



Art of Defiance: New exhibits explore the role of the artist in social justice movements



Photo by Jeffrey Sturges

"Steel Life" by Melvin Edwards

By Jim Fischer

From the February 18, 2016 edition

"Not every song is a love song."

Quite succinctly — and artistically — does Melvin Edwards, a sculptor whose work is currently on exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art, describe the call of the artist, not universally but throughout history, to a dual role as social critic.

Indeed, it is a similar refrain to that which was offered, unprompted, by a number of artists and scholars with whom I discussed the relationship between art and social justice issues.

To paraphrase: Not all films were meant to be accompanied by popcorn. Not all poems describe pastoral scenes. Not all paintings are going to be of pretty flowers (in particular, local artist David Butler said, "when little black boys are dying in the street.")

Speaking with a variety of members of the arts and social justice communities, including local and national artists, advocates and academics, it became evident that the relationship of art to social justice is a timeline that can be explained in three parts: reflection/reaction, engagement/conversation, and imagination.

"Art is always a reflection of its time and culture," said Rebecca Ibel, curator at the Pizzuti Collection, where the current exhibition, "Us Is Them," strives to "reflect timely and potent issues of social justice and current affairs across the world," per its curatorial statement. "For example, we learn through ancient Greek artists about their society, their culture."

"Certain films, for people of a certain generation — 'Easy Rider' from the '60s, for example — while it's hard to say they changed things, reflected and helped shape their political and cultural times," said Dave Filipi, Director of Film/Video at the Wexner Center for the Arts.

But the artist does more than simply record history, Ibel added, suggesting that "art is about beauty, about a higher calling, about expressing experience."

Both Butler and Edwards confirmed this notion.

"In my opinion, the best artists react to the times they exist in," Butler said. "When you're engaged in a community, treating others and yourself as human, things happen and it affects you, and you express that through art so you don't go crazy. I have a lot of visceral reactions, and I process them by doing. The making process is cathartic."

"I express my opinion," Edwards said. "Everybody's a human being. At one basic level, everybody knows how to treat other people. But the world doesn't always work that way. So, how can we educate and balance life? Those are subjects that I touch."

"Art is not just creating humanizing pathways. It is an attempt at explaining the nature of the world and the creatures who inhabit it," CATCO Producing Director Steven Anderson said.

Issues of social justice are not static, of course, but dependent on the society in which they exist. Equality, diversity, opportunity — these concepts are broadly applicable. As Edwards implied, basic human rights do not have to be a complicated thing.

How these issues manifest themselves specifically from one culture to another, of course, can be as diverse as the societies themselves. Columbus is currently rife with examples of the arts community examining, engaging and challenging the community at large.

The Butler-curated "Perceptions: Reflections on Black Lives" exhibition at the Ohio Art League's X Space at 400 W. Rich in Franklinton, is primarily concerned with the issue of race in the United States, as perceived through the lens of current events, including the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, Black Lives Matter and the related Say Her Name movement.

Activist and filmmaker Cleo Manago will address issues of race in a discussion titled "In My Own Image: From Community Activism to Filmmaker," which takes place Thursday, Feb. 18 at Ohio State University and specifically concerns his work addressing the powerlessness of black men, in particular those of diverse sexuality, through his filmmaking and organizations he has founded, including Black Men's Xchange and Black Life Matters Media.

"Melvin Edwards: Five Decades" is a retrospective that begins with the artist's "Lynch Fragments," sculptures born out of the social and political turmoil of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and '70s.

The yearlong "August Wilson Celebration," hosted by Short North Stage and curated by Wilson scholar Mark Clayton Southers, examines Wilson's storytelling of a century-long journey of a people and their culture from Africa to the United States, as told by Wilson's fictionalized characters. Wilson was at times an activist himself, but most often played the role of "griot," a traditional African storyteller, relating the evolving African-American experience.

CATCO's production of Terrence McNally's "Mothers and Sons" helps to personalize what Anderson called "the enormous loss of a generation of gay men" to the AIDS epidemic.

The Wexner Center's "Not Sustainable" film series is presented in conjunction with Ohio State's campus-wide "Conversations on Morality, Politics, and Society," for which the theme this year is sustainability. Films address topics from toxic landscapes in Russia to failed eco-engineering in Tanzania to the costs of China's economic progress.

