Melvin Edwards
Painted Sculpture
Melvin Edwards: *Painted Sculpture*

October 24 – December 14, 2019

Alexander Gray Associates
In 1968, roughly a decade into his career, Melvin Edwards began making color painted steel sculptures. This might seem an odd turn of events, as there was little in Edwards’s initial body of sculptures that pointed to color as one of his potential concerns. How incongruous, for example, is the thought of one of his signature Lynch Fragments—a series begun in 1963—covered in color? After all, the power of their abstraction is underpinned by the visible, sheer material contiguity of the hardware parts and scraps of metal the artist welds together, and by the palpable sense of the work involved in fusing the original pieces together and de-figuring them in the process. And yet, Edwards was no stranger to color: initially trained as a painter before turning to his preferred medium of welded metal, he had studied key writings in color theory, such as French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul’s *The Law of Contrasts of Color* and developed a critical perspective on the adherence to primaries by earlier modernist practitioners such as the De Stijl artists and Alexander Calder. Sculptural purity was never a concern for Edwards, let alone a deterrent, and this is crucial for understanding both the immense experimental variety of his work throughout the decades and his relation to modernism.

That his interest in color was revived in the late 1960s is not entirely surprising. Like many other artists, Edwards did feel the impact of Pop culture (and Pop art), which translated, as David Batchelor once put it, in the paradigmatic shift from “analogical color”—“a continuum, a seamless spectrum, an undivided whole, a merging of color in one another,” as in Chevreul’s color wheel—to the plurality of “digital colors”—“a grammarless accumulation of units” in which “every color is equivalent to and independent of every other color.” Glimpses of this emerging chromatic order appeared also in a number of modernist sculptures by David Smith and Anthony Caro, but for the most part Edwards remained unimpressed with the deployment of color by most sculptors of the time.

There was one notable exception, though: George Sugarman, whom Edwards first met in 1965. Granted, the former’s wooden sculptures are a far cry from the latter’s welded constructs, both formally and materially. But then again, just like he admired painter...
Jacob Lawrence's sense of composition, but not his particular brand of cartoonish figuration, Edwards’ interest in Sugarman’s sculptures derived not from the search for formal affinities, but rather from the array of creative possibilities he saw them opening up. Sugarman’s bold play of primaries and secondaries went far beyond the “simplistic” color scheme Edwards disliked in most modernist art and sculpture; his colors could be as vibrant as Donald Judd’s, but without the latter’s Minimalist formal restraint. In short, Edwards saw in Sugarman “the sensibility of painter,” a trait that resonated with his own artistic formation.4

More so than Caro’s, Sugarman's sculpture struck Edwards with “the idea that more of the environment was covered by a piece”—in other words, the color-driven expansiveness of his manifold and unapologetic formal inventions prompted Edwards to experiment with an entirely different spatiality than that of the remarkably condensed Lynch Fragments, with sculpture that would need “more area to put the paint on.” 5

Thus the wide surfaces of Yellow Diamond (1968) and Homage to my Father and the Spirit (1969)—the latter's formal concision and juxtapositions of primary and secondary colors represent perhaps the closest point between Edwards’ sculpture and Sugarman’s (one work in the present exhibition, Luxor-Top, from 1983, distills some key aspects of these earlier pieces).

But nowhere else was Edwards' newfound environmental awareness more fully on display—and more fully invested in the conjunction between painting and sculpture—than in his short experience as a member of the artist collective Smokehouse Associates alongside William T. Williams, Guy Ciarcia, and Billy Rose. Their pioneering community-oriented interventions in various sites in Harlem mobilized color—everyday color found in people's clothes and street signs—and geometric abstraction so as to displace traditional figurative muralism, fueled by the belief that environmental change could pave the way for social change.

Now, in a cluster of remarkable works from 1974—some of which form the core of the current exhibition—Edwards strikes a somewhat different chord. The forms remain open, rather than condensed, but the wide, geometric expanses of color give way to far more linear compositions, to geometric expanses of color give way to far more linear compositions, to the point that he refers to Augusta (1974) as “a calligraphic piece” (the title of his drawing series “Lines” for John Coltrane and Other Creative People further confirms that linearity was very much in his poetic order of the day).6

What Edwards seems to be testing in these pieces is color as a catalyst of sculptural dynamism. It is no coincidence then that his constant reference to music as a generative force is so palpably felt in works such as Tan Ton Dyminn (1974) and Felton (1974), as well as—and unsurprisingly, given the title—Dancing in Nigeria (1974–1978). The key shared trait of all these sculptures is the fact that they comprise two entirely separate welded units. Their physical separateness plays an important role in prompting the viewer to consider them in dialogical terms, to the point that the relationship between the parts can be convincingly described in musical terms as one of response, reprise, or even, depending on the case, of counterpoint (conversely, the chain linking the parts of a work such as Ntrytry (1981) begs a very different reading both of the relation between the parts and of their belonging to a whole). In any case, regardless of one’s chosen metaphor, the pairs are visibly linked by a dynamic play of formal motifs, as if one sculptural ensemble either developed, echoed, or countered a motif introduced by its counterpart.

