

MELVIN EDWARDS

FIVE DECADES

JANUARY 31 – MAY 10, 2015

Teaching Resource

Born in Houston, Texas in 1937, artist Melvin Edwards has worked in places ranging from Los Angeles and New York to Zimbabwe, Japan, and Cuba. Working primarily in steel, Edwards is best known for his *Lynch Fragments*, an ongoing series of small-scale reliefs begun in Los Angeles in the early 1960s and born out of the social and political turmoil of the civil rights movement.

Lynch Fragments

As a child, Melvin Edwards lived and attended school in both segregated Houston, Texas and integrated Dayton, Ohio. His varied experiences in these two cities made him especially aware of the role of race in his daily life and formed a foundation for his involvement in the civil rights movement as an adult. Made of welded steel, the *Lynch Fragments* span three periods: the early 1960s, when Edwards responded to racial violence in American history; 1973, when his activism concerning the Vietnam War motivated him to return to the series; and from 1978 to the present, when he began making *Lynch Fragments* to honor individuals and to explore memory and his interest in African culture.

Familiar Form Objects

Although they are abstract in form, works in the *Lynch Fragments* series incorporate what Edwards calls “familiar form objects,” which include chains, locks and axe heads. The presence of these objects calls attention to their role in both positive and negative human experiences. A chain, for example, may be associated with human bondage but it is also a device for connecting and may symbolize kinship or linkage.

- Choose an object found in the *Lynch Fragments*. Write a list of everything you associate with that object, then compare with a partner. Discuss which associations the artist may have had in mind when making the sculpture.

Jazz

Edwards compares the use of negative space in his sculptures to the silence between notes in performances by jazz musicians such as Thelonious Monk.

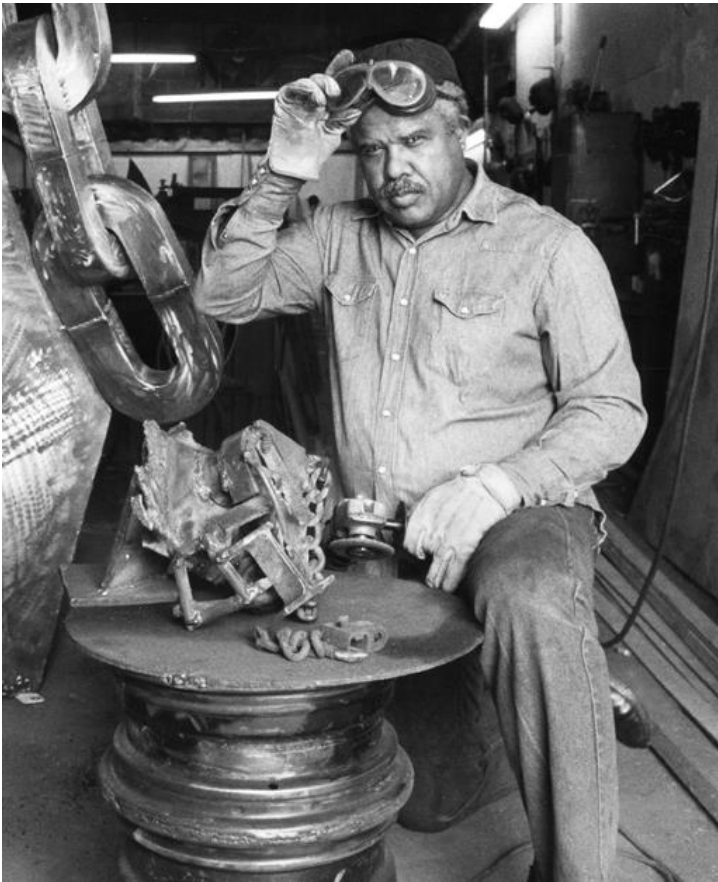
- Listen to a recording of Thelonious Monk paying close attention to the rhythm and silence. How would you represent this recording in a sculpture?
- Think of other things that music and sculpture may have in common.

Barbed Wire

The Lower Level Gallery features a re-creation of four barbed wire sculptures originally shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. Edwards uses the wire to create a drawing in space that viewers must carefully navigate.

- Sketch the installation from two different angles. How does the experience of viewing this installation differ from viewing a drawing on paper?
- What is barbed wire used for? How does the material affect how you move through the space?





Melvin Edwards in his studio, Plainfield, New Jersey, 1990



Melvin Edwards, *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*, 1969/2012, Barbed Wire. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

Previous Page: Melvin Edwards, *Some Bright Morning (Lynch Fragment)*, 1963. Welded steel 14 x 9 in x 5. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Melvin Edwards, *Ame Eghan (Rocker)*, 1975. Welded steel, 12 ½ x 19 ½ x 19 ½ in. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS),



Melvin Edwards, *Steel Life*, 1985-91. Welded steel, 12 ½ x 18 x 17 ¾ in. Jacqueline Bradley and Clarence Otis. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Melvin Edwards, *Chaino*, 1964. Welded steel, 62 x 102 x 26 in. Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts; Museum Purchase. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.