"Us Is Them" at the Pizzuti Collection features the work of artists from Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and the United States, and addresses a broad spectrum of issues.

The emphasis of all of these efforts is on art's ability to express humanity in ways other means of communication can't.

"The role of images is important," Butler said.

"My films examine the contemporary impact on black men in a patriarchal society," Manago said. "How many times have you even heard that addressed?"

"Almost since the beginning of film, it has served as a very effective tool to advocate for certain issues," Filipi said.

Dr. Treva Lindsey, professor in OSU's Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, as well as a leading authority on the Black Lives Matter movement, took this idea of art representing humanity even further.

"Art can sometimes strike us in an emotional place. Seeing an image that captures the humanity of a particular moment does move people, giving people the space to consider their own engagement to that moment," she said.

Engagement with social justice art is crucial, from communities that seek and communities that deny that justice.

"I'm trying to find ways to have a conversation," said Butler, noting he hoped his work could engage races outside the African-American community. "I would rather engage people of different backgrounds, share, dialogue, ask questions, to ask them to acknowledge that this is important to me."

"Art in the context of social change is powerful, but it doesn't happen by itself. John Lennon, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Sly Stone. They all had a powerful and wonderful message. If that alone was enough we'd be in a Utopia," Manago said, adding that social justice art's function is "to spark dialogue on issues not being addressed, to raise consciousness on these issues. When interaction is inspired by art, the message can be used and absorbed for social change and transformation."

"These works tap into national debates, but they are based on personal experiences," Ibel said. "It invites the viewer to look inside and look at the world, and to consider how they feel and how they think about it."

"These films look at the consequences of decisions we make as a society, and through that can reach a lot of people," Filipi said.

"I want to be a catalyst for the conversation," Butler said.

The availability of contemporary artists to speak directly about their time and their art to their communities can be a beneficial part of that conversation, offering "a place where art and audience meet," Lindsey said.

"We live in the same culture as these contemporary artists," Ibel said of the work represented in "Us Is Them." "These are young artists and the work is of the moment."

And yet, the final piece of the puzzle with social justice art is the ability of art to not only reflect a past, acknowledge a present and begin a conversation, but then to imagine a picture of the future.

"Images can conjure feelings and ideas about where we stand, but also imagining things we haven't seen yet," Lindsey said. "Artists can show a future where issues of injustice, disparity and inequality are no more."

"Theatre and drama provide two specific avenues to establish a more just society," Anderson said. "They provide enough distance from the subject of abuse or neglect or bigotry so that we as a people can apply our innate virtuous judgment, and they provide us with empathy for people we might overlook or misunderstand."

"I have no illusions that what I do in art will make anyone stop or start doing something, but we can begin a human discussion and express hope for a better world," Edwards said.

"I can never assess how everybody's impacted but there is always someone impacted," Manago added. "We can show transference of attitude, or philosophy."

"It's been 50 years since the 1960s, and as some artists get older they can feel like their art hasn't changed things," Southers said. "But I don't think artists are going to give up being a voice. They will always be trying to make statements."

"Perceptions: Reflections on Black Lives"

Ohio Art League X Space

Through Feb. 28

(Performance-based reflections, 7-9 p.m. Feb. 26)

400 W. Rich St., Franklinton

oal.org/xspace

“Melvin Edwards: Five Decades”

Columbus Museum of Art

Through May 8

(Learning to Look Tour, noon Saturday, Feb. 20)

480 E. Broad St., Downtown

columbusmuseum.org

CATCO presents “Mothers and Sons”

Studio One, Riffe Center

Through Feb. 28

77 S. High St., Downtown

catcoistheatre.org

Cleo Manago “In My Own Image”

OSU’s Barnett Center for Integrated Arts & Enterprise

6-8 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 18

Sullivant Hall, 1813 N. High St., Campus

barnettcenter.osu.edu

August Wilson Celebration

PAST Productions presents “Two Trains Running”

March 3-19

Garden Theater, 1187 N. High St., Short North

shortnorthstage.org

“Us Is Them”

Pizzuti Collection

Through April 2

(Omar Victor Diop Artist Talk, 6:30 p.m. Feb. 24)

632 N. Park St., Short North

pizzuticollection.org

Not Sustainable: Films on Environmental Loss presents “Still Life”

7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 19

Wexner Center for the Arts

1871 N. High St., Campus