

Melvin Edwards imbeds history in his art

By Kiersten Adams

Oct 10, 2023



Melvin Edwards, the first artist-in-residence to debut work at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, working on a piece. — Submitted



Melvin Edwards' "Vision and Purpose III."
— Photo courtesy of Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Melvin Edwards, a contemporary artist and former teacher, firmly states that he is not an illustrator. He is seemingly uninterested in depicting ideologies that define moments, but rather, is interested in the significance found throughout human history.

"I continue to be curious about the world that I live in, and express it through the means that I've learned and that I've developed," Edwards says.

Born 1937 in Houston, Texas, Edwards' rise to prominence started with his first solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1965 in California. In 1970, at 32 years old, Edwards would become the first Black sculptor to have a solo show New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art.

Edwards, who is internationally recognized for his mastery of steel sculpture, painting, and printmaking, creates work that evokes themes of social injustice and race. However, he claims that this is not his intention, but rather the interpretation of the viewer. Edwards isn't chasing motifs, but expresses his understanding of "being" first and foremost.

"People say my work's related to the Civil Rights Movement...well, of course, because civil rights is within the realm of human rights, and always was," Edwards says. "If we want to understand life, we should read, study, [and] get that information.

"If you're gonna go into the forest looking for something, you have to push a lot of bushes aside to find whatever you're looking for," Edwards shares.

Edwards career in the arts started during his time as a student at the University of Southern California where Edwards admits sculpture, the medium for which he's most known, was not his first choice of study.

"The truth is, I was strongly active as a painter," he explains, "but I saw a couple of graduate students welding and I was curious about the process, and got one of them to teach me the rudiments. From that, I developed my work."

Edwards, a self-proclaimed lifelong learner, went on to teach for over 40 years at the Chouinard Art Institute (now known as the California Institute of the Arts) and Rutgers University where his historical appetite was constantly fed by remaining in academia. Now at 86 years old and an artist for 60 of those years, Edwards continues to create sculptures that explore the interwoven history of the African diaspora, politics, and generational human experience.

In his most famous works, such as “Lynch Fragments (1960s-Present),” the artist uses welded steel to explore themes of identity and racial violence. In his watercolor and ink piece on paper “Untitled (1974),” the artist uses chains as the central focus, possibly a reference to human interconnectedness, surrounded by deeply saturated stains of pink, purple, and blue.

In his steel-welded piece “The Lifted X (1965),” a sculpture inspired by the death and progressive mind of Malcom X, the 1975 Guggenheim Fellow reveals he will occasionally name his pieces after individuals to acknowledge that some people and ideas throughout history are worth considering.

“Everything human beings do — every bed we sleep on, every chair we sit on — was somebody’s idea, that’s history. That’s what history is, among many other things, to me,” he shares.

Edwards came to Philadelphia as the Historical Society of Pennsylvania’s (HSP) first artist-in-residence to debut some of his most recent work thanks to Raven Fine Art Editions founder and HSP councilor Curlee R. Holton. As part of HSP’s artist residency program, Edwards created a serigraph of prints entitled “Vision and Purpose I, II, III, and IV.” The printworks were created after engaging with HSP’s collection related to Father Divine, the founder of the International Peace Movement and controversial religious group.

Edwards does not follow the doctrine of Father Divine. His inspiration stems from his anthropological view of human history, that’s what made these prints possible. That’s what makes his legacy of thought provoking sculptures, paintings, and prints captivating.