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Melvin Edwards at Alexander Gray

by Charlie Schultz



Installation view of Melvin Edwards exhibition at Alexander Gray, New York, 2010.

Melvin Edwards makes unsettling sculptures that answer the call of unpleasant realities. From America's legacy of lynching to our drawn-out war in Iraq, Edwards has been an unflinching artistic responder. He's also kind of funny from time to time, entirely resourceful, and deeply connected to his African roots.

Edwards's solo exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates spanned a 46-year period—essentially a condensed retrospective—of the sculptor's laudable career. Since 1964 Edwards has hit enough blue chip benchmarks to be a major name, but he isn't. (Litmus test: how many art lovers know his work is currently on view as part of the MOMA's permanent collection?) One reason for this is simply because his work is challenging. Unlike Kara Walker who makes difficult subject matter playful to the point of silly, Edwards's sculptures can sober you up.

The majority of the work in the exhibition is drawn from Edwards's on-going series "Lynch Fragments." Nine steel assemblages in gunmetal grey that are about as big as a face hang at eye level. Composed of found objects (such as chains, railroad spikes, mallet and hatchet heads, bolts, and padlocks), these welded wall-sculptures are meant to evoke African masks. They are haunting and enigmatic works that have resisted evolution; *His and Her* from 1964 looks strikingly similar to *Bayou Talk*, made in 2005. The visual congruence of such an extended series adds to the impact of the work, giving it the gravity of something heavy and intense.



Melvin Edwards, *Iraq*, welded steel, 13 by 7 by 7 inches, 2003.

Yet despite his explicit engagement with history, Edwards is at heart a Modernist working in the welded-steel tradition established by Julio Gonzalez and David Smith. His free-standing sculptures *Tools at Rest* (1973), *Five to the Bar* (1973), and *Chaino* (1964) reveal a penchant for precariously balanced geometric forms. For example, *Five to the Bar* is composed of two flat half-circles connected by a single rectangular bar. Additionally, five strands of barbwire hang slack—forming more semi-circles—between the two half-circles. *Tools at Rest* is a study in four-sided forms. In *Chaino* Edwards suspends a car motor between triangular uprights. The sculpture looks like it should fall over, but it doesn't. And that's a testament to Edwards's calculating precision.

Edwards may work with steel and he may confront issues of social violence, but he still has light-hearted moments and they supply a welcome relief to all the heaviness. The most playful work in the show is comprised of the same raw materials Edwards uses for "Lynch Fragments"; the humor comes out in the title: *Steel Life*. Alone the work might seem a little insouciant, but in the context of Edwards's oeuvre it demonstrates the sculptor's ability to touch both ends of the human emotion spectrum, from hostility to humor.