In one of Felton's units, for example, an open and concise ensemble of lines and curves insinuates a low, balanced horizontal expansion that is complicated by its pair, whose own take on the line and curve motifs results in a condensed upwards escalation towards—or perhaps elevation of—a square-shaped plate inscribed by a hollow circle. The geometric precision of the plate stands as a synthetic resolution that clarifies the formal animation of the piece as a whole; from its standpoint, the other unit may well be read as a cube opened up by the work of the semi-circular curves. The monochrome red coating plays a vital role in that it abstracts from the materiality of steel and emphasizes the piece’s quasi-musical sense of progression and cohesion (it is easy to imagine how an unpainted surface might have led viewers to split their perception instead between the play of formal motifs and the materiality of the steel parts).

But it is equally clear that for Edwards the monochrome is an experiment rather than a dogma: in Tan Ton Dyminn, the sculptural dynamic shifts to
This is particularly true of the two-piece sculptures, which can seem to be potentially free to be set at variable distances from one another but also to require a rather exact closeness if their formal resonances are to be maximized. Such reciprocal placement is somewhat theatrical, although not quite in the way Minimalist works are theatrical in Fried's sense of the word. Whereas Minimalist sculpture often relies on formal simplicity and geometric resonance with their architectonic surroundings in order to situate the viewer's body in the here and now of phenomenological experience, Edwards' pieces draw instead on the potential resonance between their formal dynamism and the viewer's bodily movements—hence the dance metaphor. Curves and straight lines read not so much as variations of a geometrical repertoire than as virtual reconfgurations of a body on par with the viewer's own. Thus Edwards' use of an approximately human scale, so that "a person can walk into [the sculptures] and feel the kind of movement they are involved in." 

Notes
1 Melvin Edwards, telephone interview with the author, September 30, 2019.
4 Edwards, interview with the author, op. cit.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 One of the consequences of Brazilian Neoconcretism's peripheral condition was that it took at least three decades after the end of the movement for a consistent international recognition and evaluation of its implications to take place. As for Calder, Clement Greenberg affirmed in 1965 that Calder's "role as an influence has never been commensurate with [his fast growing] reputation," a diagnostic critic Luis Camilo Osorio has recently challenged recalling precisely Calder's enormous influence in Brazil. See Luis Camilo Osorio, "Reverberações cruzadas: Calder e a arte brasileira," in Calder e a Arte Brasileira (São Paulo: Itaú Cultural, 2016). Likewise, a re-evaluation of Edwards' work also entails that of Calder's and Sugarman's.
10 Edwards, interview with the author, op. cit.
Melvin Edwards with Double Circles (1970)
in Harlem, New York, c.1979
Notes on Black Art (1971)
By Melvin Edwards

To talk of Black Art in America is to talk of the African American people. Black Art is works made by Black people that are in some way functional in dealing with our lives here in America. Since the most important thing is our dealing with oppression by White America, our most logical works are those forms of social protest and those which build our self confidence and self reliance. Most African American artists, either deal directly with their own familiar subject matter and symbols, or they indirectly title abstractions with the names of friends, heroes, relatives, harlems, musicians, foods, etc. There is no black artist who has not thought about his condition in America. As soon as Blacks know that a work was made by a black person then it becomes functional. The more explicitly concerned with the ways & symbols of black people, the more positive the response.

In the 20th century in American art there have been times when the confidence of the black artist has been stronger than at other times. When the mural painting social conscious nonwhite Mexicans were affecting the world most dynamically by using the symbols of their being Indian or African. They showed confidently that those were the positive things in themselves and that, to get the positive racial economic truth to their people, was the most important thing about their work. They came to the United States and Harlem and the importance of their ideas were taken into our own works. We are always affected by symbols and ideas that are good for us. Our knowing what is good for us all has not created exclusion of the creative abilities of African Americans. These same conditions are apparent in the music, cinema, theatre, television, and literary works as throughout American life.

The work can either take the form of giving and using ideas, subjects & symbols for radical change, or the works can be of such large physical scale, and in the right places, as to make real change. It should always be known that these works are our methods of changing things. We must search for our own processes & symbols, if we can’t find them in our individual selves then we must find them in our families and friends, in our cities (Harlem or Watts or South Sides or 5th Wards) in our rural Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Carolina, Ohio, Nebraska, Arizona, California, Utah. We must take ideas from Guyana, Brazil, Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad. From the Philippines, New Guinea, India, Ghana, Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt, Congo, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, etc. They are all ours.

