



**MELVIN
EDWARDS
LYNCH
FRAGMENTS**

MASP



MELVIN EDWARDS LYNCH FRAGMENTS

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ART FOR TIMES OF INSURRECTION

Steel, weight, gravity, and lightness make up the work *Some Bright Morning* (1963) [imgs. 12–14], inaugurating Melvin Edwards’ series *Lynch Fragments*. Installed at eye level, the sculpture is a combination of elements—a circular metal piece, a sharp triangular shape, a chain, and a rough pendant—put together in a compact assemblage, united by visible welded joints. The title *Some Bright Morning* references the threats an African-American family received from racist white individuals, who warned them that “some bright morning” they would attack.

The artist’s motivations to create a series evoking the violence of the summary executions that victimized so many black people are clearer when we consider the events that occurred in 1963, when the series was created. On August 28, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) gave his landmark speech *I Have a Dream* to a crowd of 250,000 people, as well as to television audiences, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.¹ The date marked the eight-year anniversary of the lynching of Emmet Till, an atrocity with catalyzing effects on the African-American community and which reverberated throughout the country. Emmet Till, who was only fourteen years old, went to a Mississippi store with friends to buy chewing gum. Following allegations that he flirted with the store’s clerk, a white woman, he was snatched out of bed by gunmen, abducted, tortured, and killed. His body was found in a river days later, and his mother demanded an open-casket funeral, because she wanted the world to see what had happened to her son.

In that same year a dynamite explosion at a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama—planted by the Ku Klux Klan—killed four black girls, a tragedy that lent momentum to the civil rights movement. The attack occurred months after George Wallace’s (1919–1998) inaugural address as state governor, in which he stated:

“segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) addressed the country on broadcast television in June, acknowledging that “the fires of frustration and discord” were “burning in every city.”² He recalled that the nation had been founded under the principle of equality, and asserted that new civil rights legislation was needed. Kennedy was assassinated in late November of 1963.

Just as the context of current events informed Edwards’ work, it also shaped the musical production of that moment. “Alabama,” a composition by John Coltrane (1926–1967) in response to recent events, was released in 1963. Sam Cooke composed “A Change Is Gonna Come” (1931–1964). Singer, songwriter, and pianist Nina Simone (1933–2003), a contemporary of Edwards, reflected her activist passions in her performances and compositions, such as the ironic “Mississippi Goddamn.” Her interpretations of “Strange Fruit” expressed the emotions of the song composed by Abel Meeropol (1903–1986), a Jewish professor and communist writer. He composed the song after having seen a photograph of a double lynching that took place in 1937. “Strange Fruit” was eternalized by Billie Holiday (1915–1959). Holiday reported the discomfort that the song caused in audiences, certainly as a result of the combination of the incisive verses with the intensity of her performances. In Edwards’ sculpture, the small volume at the end of the chain is equivalent to the strange fruit of the song, an inert body hanging from a tree.

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Some Bright Morning arises, therefore, from a context of uncertainties, tensions, and acute violence. The artist makes a poignant connection with the civil rights movement against the systemic brutality and its power to annihilate black lives. His sculpture brings mourning, but also rage, expressed in forms such as the blade, nails, and the chain, resulting in a work saturated with potential aggression. It is a work for times of insurrection.

POLITICAL ABSTRACTION

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) is an example of an artist committed to representing aspects of the African-American experience that culminated in those decisive years, making him a pioneer among artists engaged with the theme of lynching. Born a generation before Melvin Edwards, in 1941 he created a narrative series dedicated to the Great Migration, an exodus of more than six million African-Americans from the largely rural southern states such as Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas (where Edwards was born) to cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York.

This quest for less oppressive living conditions during and after World War I is present in a set of sixty modern-style paintings, in which the artist adopted a geometric and synthetic artistic vocabulary. Two works of the series deal with the theme of lynching, a common occurrence in the South. As the captions of the images indicate, lynching was one of the motivations for the migration. In *work #15*, we see a figure huddled

under an empty noose hanging from a tree, emphasizing the absence of the individual subtracted from life. Like the chains in Edwards' works, the pendant loop marks the past executions and the threat that follows. *Painting #16* presents the interior of a house that seems to be collapsing towards the figure sitting alone at a table, and also towards the viewer, in a cubist play with angles.

