Freestanding Metaphors of Suffering and Strength

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

A PURCHASE AT the Neuberger Museum at the State University of New York here is an old-fashioned blockbuster exhibition containing a large number of imposing sculptures with historical depth. It is a retrospective of work from the last 30 years by Melvin Edwards. The sculptor, who weilds his steel pieces out of a studio in Plaistead, N.J., is gaining a growing national reputation as a mature talent with urgent things to say.

Mr. Edwards is a large, powerfullooking man whose works are clear records of that strength. The show contains a videotape of him in his alien-looking welder's gear, fusing various metal objects together; it is obvious how readily the forms flow out of the person. The pieces he works on in the video are from his muchdiscussed series titled "Lynch Fragments." There are 70 of these compressed works in the show, and the way they are arranged one after another on the gallery walls reminds one of a string of bullet holes made by an oversized antiaircraft gun.

"Lynch Fragments" is not a pretty title, but the works are meant to disturb; but they also fascinate and elicit an occasional laugh. They range from the essentially frontal and symmetrical "Afro Phoenix No. 2" (1964) to the exercise in loose and loopy forms that is "Dry Days" (1992). Variety results from the deft way the artist skillfully combines his arsenal of materials, which includes heavy chains, blacksmith nails, scissors and even horseshoes, which portend either good luck or bad depending on the way they are turned.

Mr. Edwards traffic in unvarnished sexual imagery and understands how phallic forms can be both threatening and funny. But apart from the emotion residing in each of these fragments, there is an underlying and carefully considered planar structure that might have been inspired by African masks. A fortunate side effect of the exclusion here is the display of over 130 pieces is interrupted by works from the Neuberger's permanent collection of African sculpture. It is bracing to have evidence of the roots of Mr. Edwards's art.

Historically, the fragments remind us of the work of pioneering 20thcentury sculptors like Picasso, Julio Gonzalez and David Smith. But it is fortunate that their work may currently be seen in a major exhibition "Picasso and the Age of Iron" at the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan. But time spent among the fragments gives the impression that they aren't achieved as much by sweat work as by natural, albeit mystical, accretion.

A frequent motif in the pieces is half of an oblong chain link, and his half resembles a magnet, which spurs the sensation that the objects constituting a piece might be magically drawn together.

The overly compacted nature of the fragments - a lynching is often a choking - is countered by an opposite sensitivity in Mr. Edwards's larger work.

A roomful of larger, colorful sculptures reveals a more conventional and social side to Mr. Edwards. In many

A merging of Modernist and African influences.

of these he is taking a page from the book of Anthony Caro, whose works are characterized by the welding together of metal fragments in a linear way so that the pieces recede through and mark a wide area of space.

One of the happiest of these pieces is the brightly colored "Dancing in Nigeria" (1974-78) composed of two wide and airy parts that seem to be inextricable. Some of the metal in the piece is the familiar industrial type that bears a raided A-shaped pattern. In this context, the pattern could signify textile design or the texture of raffia, often worn by African dancers.

If this piece lends itself to literalness, other work is characterized by a balancing off of billowing elements with the look of things that are never far from Mr. Edward's reach. "Hyrtyty" (1981) is composed of a superstructure of stacked yellow triangles and is a fairly geometric assembly. But the elements are disconcertingly linked by a heavy chain hung slackly through them.

A glossary of the African words used for some of the titles is provided for viewers. Although natty is listed as untranslatable, many other words when understood are poetic and set one dreaming. Few exhibitions take the trouble to provide such translations, and it is real service.

Other sculptures are tabletop-size unpainted steel pieces that combine elements of the fragments and the rarer painted works. In fact, one of the earliest Lynch fragments from the early 1960's is not a wall piece but is done on a tabletop. One of these tabletop or pedestal pieces, "Artist's Voice" (1984), features a steel palette with a chain around it, which is easily interpreted as a remark on constraints or censorship.

With large monumental works, Mr. Edwards runs up against the limitations faced by all sculptures meant to fit the immense scale of public spaces. They must, above all, be imposing. Mr. Edwards's frequent device is simply to add chain images to his looming elementary forms, and reverberations begin.

He has also come up with forms he calls "rockers," which rest on half circles. "Pamberi" (1988), which is the Zimbabwean version of the African American proverb "Keep on keeping on" (or "keep on trucking") is a tabletop rocker. Outdoors in the Neuberger's courtyard, "Homage to Coco" (1979) is a boat-sized one, whose arcs are linked by a row of chains, which rattle in the wind.

"Melvin Edwards Sculpture: A 30year retrospective 1963-1993" is at the Neuberger Museum of Art on the SUNY Purchase campus through June 27. The number to call for more information is 251-6100.

Photographs from the Neuberger Museum.