The art establishment is offended by the fact that it can be pressured into an exhibition of the work of the American black artist. Historically, American museums did not show the works of African Americans, because they would not consider African American art an integral part of American art. Now that the social & political pressures of the civil right movement has begun to put pressure on museums the art world takes offense and is reactionary. The facades of liberalism are reacting on all the levels. The basic art establishments, galleries, art magazines, collectors, museums, university art departments, art schools, grant & financial aid giving institutions are upset that they can be identified as noncreative racist operations by their documented exclusion of African American artists from a tangible dynamic participation in the various roles and levels in the American art world. The art world and its dehumanizing institutions are not unique in this form of systematic exclusion of the creative abilities of African Americans. These same conditions are apparent in the music, cinema, theatre, television, and literary works as throughout American life.

In 1971 all of this is known and the consequences of the past are sitting on the heads of the present. Museums are being criticized & picketed because of their basic lack of speed in changing to meet the real needs of the variety of cultures they pretend to represent. The real life of this European post colonial western hemisphere nation in North America is built on the land of the American Indian and the backs of African Americans, and contains a fantastically large amount of absorbed African culture and a much larger amount of unabsothed unutilized African American creativity. African dance & music forms have been utilized and absorbed both intrinsically and exploitatively. In the visual arts the absorption came through European colonization and the bringing back examples of African art as the prizes & loot of conquest. Certain aspects (cubisms) of African styles have been utilized since the turn of the 20th century in European
and American art. There was always a body of existing African art survivals in the Americas; in the Spanish, French and Portuguese speaking countries the evidence is highly visible. In the United States the visual creativity of the African American has been ignored and discouraged. Read through any one year of American art periodicals for traces of our heritage. It’s not there. However there are survivals. Survivals are positive examples of the strength of our traditional art systems.

Carved wooden grave sculpture in Georgia related to ancestor carvings in West Africa. Iron works with African patterns, shapes & forms as their decorative structure. Traditional plaited hair styles & clean headed Yoruba hair cuts on our men. Painted faces going back to ritual faces. The complex set of African American quilt patterns and systems have real relationships to African plane geometry. The designs are as complex as woven kente cloth from Bonwire & the choices of antisimilar [sic] harmony in accentuated color choices of organic patterns with geometric patterns against plain color are directly observable in how a Fanti woman in Ghana combines her blouse and bottom wrap. These things are all visually apparent as the connections are made with our heritage.

The important thing is not that the establishment has been offended by the pressures of the times but that African American creativity, on all levels, develop the ideas, tools & actions that provide the revolutionary change necessary for a positive world humanism.

Melvin Edwards, 1971
Melvin Edwards
Painted Sculpture

Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019
Mozambique, c.1974
Mozambique, c.1974
Right: detail
Outdoor view, Germantown, New York, 2019
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019
Tan Ton Dymo in, 1974, detail
"Lines" for John Coltrane and other Creative People, 1974
It's not creative unless it sells.
“Lines” for John Coltrane and other Creative People, 1974, part 1 of 5
Untitled, c.1974
Augusta, 1974, alternative views
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2019
Melvin Edwards

Melvin Edwards (b. 1937) is a pioneer in the history of contemporary African American art and sculpture. Born in Houston, Texas, he began his artistic career at the University of Southern California (USC), Los Angeles, CA, where he met and was mentored by the Hungarian painter Francis de Erdely. In 1965, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA organized his first solo exhibition, which launched his professional career. Edwards moved to New York City in 1967. Shortly after his arrival, his work was exhibited at The Studio Museum in Harlem, and in 1970 he became the first African American sculptor to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Edwards’ practice reflects his engagement with the history of race, labor, and violence, as well as with themes of the African Diaspora. Making welding his preferred medium, his sculptures are studies in abstraction and minimalism. Ranging from colorful painted sculptures that expand on the modernist vocabulary of artists like Alexander Calder to barbed wire installations to tangled amalgamations of agricultural and industrial elements, his work is distinguished by its formal simplicity and powerful materiality.

Edwards remains best known for his series of Lynch Fragments, welded combinations of disparate objects that invite competing narratives of oppression and creation. This body of work spans three periods: the early 1960s, when the artist responded to racial violence in the United States; the early 1970s, when his activism concerning the Vietnam War motivated him to return to the series; and from 1978 to the present, as he continues to explore a variety of themes, including his personal connection to Africa. Edwards first traveled to the continent in the 1970s with his late wife, the poet Jayne Cortez. Since his initial trip, he has returned to Africa many times, teaching welding in different countries before ultimately establishing a studio in Dakar, Senegal in 2000.

