

"Nobody gets away from identity," says Melvin Edwards,



BY GAIL GREGG

Every workday for the last 19 years, sculptor Melvin Edwards has climbed into his car and made a metaphoric reverse commute from his SoHo apartment in Manhattan back to the tree-lined neighborhoods of his childhood. The "all-American city" of Plain-

field, New Jersey, where his studio sits among modest homes, may be thousands of miles from Dayton, Ohio, and Houston, Texas—where Edwards actually grew up. But the suburban perfume of burning leaves and the quiet streets are much the same.

Edwards atop *Southern Sunrise*, 1983,
at North Carolina State University.

It's a fitting home for Edwards's studio. While his neighbors get their children off to school and mow their lawns, Edwards labors over the intense, intimate welded work that is his signature. Relics of his own childhood in the segregated south are woven throughout his steel relief pieces: bicycle chains, auto parts, barbed wire, cups, knives, farming implements. And many of his larger works make unabashed reference to the rocking chair used by his grandmother Coco.

"It feels very natural to be here," says Edwards, who, at 57, retains his college football player's build—plus a few pounds. "It's a very human exchange. There are days when I'll fix my neighbor's fence—and my neighbor will give me paint he doesn't need."

Inside his fading yellow studio, chaos reigns. It is stacked, crowded, hung, and covered with the detritus of a sculptor's life: odd parts of large sculptures, rusting sheets of metal, welding masks, abandoned tools. Scrambled across a maze of worktables are the very ordinary elements—a piece of iron fencing, a faucet, a chain—that will end up melded into "Lynch Fragments," a series of reliefs begun 30 years ago during the explosive years of the civil-rights movement. The objects themselves seem inconsequential and almost weightless in comparison with the burly, dense bulk that they will become as a "Fragment." These abstract constructions suggest a range of associations with African-American identity. Barbed wire can connote imprisonment or bucolic farm enclosures. A chain can be a tool, an instrument of bondage, or simply a line. Farming tools may represent the sorry lot of southern blacks before and after the Civil War, or a chosen way to make a living.

"Edwards dips into a familiar vocabulary of sculpture, but with his own kind of encoded message," explains Lowery Sims, associate curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "He uses techniques of allusion and association."

The process of association begins with



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the "Lynch Fragment" titles—which often refer to civil confrontations, African gods, and black leaders and culture heroes like Richard Wright and Léon Gontran Damas. "Metaphorically, I wanted to load it up," Edwards explains. "I really did want to find some way to have my concerns about social matters be some sort of starting point for my work."

The reliefs are roughly head-size and head-shaped. *War Again*, one of the 22 pieces recently at the CDS Gallery in New York, is constructed from chain, pipe, and what appears to be the barrel of a gun poking from an opening. *Restless* is more abstract: a swirl of activity centers on a knife blade and sharp arcs of bent steel that look simultaneously threatening and lyrical. *South African Election I* is layered with planes of steel bars and grills, an implied prison enclosing a pair of scissors buried deep in the center.

Just as Edwards's work embraces both the particular and the abstract, it is also characterized by a distinctive kind of material beauty. Edwards creates a sort of blacksmith's palette for his "Fragments," building surface "color" with passages of polished steel and raw seams of the scrubby, dark residue of the forging process. "He brings almost a poet's eye to the assemblage of objects," says Alison de Lima Greene, curator of 20th-century art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

It is this very ability to combine the symbolic, the tough, and the formally

Eye to eye,

beautiful that has earned Edwards dozens of museum shows over the years. But the charged content of his work also seems to have kept private dealers and collectors away from the "Lynch Fragments" series. "They are difficult to include in a private collection because they don't hide their nature," admits Clara Diamant Sujo, owner of CDS Gallery and Edwards's New York dealer. "Their confrontation is a dramatic one."

In fact, CDS was the first commercial gallery to give Edwards a solo show—and that came in 1990, after nearly three decades of work on the "Lynch Fragments." But Sujo and Edwards are hoping this

is the year such resistance will be overcome. In the wake of a 1993 retrospective organized by the Neuberger Museum of Art at Purchase, New York, Edwards's work was exhibited in four one-person shows: at the Florida International University Art Museum; the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College; the G. R. N'Namdi Gallery in Birmingham, Michigan; and CDS. And work from the Neuberger exhibition is scheduled to travel to several other museums around the country.

In the last few months, the National Museum of American Art bought the large *Tambo*, now on view as part of the museum's "Free Within Ourselves" exhibition; Stanford University's gallery purchased *For Richard Wright*; and Houston's Museum of Fine Arts bought three major works, which are currently on display in its "Private Identity and Public Conscience" exhibition. Edwards's work was also included in the Cairo biennial in December and, in 1993, his *Asafo Kra No* won the grand prize of the Fuji-Sankei biennial in Japan.

Edwards notes with satisfaction that his art may, at long last, have begun to pay for itself. For years his main source of income has been a professorship at Rutgers, where he teaches drawing, sculpture, and art history. "Now the art pays to keep the roof on," he says laughing. "Or if the roof blows off, I could borrow the money to put it back on." Edwards's "Lynch Fragments" sell in the \$12,500-to-\$18,000 range; small, free-standing pieces, at

African art is like a deep conversation with family

about \$30,000; and large sculptures in the six figures.

Edwards is a supremely congenial man, and it is hard to detect any bitterness when he discusses this belated rise in fortunes. His career first took off with a show at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1965, just months after he graduated from college and only two years after he began work on his "Lynch Fragments." There followed solo shows at many institutions, including the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (1968), the Whitney Museum of American Art (1970), and the Studio Museum in Harlem (1978). In addition, there were scores of group shows, a Fulbright Fellowship to Zimbabwe in 1988, teaching and speaking engagements around the world—and extensive travel through Africa and South America.

At a recent slide show in Detroit, Edwards treated his audience to a half-hour glimpse into the many subjects and places that have captured his interest. A sunrise in Brazil; a fishing excursion in Ghana; his mother and grandmother; traditional African cloth; his wife, the poet Jayne Cortez; New York's Chinatown; his three daughters; the Barbara Hepworth sculpture at United Nations Plaza—all punctuated his presentation. "All of that," he says, "is who I am."

What that on-screen autobiography portrays is a man both fascinated and horrified by his fellow man—and yet hopeful that humanity will triumph over its worst impulses. His slides of New York reveal not only poverty but also the vitality of Chinatown and the diplomatic promise of the United Nations. They also illustrate Edwards's abiding interest in African art and culture. In a recent essay, he describes an early, powerful "meeting" with African art: sitting in a college art-history class, he noticed a Fang sculpture on the teacher's desk. A male figure with muscular shoulders, it made immediate, intuitive sense to him. "Eye to eye," he wrote, "African art is like a deep conversation with family." He has made it a point ever since to continue that "conversation," studying African art and traditional crafts. During his travels to Africa he has sought out village blacksmiths and bronze casters to learn the techniques they have employed for thousands of years.

But the genesis of the interest may well

have originated inside the home. "We were a reading family," Edwards says. The kind of child librarians love, he would check out stacks of books every week—ranging from do-it-yourself manuals to histories, adventure novels, and the *National Geographic* magazines in which he first learned about Africa. His family also was intensely creative. Edwards's father, Melvin, Sr., who worked days as a corporate waiter, prowled Houston's nightclubs as a photographer; his mother, Thelmarie, was a skilled seamstress and avid reader; and his younger brother, Gregory, is a painter.

Edwards's talent in art was noticed and nurtured in school from an early age. A diligent draftsman, he participated in his high school's elective art program beginning in the eighth grade. As a junior, he was one of six students chosen to attend classes at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. "Being able to see work in a museum was very special, very important," Edwards says. It was there he was introduced to Michelangelo and Leonardo, sparking a lifelong interest in anatomy.

Despite his avid interest in art, Edwards was hardly the stereotypical cerebral youth: he also was a committed athlete. A football player (and member of the swimming and baseball teams) throughout high school, he won a football scholarship to the University of Southern California at Los Angeles—and could have gone on to play professionally if a career in art had not beckoned. Edwards's college education began at Los Angeles City College; he transferred to U.S.C. in 1957, spent a year at the Los Angeles County Art Institute, and returned to U.S.C. the next year, in part to play football. He credits sports with teaching him the kind of stamina and discipline that he would later apply in the studio, and the L. A. County Art Institute with introducing him to students who saw themselves as "real artists," whose primary focus in life was their work.

Edwards's art education focused on painting. But just before leaving college, he signed up for a course in welding—and experienced the same immediate connection he had felt with African sculpture. He continued to audit night classes at the university until he could afford his own studio and equipment. That happened in 1963—and he made his first "Lynch Fragment," *Some Bright Morn-*

ing, soon thereafter.

Because he "sort of stepped into the new process" from abstract painting, Edwards says, he had had little previous exposure to sculpture. "When I started to weld, it was between me and the materials," he recalls. But he credits a number of art instructors with influencing his development: sculptor Hal Gebhardt, painters Hans Burkhardt and Keith Crown, and draftsman Frances DeErdley.

Edwards completed his studies just as the civil-rights movement gathered momentum. As Los Angeles became increasingly tense—culminating in the Watts rebellion of 1965—Edwards began to explore the themes of racism and injustice in his work. "It seemed logical that in some way I should be able to participate through my work," he says.

But although this social charge has propelled his sculpture ever since, Edwards's work remains somewhat apart from the more overtly political, less formal strain in African-American art. For him, the exploration of abstraction has remained as critical to the soul of his sculpture as its narrative content. "I could cast out all the titles and labels, and I have to presume the 'Fragments' would still be interesting," he says.

Finally, Edwards's sculpture is distinguished by its potent transcendent quality. For all the aggressiveness of a work like *Elementary* (1980), with its coil of barbed wire, battered padlocks, and steel spikes, the "Fragments" contain an emotional synthesis. He has taken the rich and varied stuff of his life and welded it into sculpture that not only confronts struggle but also celebrates it. "I consider these events dual," he says of the conflicts referred to in many works. "People sacrifice to make things better."

Remarkably, Edwards is able to infuse the struggle of African Americans with universal meaning. "Nobody gets away from identity, but it's not always declared," he wrote recently. "Identity is the basis from which all art begins." The task Edwards sets for himself in creating a "Lynch Fragment" is familiar to us all: to plumb the memory, to confront the good, the bad, and the ugly of life, and to somehow construct a positive whole from the many pieces. ■

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