



MELVIN EDWARDS

in Conversation with

MANTHIA DIAWARA

and **LYDIE DIAKHATÉ**



Melvin Edwards: Sculptures, 1964–2010,
September 8–October 16, 2010,
installation view. Courtesy Alexander Gray
Associates, New York, New York

October 14, 2010

Melvin Edwards: I always thought that art and architecture were supposed to be a part of it all. So I did a lot of reading about architects—the older ones . . . of Gaudi and Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright—and I found things that were positive for me and for my thinking. All of that has always been helpful. People ask, are you doing this research for the *Lynch Fragments* interests? I would say a lot of my public art ideas came out of those. I understand that because often it's conceptual or mathematical, or, how do you say, "the spark"? Certain forms are useful and are taken out and developed into new ideas. I would never rule out ideas; I already had too many, and not yet searched for more.

Manthia Diawara and Lydie Diakhaté: We know that you like abstract ideas, but are you also superstitious? Do you believe in intuition, mythology, coincidence? Because when you were talking, it made us think about all of these things.



Smokehouse Collective (Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, and Guy Ciarcia), *Public Wall Paintings*, Harlem, summer 1969 (different locations: 121st Street and 1st Avenue, and 133rd Street and 1st Avenue). Courtesy the artists

ME: I use all of them. I think that they all are valid or we would not have words for them. That tends to be the way of my own logic, how my own thinking really works, if there is a word for it. You know human beings, and we don't make words for nothing—whether to be used positively or not. It's like any other tool; language is a tool. I had a project, and I boldly announced it to poet Jayne Cortez, and it's called "Before Words"—because "before words" we had to communicate. What I was getting at was, human beings needed to communicate so they made the process of words; it's unique to human beings, as far as we know. But what I am saying is that the need and the concept were there before. But again, when you are talking about conceptual art, let's say that to conceive mentally is an automatic part of any creative process. It's not possible for you to make this film without conceiving of something about how it should be, while changing your conception as it goes. That's improvisation, it's the improvisation that we all do. I don't think that improvisation is unique—it's so quick and automatically a part of things that we forget it. If you write it out in a square, a treatise, then you think it's important.

Michael Brenson asked me something to the effect of how did I know when a work is finished? And I said, intuition. And he was a bit flustered because it wasn't an answer. But I said, I mean—intuition can only exist if based on experience. You know the intuition of a baby and the intuition of a seventy-three-year-old man are very different. But we both still want the cookies and milk.

MD & LD: Who were your black artist contemporaries in LA?

ME: They were Marvin Harden, Danny Johnson, Ed Bereal, Stephon Neon for the African American; as well as the Japanese Ronald Miyashiro; the Euro-American Arthur Secunda, David Lawrence, and David Novros—I worked for his father in film animation.

MD & LD: What was fashionable in those days in terms of art?

ME: It was a bridge period of abstraction, clearly, but they were already dealing by 1964 with the first of the post-abstraction and pop-optical exhibitions, so they were trying to be on the level with New York Art media who made things fashionable, or not. They were trying to make that distinction. LA was dominated by a figurative abstraction. That was the 1950s. In those generations everyone was trained close to the figurative traditions, the standard major and minor forms made by the Academy. So, those basics.



Smokehouse Collective (Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, and Guy Ciarcia), *Public Wall Paintings*, Harlem, summer 1969 (different locations: 121st Street and 1st Avenue, and 133rd Street and 1st Avenue). Courtesy the artists

MD & LD: . . . Why did you move to New York?

ME: Well, New York for the arts was a Mecca, except you don't go and leave—you go and stay. And it's very hard to stay in Mecca. That's what you find out. One thing you find out is New York is the place. It wrecks lots of people trying to be artists here. You have to be strong—it's hard on you, it's hard on the family, personalities. When I got there things were relatively inexpensive in the art community. I was offered a space for \$250 a month in 1970. Later that was the Paula Cooper gallery building—I could not tell you how much that space was worth.

People were hunting for loft space. They needed it. George Sugarman had a studio on Greene Street. He paid \$90 a month, and he had it for years. The older generation people were from the 1930s under the Depression, so their idea of economies—and the art world didn't have much money in it. People were buying things. Not like today's art-world business.

MD & LD: Who were your companions? And what were the movements? The artistic expression?

ME: I've been talking to my friends about this. We're all different from each other. Minimalism was publicly a big deal.

But the truth is people were doing very different things from each other. Newspapers moved up minimalism, and pop and sculpture came off the pedestal, but that didn't mean that artists did. You know, there is a cyclical set of changes, almost like fashion, or close to it. I found artists who've lasted were those who were strong in their individual work.

MD & LD: But what were the issues, the local artistic and social issues that had an impact on the work of the artist of that time?

ME: It depended, it varied. In the black community, there was the Black Arts movement, but the truth is, that wasn't the only thing. Besides, the visual arts weren't the most dynamic, anyway. . . . There were the dynamic veterans, such as Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, and Bob Blackburn. Then I can name Bill Majors, Richard Hunt, Emilio Cruz, Sam Gillian, Ed Clark, Joe Overstreet, Benny Andrew, and Al Loving.

But in any case, as individual artists, we were not so much joiners—Jack Whitten was on New York's Lower East Side, when Amiri Baraka and Ted Joans were here in Manhattan. Some people could not work under the organization of the people closer to literature or directly close to politics. They were not joiners. Amiri became a good friend of mine



Smokehouse Collective (Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, and Guy Ciarica), *Public Wall Paintings*, Harlem, summer 1969 (different locations: 121st Street and 1st Avenue, and 133rd Street and 1st Avenue). Courtesy the artists

later. I liked his ripping satire theater very much. You know those little organizations? When I say little, no matter what size they were, they were really poorly informed about what art was and what it can be in terms of visual art.

The real art movement was bigger than all of us. But they wanted to have little rules. The things I heard, I never had time to care about. I never tolerated . . . people of the visual arts who were inconsiderate of the development of others. I think in relation to the visual arts, my experience with New York people in the movement proper, or in the organizations, I got very little. So I wasn't a part of it anyhow, so it didn't matter. You know, I had come from Los Angeles; I had already moved to the level of having my work in a museum, in exhibitions and stuff. I had another struggle! Avant-garde jazz music was an excellent example of free visions; no strings held you back.

MD & LD: How about Africa at that time? Can you tell us about the arts festivals in Senegal and Nigeria?

ME: The big one that I attended, which is one that leads to this, is FESTAC in 1977. The one in 1966 in Dakar, I heard about but I was young and on the West Coast and no one sent for me. I could not make it to first base.

But the things I saw [concerning the Dakar Festival], and documented afterwards, were very interesting. It was one more thing that encouraged me to want to be in Africa. Four years later, in 1970, I went to Africa with a group of educators. But I went to the FESTAC in 1977. The good thing was that I went to Nigeria before, and I saw some artists I had met; it was already a reunion. The diaspora, the variety of places and people that we consist of. . . . It was more than exciting—it was important. I remember the village in FESTAC village Lagos. All the different countries were housed near each other. And in the off time, some people were rehearsing, so you heard all this music at one time. There were people and music from the Ivory Coast, music from Chad, music from Egypt—it would be incredible if you could put it together.

We were walking around, meeting each other and talking. And the American group was interesting, too, but no one group could cover everything. But the age thing of the Afro-American artist was also important: the elders like Ernest Crichlow and Vincent Smith, the West Indian diaspora, or William Williams, doing his laundry, a T-shirt on a balcony, were the scenes at FESTAC village.

As Jayne Cortez and I remember, Ama Atta Aidoo was there, and in different situations when the bus driver drove us to the bar and told us he had to do something administrative and left us outside for about an hour. I mean, everything was going on.

Damas Nwoko did *Children in Paradise*, which was a drama with music—in Europe you would say “opera,” but it wasn't done that way; there was no soloist. It was very collective. It was based on how he knew things in the village. But what it looked like was Japanese theater. The familiarities of traditional African life have mirrors elsewhere in the world; similar things have developed totally uninfluenced one by the other, and Nwoko was aware of that. He wasn't trying to make the connection, but it was a reality. I could make the connection. It was a reality I recognized. What I liked about that festival was the reality. You can find what comes from different places: Mozambique, Jamaica, and Angola.

MD & LD: . . . What was the purpose of your first trip to Africa? Was it in Nigeria?



Smokehouse Collective (Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, and Guy Ciarcia), *Public Wall Paintings*, Harlem, summer 1969 (different locations: 121st Street and 1st Avenue, and 133rd Street and 1st Avenue). Courtesy the artists

ME: It really was more than Nigeria, but Nigeria was a part of the first trip, which included Ghana, Togo, Dahomey, and Niger. It was ETA, Educators to Africa, formally sponsored by the University of Connecticut and Howard University and the African American Institute. I was teaching at the University of Connecticut. And I tried to get a grant to travel that summer but they turned me down. But then I heard about a trip sponsored by the AA Institute, and Jayne got a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and it sponsored her part of the trip, and I was reading her papers and it said it was sponsored by the University of Connecticut, where I was teaching, and by Howard University, so I went back to the university and said, you turned me down for going to Africa, plus you sponsor this trip. So it's covering the area that I would like to do, so they sponsored my participation in the trip.

It was six weeks in Ghana, Togo, and we passed by Dahomey [Benin], and Nigeria. The first three weeks were in Ghana, and we were in Cape Coast for two weeks; also a week in Accra and a week in Ashanti region, in Kumasi, because it coincided with the "instoolment" ceremonies for the Asantehene Opokoware. He was the first coronated in

forty years because his predecessor had lived that long, and we were there. In that week, we went to the stadium. It took half a day for the units of people to come into the stadium. Each had an entourage of fifty to one hundred people and they were drumming. They were dressed not just in the traditional Kente cloth, but the funerary version, all black or rust colored; and women had their heads shaved. So combine that with all of that, and it took all day for all of the entourages to come together; so by four o'clock (it started at noon), it was a hum of sound, drums, iron bells, just everything.

MD & LD: Let's tie that together. You look at Countee Cul- len, "What Is Africa to Me?," and Langston Hughes, "I've Known Rivers." You look at Senghor, "Femme noire." What is Africa to you?

ME: Well, it's home. I don't know why, but in my family there was never any reticence that we were African in a sense that that is what African Americans are. We used the word *Negro*, but all in all it means the word *African*.

MD & LD: How about your identity as an artist? What is Africa in that?

ME: It is as essential as it can be. Without it I don't know what I can be. I don't know what type of person this could be. A part of that is a concentrated experience of African Americans in the South, because Houston is a twenty-first-century city, with families from the rural areas in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, plus the two generations before who came up from slavery out of Alabama and the eastern part of the South. What that meant was growing up segregated. One way to see it was negative; or another way is to see that our community was African. And it was all the varieties of Africa that you could think of. There were people who looked like they never left the continent, and some were fair.

Everyone's family had some type of African, mixed all types of ways. And no matter what, no matter the petty details, the contradictions, we were everybody. We were black.

We got on the bus and we got in the colored section.



Smokehouse Collective (Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, and Guy Ciarcia), *Public Wall Paintings*, Harlem, summer 1969 (different locations: 121st Street and 1st Avenue, and 133rd Street and 1st Avenue). Courtesy the artists

But you know? What that should have said is the "African Section" [*laughs*]. Because there were times when we took over the bus. You know, we had to sit in the back.

But there were times, like football games, and extra buses were put on, and we'd all ride to the side of town where the stadium was. And we'd ride from the fifth ward, our section. We would party on the bus. Some of the bus drivers were good spirited about that and others were not. The bus danced all the way to the stadium, and then all the way back, and if the bus driver did not like it he often got put off the bus, you know?

MD & LD: And your family was very supportive of your work, of your desire to be an artist? Did you think that art was the way to build the connection with Africa?

ME: Yes, my family was supportive of the truth. There are families that had questions about it, but they were always supportive. My family wanting to participate in art in one way or another was not new. My first easel for trying to paint was one my father made with his friend. He worked for the hospital section of the Southern Pacific Railroad. And he came home with an easel, and he tried to paint a painting with my mother, and it was terrible. So he abandoned it and I got to use it. He had free paper he could bring from work. His friend from work was better trained, and an amateur artist, a Mr. Gilbert, who had recommended an art book to study, one of those anyone-can-paint sort of storybooks, and it was helpful. He told me that I needed three brushes and that they would cost money. And they cost three and five dollars, and that was a lot of money for a fifteen-year-old young man. And the way art was in Houston at the time, the only art supplies were in a photography shop, so it wasn't a city that had a lot, but art supplies were available.

He told me what to buy, what to get, what to try. And I stole two books, one called exactly *Anyone Can Paint: Advice to a Young Artist*, by a French artist, at a small library in the Colored Section of Houston. I still have it. The only thing I am sorry about is that I ripped out the library identification. I wish I had it for history's sake. But anything I tried to do, my parents were fine with. When it came to art as finally a career kind of choice . . . they wanted to know how I would make a living with that as a black person.

I said commercial art, but I didn't know what that meant. But they encouraged me. My father sang and modeled for the art school in Houston after his job on certain days. My family read a lot, and my mother read an awful lot. So between athletics and reading a lot, I was a regular teenage boy that was no problem. The only concern was if there was a possibility to go to college . . . because my family didn't



Melvin Edwards, *Chaino*, 1964. Painted welded steel and chains, 62 × 102 × 26 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

have much money, and my aunt came to the rescue. She lived in California. At that time, Los Angeles City College cost nine dollars a semester, until Reagan came along. And many people did what I did: graduate from high school, find ten dollars, and get into college. In high school I took art every semester. In the university, it was my major.

In terms of my family and my art as a sculptor—that is, working with metal—I didn’t know it in those days, but I found out, later in the 1970s, that my great-great-great-grandfather was a traditional African blacksmith. We don’t know from what country. But he was brought as a young adult into slavery—he was a slave and was sold in one of the ports in the New York area to a family in the Carolinas who then moved to Alabama, and he served his years in slavery in Alabama and probably lived his whole life there. But he lived to be 106 years of age, and to the early part of the twentieth century, until 1906. My mother told me the story in 1976. She had just got the story from her uncle, my grandfather’s brother, who lived in Detroit. She was just

telling us about the family, and about Fed Felton the blacksmith; and it was probably a corruption of “Fred” because one of his descendants was named Fred. But the interesting thing is that he was trained over there, and in this period of slavery, what he did was metalwork—you know, on the plantation? I don’t know the nature. Wagons? I don’t know. Uncle Charles Felton told my mother the story. So when he told my mother that Fed was a blacksmith, she said, “That is what my son Mel is doing.” But it fits with what I was told in Zimbabwe about family and occupations. Anything that gets passed to you directly, which was fairly easy and normal in the old days, you know somewhere in your life you will get an epiphany. You are called; you feel like you want to do that; and I think that it happens. You find it with artists who start a little later, and don’t start from school or that kind of thing.

MD & LD: But you had said that you started very early?



His and Hers, from the *Lynch Fragments* series, 1964. Welded steel, 10¾ × 6 × 4¼ in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

ME: I started with art, but not with sculpture or metal. I was an art major. I got a couple books about sculpture when I was a student, but I was a painter primarily. But I took sculpture because everyone was required to take it in those days. You took drawing, painting, sculpture, and ceramics, and sometimes printmaking as your introduction for the first two years.

And then after that you concentrated, and I concentrated on painting. I took an extra sculpture class, and when I took that I saw some MA students welding, and that got me extra interested.

So I took a night class from one of the George Baker grad students, and he didn't teach me any art but he taught me welding, real simple, real direct, and then he would say, "Don't bother me, I'm busy."

We [Mel and his friends] would find where to play and where to dig small clay, and we would make little things. We didn't think we were sculptors. We were making things. I hit my best friend in the head with a wheelbarrow, a wooden toy. He teased me about some funny socks that my mom bought for me. I made the apple craft wheelbarrow. We did

all kinds of things. Again, with African connections. You know, the African game with the board and the rocks. It has different names in different places. We did one with marbles but you didn't have a board, you just had holes in the ground. I think we called it Dropsies—because you put a certain number of marbles in your hand, and you drop them in a hole. I no longer remember the details of the game; I remember the configuration. I remember seeing the game board in Africa; that's one of those things that continued that way. That summarizes a lot of the African sensibilities of African Americans. You have the concept in your head or your spirit somewhere, but you don't have the detailed structure. It's too many generations ago. But the concept related to it, that's there somewhere in Africa.

What I think remains or stays with you has moved with us. These concepts are things you learn from other children. You don't learn these from adults; you learn this in the interaction of children. . . .

MD & LD: You and Jayne are now spending a good part of your lives in Senegal. You have a house in Dakar. Could you tell us about that?

ME: My work is mature. It's not going to change much anymore, because I am not a beginner or looking for things to add. What I find, and what I have found from the beginning, are more confirmation of the influences and collaborations. The ideas that I have, they do make African sense. By the way, I normally don't do this, but my nickname in high school was Jungle Boy. . . .

MD & LD: So you were born for adventure. And you were happy with that.

ME: I was a football player. I was wild and aggressive.

MD & LD: Tell us more about your experience in Senegal. . . .

ME: . . . I knew something about Senegal, generally historical. But in '97 Jayne and I were going through to Ghana. We were thinking about an idea of something in Africa. We had thought for years that things worked out naturally, and I was making a little bit of money off the sculpture art for a change. They were doing housing group complexes for gated sections, and they were affordable. And they cost the price of a car, an automobile that fit our budget. But in going to Ghana, we stopped in Senegal on the way, and we visited with Souleymane Keita [Souley]. We said, Someday we will do something in Senegal. That was the conversation with Souley. Soon they made a proposition in a farm



Five to the Bar, 1973. Welded steel and barbed wire, 14 × 20½ × 20 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

project we were involved in. It was very affordable, and it involved seven hectares of land. And it all grew together. It wouldn't make us any money, but it would pay for itself and the people that did the farming, and that was fine. Just for me, just to take the step, to go around the rhetoric of return to Africa. Jayne and I were sold on that. It was her push, to tell the truth; it was the kind of thing we had talked about for years.

But at the same time, it came up that Souley and I had tried to get going on a project out of the Gorée Institute, to do prints with three artists from different places—me from the US, Keita from Senegal, and Breyten Breytenbach back from South Africa. And the concept would produce a printmaking workshop and situation, where young black artists could be trained. It was an exchange idea, it was a service center. It got as far as us completing our project after two years; but the institute did not have the energy to push it through. As a result, we have the portfolio, which is a collaboration between us. One who profited from it very much was Amadou Kan Si—he helped it.

In any case, at the end of the two years it happened that

Souley was building his own studio right near his house in Dakar. Next door, there was a compound that looked like the beginning of some construction that was abandoned. And we asked what was that, and it turned out to be that a lady was trying to build a house for her mother to come in from the countryside. And her mother said, Look, I am not coming into town; that is what her mother said. So, anyway, Jayne talked to Souley, Souley talked to a couple other people [to acquire the house for us], and finally it was available, very reasonably. And since his studio was going up at the time, and our plans went together very quickly, and I guess there it was. By the year 2000, toward the end of the year, middle of the year, we could sleep there.

MD & LD: Do you have your workshop there?

ME: The first place I actually worked was literally at the farm project, because we had electricity to run the pump and stuff. I was making small pieces there, since I had a house in Dakar, and it wasn't always convenient to go to the farm in Mermoz. There [in Dakar] was a steel fabricator of gates and



Nam, from the *Lynch Fragments* series, 1973. Welded steel, 15 × 15 × 7½ in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

utilitarian metal. And so Bakary Mbaye, who lived within the block of the shop, talked to them. I bought a welding machine; they said I could come and work. Although they didn't know what I was doing, Yusuf Ndiaye, the director of Frères Ndiaye Metal Fabricators, said okay.

And I suppose they had any number of strange requests from foreigners. But after about three days of work—about half a dozen people who worked there—some of them came in. They didn't speak English, I didn't speak French or Wolof, and one of them came in. My work may have seemed odd looking to him, and he said to me, "That's art."

I know what he said was the equivalent of "We know you are making art." I am paraphrasing it.

MD & LD: Why is that? Is it because they make functional things? Why is that? What did he mean by "You are making art"?

ME: Well, they have no question about what they are doing. When they say "art" they are not declaring you are on a pedestal or taking one. They are just declaring that they see art. And it is sort of a different genre of metalworking.

Because they see—I can weld. I can do technically the same things they can do. What I am coming up with is

something else. So they declare what I do as art; that is the delineation of what I do.

MD & LD: But what do you think about the debate around African art as functional art?

ME: This isn't a debate. It's like if you told me I just walked in the door and I am not functional. But I walked in the door.

MD & LD: Let me make it harder. What is art to you?

ME: It's a three-letter word [*laughs*].

MD & LD: The African welders saw your stuff and said, "That is art." Okay, tell me, what is your definition of that?

ME: There is nothing to define—I just do it.

You know I am going to get to your point, but with another very nice interpretation or encounter around what I do in an African context. Back in 1970, I met Nana Osei Bonsu, who was the chief carver for the Asante in Kumasi. And he showed me some pictures and took me around to the various shops where his sons and grandsons worked. His grandfather was the Asantehene. In his system you don't say "prince." You were further away from the title after each succeeding generation. And he found himself in the occupation of a carver. He became exceptional at it. He showed me photographs. He gave me—but I also bought—a couple of Akwaba dolls. I gave them to my daughters. That is what they did. But when I showed him my work, he said, "Oh, beautiful machines." I don't think that between actual artists or actual workers we need to make these definitions, which are after all tools for writers and critics. I'm not saying that they are not useful, because you need to have words that help people understand. But the detail of what is art, for me, is always something done at a high level. Everyone that makes a sculpture is not a sculptor, but with a sculpture at a higher level, we have the artist.

When my daughter is scratching lines, she's not an artist, but she is having fun with art. And she should. And there shouldn't be any pressure on that, or anyone else that wants to fiddle with art, play with art, and amuse themselves with art.

MD & LD: And what do you say about conceptual art? What is your opinion?

ME: You can't create anything without conceiving. Any type of art has a conceptual sector. That is just the mental aspect that happens before the actualization. Conceptual art is a rhetorical label for people whose work, you might say, dia-



Machete for Gregory, 1974. Welded steel and barbed wire, 31 × 40 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

grammatically expresses their idea more than visually. In other words, the visual is more like a diagram. The words tell you what you are thinking. In the world of conceptual work the concept does the thinking for you. It's the idea that precedes the physicality of reality, the tangible. Now they want to talk more about this idea of concept as the aspect of art itself. I am old enough to know that, but my own work has always been conceptualized.

It's like saying people who improvise music don't think about it as much as people who write it out. Well, that can't be true because the key in the improvisation is the time spent between conceiving and delivering the art, you know? The musician conceives a piece almost immediately. You can't separate what happens and how it was conceived.

My art is always about improvisation, I'm improvisation. Today or tomorrow or next week . . . I am improvising. . .

MD & LD: . . . And how do you interact with the public?

ME: Well, that's for the larger scale of work that would make it public work.

The way my art is developed within me makes me want to say that I am socially expressive as an artist. I would rather say that than a limited term like a social realist, or a social protest artist.

All of those possibilities are within being socially expressive. I express the world as I am interested in it—as I see it. Sometimes it coincides with what others are doing or saying. If I can narrow it down, one side of me discusses the world as it is, the other side guides my response to society—something that should live, and should be a part of the development of society, something new, not just how I feel.

I do take feelings seriously, but if all I am doing is expressing my feelings, what am I doing about how I feel? I have to relate to people and want to relate to people. They usually have specific direction, and when I say "specific," it doesn't have to have one limited design or methodology.

The concepts I am using, they are there because I want to use them. Some of the public pieces, the large-scale things I did when I was young, in high school [1952–55]. I would look at books and how they designed new cars and streamlined the design process. Early in college, I was



Weapon of Freedom, from the *Lynch Fragments* series, 1986. Welded steel, 11 × 9 × 6 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

interested in the inventedness of boxes. I believed in the idea that society tried to do something for people that they could use. Well, I also looked at knives, forks, and spoons, or buildings.

When I was in high school, I took a little architecture for a semester, and there was a fire in the architecture room, and we didn't get to finish it because the space was burned. But luckily the tools and equipment were saved. The teacher gave them to us and we could use them as we wanted. So we had T-squares and drawing pens. And I looked at how things were made, and I drew a car.

When I was five and six me and my friends would draw automobiles, in the late models, in the '30s and '40s, and they were in a curved kind of form. When I tried to design years later, they were more boxlike. For the first time, I had the idea that doing something should be practical. That is what I thought I was doing. And that was practical because of the T-square triangle. In any case, let me say that of all the creative things that we do, my preference for much of it is functional.

I understand conceptual art and stuff like that very well. But much of it struck me as graduate school projects. No matter a person's level of reputation, my honest feeling is that I'd rather develop something that will improve the world that we live in.

If I think in terms of the African American community, as

an example of peoples in need, in relation to the world, it is clear that we are not the ones that make the choices. The art world makes them for us. But we'd rather let the art world over there doing something that we don't consider seriously, rather than changing the way the world is.

MD & LD: So you think that artists should put more pressure on the art world as it is? That they have to give more support to public art? Life? Creativity and social change?

ME: We need more focus on human development as opposed to entertainment. More entertainment leads to distraction; at least, that's how I feel about things. I think we are supposed to be serious. I remember the mentors and advisers I had through the years—Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis—they were quick to declare if something wasn't serious. Because they didn't have any time.

I used to talk to them. There were enough foolishness, enough waste of ability in society and art then too. But what was important were artistic creativity and capacity. We appreciate Romare Bearden's work, but it doesn't get anywhere near the level that he really was as a creative person. The same with Norman Lewis. Joe Mugnini, the teacher I had at the Los Angeles County Art Institute, was looking at my drawings and stuff and he said, "You are making progress." He said, "Okay, now you've got your weapon." We never talked about the conditions of the world. But he knew by experience.

MD & LD: Are you concerned that the new media will affect the way we perceive art today?

ME: It will always be different. I don't mind difference. I am a little old, so the language won't be a tool for me as it will be for my grandson, but I am not afraid of it. I am a part of the creation of the people who went to the Moon, the people who are going to Mars. My father wrote a little song once, about building Houston. Well, it was such a funny place; it's because he knew the place from 1920 on, when all those people came in from the country and started to build the city into an industrial complex. A part of it is also the human ingenuity that often wasn't protected, or used up and forgotten; the human ingenuity that was wasted.

That's what I see when I talk about the waste. People are talented, but people don't often have a place to constructively put their talents. This place I happened to make in the art world was nice, but it could have been much more.

MD & LD: What is the project with the tapestries of Thies in Senegal?

ME: First the idea was to do one tapestry and see how it worked out. I knew Papa Ibra Tall through his tapestries coming here in earlier years [1960s through 1980]; I had seen the one at the United Nations, and I had some sense of the story of its development.

I had been to Thies, in 1982, to see the place. Papa Ibra Tall wasn't there at the time, but I got a view of the place; it was one of the things that an artist had to do. . . .

What I am getting at is that it was sculpture that was architecture, that had a function that was important to people. The idea of tapestry in Europe was to keep the cold walls from radiating the cold for people. It was like rugs to insulate the floors. But they made them in beautiful forms. Some were topical stories, or heroes, or people or whatever. And when they developed the contemporary tapestry in Europe [1940–50], Senghor was affected by them. He appreciated modern art, Picasso, other people who took interest in Africa. Then developing a tapestry became a modern idea so he supported its development in Senegal.

Senghor was president and a poet with some real creative sensibilities. The short of it is that I went back to Dakar and talked to Papa Ibra Tall in Thies, and two weeks later I had the maquette. He made the estimate, and I could afford it and sent in the check from here for half of the cost.

When I came back, it had made some progress, and the next trip it was finished. I showed it to William Williams, who was working with Llowery Sims on a project for his show in Maryland. He told her about my new project. She's dealt with my work before. She said, I heard you've been making sneaky stuff in Senegal. She said, Can I see it? Can I take a look at it?

We couldn't get it on the wall. It's about the dimension of this rug here. And in any case, she said, Well, can I use it for my show? She was doing a show [Global Africa at the Museum of Art and Design, New York, 2011] that has objects that have African functional references or uses. I got to photograph before I got back to Senegal in May. The funny thing is that seeing the image in the photograph, I developed more ideas for the piece. The chain form was there—I used two of them, and called it *Lightening*, or *Éclair* in French. There is a sculpture of mine, titled *Holder of the Light*, from '85 in Jersey City, New Jersey. After it was completed, they had to remove it to renovate the place. They demolished the houses and created a new housing space. The reinstallation ceremony was in October 2009. It would be really nice to show the two pieces together, but you can't, because one is twelve feet high in stainless steel.

When I made the commission for a five-foot-high version, it would have been shown somewhere together with the tapestry piece to show the relationship. I am getting back



Iraq, from the *Lynch Fragments* series, 2003. Welded steel, 13 × 7 × 7 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

to your earlier question about the marriage of art with functionalism. And it goes back to my work and the collaborations with William Williams, with the wall paintings we did with our "Smokehouse Group," in the late '60s. I say wall paintings, not mural.

We decided they would be absolutely abstract, so not like the mural that told people what to do, but murals that actually change the space. So we were doing a real change in urban environment. That's what I mean by making the space more functional for people and they can do what they want with it.

A good example of that is what happened on 121st [Street] and 1st Avenue. It was a small city park that the drug dealers took over. The city never bothered to repair it. We did the walls on this corner, here and there, and we did these two walls and people started to come back, and the city did the seats. The guys dealing the drugs went somewhere else. It was a wonderful microcosmic idea. The arts can be used to change places, not to decorate, but to *change* places. Then it has a much more dynamic function. This is when you are building cities, you do it with an aesthetic option.



Bayou Talk, from the *Lynch Fragments* series, 2005.
Welded steel, 9 × 8 × 7 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates,
New York, New York

Art as part of development is more profound than the real estate business, where it ends up as investment in exploitation but nothing for the masses.

MD & LD: You're currently involved in several new shows. Can you tell us about them?

ME: Well, one is a group show at Hunter College. The Hunter College show is *Americana*: in part, the variety of techniques that different artists use—their approaches. Some are traditional ways of doing things, but I am a little off from it. In Hunter College, a chair is made with Texas pine, one by Don Judd. Just a simple approach, but structurally sound and sculptural in appearance, looking not like, but in the spirit of, the Dutch school. In mine, I used hand techniques. Another guy in the exhibition used a pattern that looked like a quilt, but it's all metal. And that was the point of view, one from a different decade of my identity, so, from the turn of the century back to the earliest ones in the '60s.

I have four pieces at the MOMA. Two were made in Zimbabwe, 1989.

And just for the sake of discussion, there is a whole Warhol wall, and my work just beside it. But the show at MOMA is full of stuff like that.

The show with Alexander Gray is historical. There are two pieces from 1964, one of the *Lynch Fragments*, and the other, *Chaino*, which is suspended. Those were from a long time ago—1964.

Chaino has that name not because of the chains, but in part because of a combination of the names of Chano Poso and Chino Pozo, the Cuban drummers, who brought Afro-Cuban drumming into the Dizzy Gillespie orchestra, and brought Cuban music to New York and the United States. So I put the names together, for the title; and those were the two pieces that were suspended.

The other pieces in there were one barbed wire unit with a machete, which I called *Machete for Gregory*, a reference to my younger brother. But it had to do with the idea that the ones coming after me, in this case, they've got a warmer environment to deal with. So I am giving them a tour, if you want to be literal about it.

MD & LD: Tell us about the linear material and the barbed wire and chains.

ME: And the other was a vision of the rocker, it had mobility. I developed the kinetic principle from my grandmother's rocking chair. Then, the two other horizontal pieces—one called *Tools at Rest*. You will find the presence of tools in a lot of them. This is the bit or bar from the jackhammer when they break up the concrete. It's one piece of steel just hanging there, or lying there. Then the other one on a pedestal is the steel tools of steel life.

The idea of barbed wire came up two or three times. Once, in 1969, at the Studio Museum in Harlem and SUNY Stony Brook. Next at the Whitney Museum with my 1970 solo *Wire Chain Works*.

One is very simple. Remember I talked about the origin of words? Well, barbed wire is a normal agricultural material. I am from Texas, in the country. My cousins would laugh, as I often tried to cross the fence and got stuck. And once I started using the sculpture, it was geometric, dynamic, and barbed. A line. A mass. No one had before used the material as a line.

In the twenty-first-century history of modern sculpture—I wasn't thinking to that extent—but I realized that after I did it, how I had done it. Not only was it a line, but also the barb gives it other implications. In agriculture it kept the cows at home. In concentration camps it was to oppress people.

There were also Native American concentration camps in the 1880s with barbed wire. And the Germans used it in Namibia [1910], and they took it back and used it on the



Melvin Edwards: *Sculptures, 1964–2010*, September 8–October 16, 2010, installation view. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, New York

Jews [1940]. And the truth is Jewish people in the German military, in that period, didn't have the conflict with Germany that they had later; so it got used on them too.

MD & LD: So you think about the different ways that barbed wires and chains have been used in history. It becomes repetitive, rhythmic, like jazz.

ME: That's art. It's theme and variation on ideas. If it's one material, two materials, mixed materials—it depends on what a person wants to do.

The first time I showed chains and barbed wire independently was at the Studio Museum in 1969. You may dig that up at a *New York Times* review. With Will Williams, Sam Gillian, and another artist, who was white, Steve Kelsey, we organized that show, and one of my pieces was two separate one-hundred-foot-long lengths of chain.

They were slightly different dimensions. And they were just on the floor and left. And people kicked them around, and William had a ten-year-old nephew named Michael who had a ball with the chains. People wanted to know—why are they carrying the stuff along? That was the idea. Was that conceptual?

Then I did the barbed pyramid up, pyramid down, in that same exhibition. Sam had his very large papers, and

William had very large paintings, and a few people were upset because William had included a white artist. Those were the early days of the Studio Museum. You know, we got past that.

More recently a group was trying to show that they are not just playing to white people. Postblack now.

MD & LD: How about the chains? You gave a full-blown definition of the wire, but what about the chains?

ME: Well, the chains are the same thing. A steel rope, a metal flexible line. You can move it, and it loops and hangs and suspends. Sometimes it's a connector. On one level, it's just a material that can be used a lot of ways. Sometimes I use it so much you can't see it. It's just steel, that melted steel. You know steel—it's subject to heat and it can be melted. But I am always aware that it's got a symbolic reading that is hard to get people away from. So I don't try to get them away, but the word *chain* is the device for connecting. If you refine chains, they become love. Chain of love, chain of fools, chain, chain, chain. There are several songs about that.

It's also symbolically chains of kinship linkage. The problem is not the chain; it's how people use it. It's like the old chime: it's not what you do but how you do it.