In addition, Edwards has a longstanding commitment to public art. Since the 1960s, he has created sculptures for universities, public housing projects, and museums. His commissions include Homage to My Father and the Spirit (1969) at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; Holder of the Light (1985) at Lafayette Gardens, Jersey City, NJ; and Asafo Kra No (1993) at the Utsukushi-Ga-Hara Open-Air Museum, Nagano Prefecture, Japan. Edwards’ large-scale sculptures extend his extraordinary range of aesthetic expression, reaffirming his commitment to abstraction.

Melvin Edwards’ work has been widely exhibited nationally and internationally. In 1993, the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, NY organized Melvin Edwards Sculpture: A Thirty-Year Retrospective 1963–1993. In 2015, the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, TX presented a second retrospective, Melvin Edwards: Five

Exhibition Checklist

Luxor-Top, 1983
Painted welded steel
40.50h x 42w x 37d in
(102.87h x 106.68w x 93.98d cm)

Felton, 1974
Painted welded steel in 2 parts
Part 1: 23h x 95w x 80d in
Part 2: 59.73h x 68w x 64.5d in

Mozambique, c. 1974
Painted welded steel
92h x 71w x 16.50d in
(233.68h x 180.34w x 41.91d cm)

Tan Ton Dymmins, 1974
Painted welded steel in 2 parts
Part 1: 84.5h x 36w x 37d in
Part 2: 66.36h x 78.5w x 34d in

Ntrrytry, 1981
Painted welded steel and chain
57h x 132w x 60.75d in
(144.76h x 335.28w x 154.31d cm)

“Lines” for John Coltrane and other Creative People, 1974
Spray paint on newspaper in 5 parts
Each: 22.5h x 29.13w in

Untitled, c. 1974
Watercolor on paper
23h x 35w in
(58.42h x 88.90w cm)

Other Illustrated Works

Augusta, 1974
Painted welded steel
66h x 61.75w x 56.50d in
(167.64h x 156.84w x 143.51d cm)

Labadi, 1983
Painted welded steel
25.25h x 50w x 32d in
(64.14h x 127w x 81.28d cm)

Untitled, 1982
Painted welded steel
24h x 31.50w x 22d in
(60.96h x 80.01w x 55.88d cm)

Homage to Coco, 1970
Painted steel and chain
48h x 96w x 120d in
(121.92h x 243.84w x 304.80d cm)

Yellow Diamond, 1968
Painted welded steel
Dimension unknown

Dancing in Nigeria, 1974–1978
Painted welded steel
Dimensions variable

Double Circles, 1970
Painted steel
8h x 6w x 10.50d in
(20.32h x 15.24w x 26.67d cm)
Bethune Towers, Harlem, NY

Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid, 1969/
Barbed wire
Dimensions variable
Melvin Edwards: Painted Sculpture
October 24 – December 14, 2019

Publication © 2019 Alexander Gray Associates, LLC
Artwork © 2019 Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, unless otherwise specified.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature without prior written permission of the copyright holders. Alexander Gray Associates made every effort to contact copyright holders for images. Please address any inquiries to the publisher.

ISBN: 978-0-578-60422-0

Cover image: Luxor-Top, 1983, painted welded steel, 40.5h x 42w x 37d in (102.87h x 106.68w x 93.98d cm)

Contributors: Melvin Edwards, Sérgio B. Martins, Page Benkowski
Editor: Alejandro Jassan
Image research: Page Benkowski, Alejandro Jassan, Alexandra Seneca
Design: Alejandro Jassan
Printing: Puritan Capital

Photography Credits:
pp. 2–3, 7 (both), 18–25, 30–41, 46–59, 66–75, 83, 85, 86–87, 93: Jeffrey Sturges
p. 5: Michel Chevreul, Exposé d’un moyen de définir et de nommer les couleurs, planche 3., 1861, courtesy Linda Hall Library via Wikimedia Commons
p. 6 (top): George Sugarman, Kite Castle, 1974, painted cor-ten steel, 219h x 120w x 180d in, courtesy Loretta Howard Gallery
p. 6 (bottom), 10–13: courtesy Melvin Edwards and Nasher Sculpture Center
p. 9: Amílcar de Castro, Untitled, 1995, corten steel, 3.5 in (80 cm) diameter, courtesy Gallery Marília Razuk, © Instituto Amílcar de Castro
pp. 8, 27–29, 42–45, 60–65, 77–81, cover: Timothy Doyon
pp. 14 (top), 15 (top), 17: courtesy Melvin Edwards
p. 15 (bottom): courtesy Melvin Edwards and Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Whitney Museum
p. 16: Valerie Schaff
p. 14: Fred McDarrah
p. 89: Ross Collab

Alexander Gray Associates:

Special thanks to Melvin Edwards, Dr. Diala Touré, Kyle Zynda, Evan Halter, Catherine Craft.

Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

Alexander Gray Associates
510 West 26 Street
New York NY 10001
United States
Tel: +1 212 399 2636
www.alexandergray.com