School in New Brunswick, Mr. Edwards has two distinct artistic personalities. The more conventional of them is apparent in the monumental pieces, which derive from the work of the late David Smith; the other is in the drawings, especially when they are done in a thick brush line.

There is a vigor and a sense of commitment in the drawings that recall African sculpture. Two studies for "Holder of the Light" can actually be read as squat, totemic figures.

The drawings, nevertheless, are not preparation for the huge works in the Newark show, which is entitled "Lynch Fragment Series" and spans the last 10 years.

Working with found objects, including hammers, hooks, bolts, spikes, chains, clamps and the occasional large-caliber bullet, Mr. Edwards arched them into compact squarish masses averaging 12 to 18 inches across.

The sculptures hang close together at eye level, running in an unbroken line around the walls of the small gallery. They could almost be medieval torture instruments, except that there is no sign of human figures on them.

On the contrary, they provide from the walls, seemingly unhurried and ready for action, some with tails that allude to Grenada, South Africa, and Paul Robeson.

This Expressionism comes from an artist with something to express, but it makes its statement truthfully. Mr. South seems not to be a people of Mr. Edwards's public sculpture, but in those vast, superbly worked, he becomes the technical means to a very powerful, emotional end.

Not that Mr. McNeil's Expressionism is not impressive, but its source seems to be passion for the act of painting, which naturally makes it easier to live with.

For a recent 26-year survey of his work at Artist's Choice Museum in New York, Mr. McNeil wrote a catalogue statement, "One Man's Expressionism," in which he explained that he came to the mode through "the back door" of 19th-century English watercolors.

"Thus by the greatest luck," he wrote, "I learned at an early age to paint vigorously and freely in response to my feelings," as opposed to taking the normal art school route of "copying" the antique and figures.

As a result of this unorthodox beginning, Mr. McNeil was able to encompass Cezanne, Matisse and the Abstract Expressionist teachings of Hans Hofmann without giving their contradictions a second thought.

Evidently, Mr. McNeil's own contribution has always been semigeneric, not unlike those of Cobra, a group of Expressionists who emerged in Europe after World War II. It also has affinities with Dubuffet, whose "art brut" was derived from the drawings of children and the insane.

Labeled "landscape abstractions," these paintings for the most part are abstract in Gallery work. It is not nonobjective at all, but a painting on a few rectangular forms that seem to be speeding through space.

The paint is the thing. Draped of its oil vehicle, it is applied in twisted ribbons of impasto, scumbled thin over thick, dribbled and splashed. Pentimenti abound, and tonal passages that look like crumbled cloth.

Eventually, recognizable forms emerge. These include the houses in "Earth-Air Abstraction No. 2," along with which floats a huge slash roughly scored in lemon and blue that can be a cloud, an eggshell or an oval planter in "West Athens Landscape." It seems to be giving onto a great curving facade.

Mr. McNeil handles his paint like an automaton. However, he chose his colors like a German fauvist, using a lot of them and savoring their juxtapositions such as blue and yellow, orange and green.

This is heavy stuff from an artist who, born in 1908, was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists, saw action in the World War II and in the post-Progress Administration's Easy to Read division and for many years was an influential teacher at Pratt Institute.

Had he not remained true to nature in his fashion, Mr. McNeil might have made it as a major Abstract Expressionist.

As it is, his painting is returning to the incoming tide of figurative Expressionism, which helps to keep
"Holder of the Light," by Mel Edwards

how right he was when he said: "If you make a mistake in art and carry it far enough, it works for you."

The Jersey City Museum is at the corner of Jersey Avenue and Montgomery Street, and the Robeson Gallery is at 350 Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd."