

Melvin Edwards

25 November 2014 – 17 January 2015



Stephen Friedman Gallery is delighted to present the first UK solo exhibition of Melvin Edwards, one of America's foremost contemporary sculptors. Celebrating a pioneer in the history of contemporary African-American art and spanning five decades, the exhibition brings together a compelling body of work including large and small-scale sculptures, drawings and a site-specific installation.

Edwards' career began in 1965 with a solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Over the next five years three more museum exhibitions followed, including his groundbreaking presentation at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the first ever by an African-American sculptor. Since 1970, Edwards' work has been widely exhibited, establishing him as an iconic figure who inspired a younger generation of African-American artists.

In all its forms, Edwards' work engages with the history of race and civil rights and social and political turmoil. Taking inspiration from Africa where he spends several months each year working in Senegal, Edwards' sculptures address his personal history with beguiling openness and universalism and celebrate inclusion and diversity.

The exhibition features a dramatic large-scale sculptural installation made from barbed wire and conceived in the 1960s. Realised here for the first time, its many strands cascade from the ceiling and create a single plane anchored to the wall in a circular configuration. Sharing an affinity with other conceptual minimalist installations of the 1960s, Edwards' choice of barbed wire as material imbues this sculpture with social and political meaning.

Edwards' best known sculptural series, 'Lynch Fragments', makes up a significant part of this exhibition. They cover three distinct periods in his personal history; the 1960s, where they evolved out of Edwards' response to racial violence in America; the 1970s, out of his protest against the Vietnam War; and from 1978 to the present, where they became a vehicle to honour individuals, to explore nostalgia, and to investigate his interest in African culture.

The 'Lynch Fragments' exemplify the extraordinary range of Edwards' sculptural practice, welding industrial found objects like hammers, chains and railroad spikes into new forms. From afar, the fragments suggest a gestural abstraction often associated with artists such as John Chamberlain or David Smith. However, these seemingly random juxtapositions reveal themselves to be well thought out assemblages of objects that struggle against one another and evoke thoughts of

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violence, humour and hope. The 'Lynch Fragments' are installed at eye level to increase the sense of confrontation between the viewer and the object.

The exhibition also includes a number of kinetic 'Rockers'. Inspired by the memory of his grandmother Coco's rocking chair, they vary in shape, scale and configuration. 'Level', a small graceful work, articulates the tension and struggle epitomised in Edwards' art; an open, linear pair of C-shapes is linked by twisting tangles of barbed wire. Like all Edwards' sculptures, the 'Rockers' are welded together in compositions of intense visual and structural energy. The exhibition concludes with a room dedicated to Edwards' drawings.

Edwards' work contains a multitude of contradictions. Seemingly arbitrary forms are meticulous compositions; distinctly evocative, sensitive and forceful. By summoning a range of artistic, cultural and historical references, his art resonates even more today. In January 2015 the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas will host his next major retrospective.

Melvin Edwards (b. 1937, Houston, Texas, USA) lives and works in Plainfield, New Jersey, USA. He is represented in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, USA; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA; and the Alford Collection of Contemporary Art at Rollins College, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Florida, USA. Edwards taught at Rutgers University from 1972 to 2002 and in 2014, he received an Honorary Doctorate from the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston. In addition, the importance of his work has been recognized by his receipt of a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, a Fulbright Fellowship to Zimbabwe, and through grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Since 1965, when his first solo exhibition was mounted at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California, USA (1965), Edwards has been honoured with a multitude of solo exhibits and been included in numerous important group shows. He has been honoured with solo exhibitions at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA (1968); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA (1970); The Studio Museum, Harlem, New York, USA (1978); and the New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, USA (1981). In 1993 the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York, USA, organized the first retrospective in Edwards' career documenting his thirty-year artistic development. The Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, USA, is organising his second retrospective, 'Melvin Edwards: Five Decades', to open in January 2015.

His work has recently been included in group exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, USA (2014); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA (2013); Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, USA (2012); MoMA PS1, New York, USA (2012); Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC (2012); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA (2011); and as a part of the Dak'art Biennial, Senegal (2010). In 2015, his work will be included in 'Glenn Ligon: Encounters and Collisions' at Nottingham Contemporary, UK, travelling to Tate Liverpool, UK.

Gallery hours are: Tuesday to Friday, 10am - 6pm and Saturday, 11am - 5pm

Stephen Friedman Gallery is exhibiting at Art Basel Miami Beach, 3-7 December 2014
Forthcoming exhibition: 'Juan Araujo', February - March 2015.

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