

# Art

## Melvin Edwards

★★★★

Stephen Friedman. ► Jan 17.

From the safe distance of our drizzly European home, it's hard to imagine how turbulent, violent and emotional things are in America right now after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. But in its own small way, this show by US artist Melvin Edwards is bringing the political turmoil crashing into London lives. Since the 1960s, Edwards has been a pivotal figure in American art, a black voice speaking out against civil injustice. The works here span his entire career and their resonance with current events sends a shiver down the spine.

You start with his 'Lynch Fragments'. They're brutally confrontational sculptures, big chunks of metal that have been welded together, creating twisted, mangled shapes that stare you right in the eye. Made up of hooks, spikes, rods, hammers, shackles and chains, their symbolism is obvious, shocking and grotesque.

But they also sit neatly in the world of mid-twentieth-century sculpture. They feel like museum pieces: you can imagine them next to sculptures by Arman or Rauschenberg. And that's part of their problem – they feel a world away from the events on the ground in the US. The 'Rocker' series (pictured) – inspired by Edwards's grandmother's rocking chair – share the shackles and chains imagery of the 'Lynch Fragments' but their more personal edge stops them from being grand statements about struggle and makes them immediately more relatable on an emotional level.

However, it's the installation that you encounter as you walk into the gallery that works best. You're met with a draped configuration of barbed wire, dangerously close to poking your eye out. You feel penned in, imprisoned. As a comment on current race relations in America, it's a harsh and horrifically immersive work of art. *Eddy Frankel*

**THE BOTTOM LINE** A sharp-eyed look at racial tension in the US.