Edwards' aesthetic interests do not remove the essential connection with the engagement inherited from previous generations. The *Lynch Fragments* series implies, in its abstract language, a fractioned syntax that seems to repeat the savage dismemberment imposed on bodies or, on the contrary, provide the restoration of impaired existences. The artist prioritizes abstraction, but instills social content in it, thus countering trends by artists who were more interested in formalist solutions. At the same time, his sculptures stand in dissonance to the lineage of black artists that privileged figuration to portray aspects of the social reality. In the artist's words:

One of my discussions within the black art community was with people who said, "Abstraction can't be black." Well, I don't know why not. It always was. Besides, we do new and experimental stuff with music, with any number of other things. Why not with art? I realized I was talking to people who hadn't played with those thoughts much. A lot of people were culturally progressive, but they were rooted in the politics of social realism, coming out of the '30s, and they figured, well, if you're going to be black and radical, it ought to be a certain way. I said, "It's fine if it is that way, but there are other ways to develop it."³

A contemporary of Melvin Edwards, but closer in age to Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis (1903–2003) anticipated his search to address pungent social themes with the artistic language of abstraction. The painting *Alabama* (1960) [img.3]

combines black and white in gestural strokes, creating an energetic and bright area in the center of the canvas. The painter alludes to the terror of the nocturnal onslaughts by the Ku Klux Klan, where the white of their clothing is illuminated by flaming torches and crosses. An extremist movement that until today espouses white supremacy, the KKK is the subject of a set of works by Lewis, the *Black Paintings*, created between the 1940s and the 1970s, in which the group's characteristic pointed hoods often appear.

Connected to the abstract expressionist painters, in 1950 Lewis participated in debates that shaped the contours of the movement organized by Willem de Kooning (1904–1997). Lewis exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York with the group the following year. Lewis, who took part in the Harlem Renaissance,⁴ founded the Spiral group in 1963 with other black artists such as Romare Bearden (1922–1988) and Hale Woodruff (1900–1980).

In her *Malcolm X Steles*, artist and bestselling author Barbara Chase-Riboud, who has been living in France since the 1960s, combines metals and textiles such as silk, cotton, and wool. With abstract and monumental pieces, she pays homage to Malcolm X, the leader whose combative speeches motivated the emergence of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, created after his assassination in 1965. In the third work in the series, from 1969 [img.4], the artist utilizes polished

brass on the relief with a fragmented surface, while a cascade of strands of fabric hides the base of the work. Barbara opposes rigidity and softness, the angular and the organic, making it look as though the lightweight material is supporting the sculpture, while the metallic mass projects vertically.

BLACK MASCULINITIES

In many of the *Lynch Fragments* we sometimes find phallic forms, which makes us follow another line of inquiry. Like the blade-like form and the pendant object that we see in the work *Some Bright Morning*, in *Texcali* (1965) we find shapes that might refer to phalluses and testicles. In *Two Is One* (2016), the suggestion of genitals is reinforced by the title, which insinuates sexual and affective relations. These combinations allude to a mode of sexualized and masculine affirmation of identity, and to physical and symbolic castrations.

Artist Barkley L. Hendricks (1945–2017) addresses masculinity in the work *Icon for My Man Superman* (*Superman Never Saved Any Black People—Bobby Seale*) (1969) [img.5], making Bobby Seale, the founding leader of the Black Panthers, a superhero for the Black Power era. Seale was arrested and during his trial he was bound to a chair and gagged by order of the judge. This scene is evoked in David Hammons's *Injustice Case* (1970). The portrait honors his moral strength by creating an affirmative presence,

NORMAN LEWIS
New York, United States
1909-1979
3. *Alabama*, 1960
Oil on canvas,
122 x 184.5 cm
Collection The Cleveland
Museum of Art,
United States
John L. Severance Fund
2017.1



12–14. *Some Bright Morning*, 1963
Welded steel, 36 × 23.5 × 12.5 cm

In 1963, Edwards created his first *Lynch Fragment*. Harnessing the reductive language of Minimalism, in this series Edwards engages with the intertwined histories of race, labor, and violence, as well as with themes of the African Diaspora. The title of *Some Bright Morning* references the story of a Florida family who was warned by white individuals that “some bright morning” they were going to attack them. Taking to the swamps, the family successfully fought off their racist aggressors. Reflecting the violence of this story, the sculpture boasts a spear-like form. In an interview, Edwards reflects on the work, noting, “The dangling ball of steel at the bottom of the chain is the plastic metaphor of hanging ... the piece had to hang on the wall, which furthered the metaphor. I said to myself, ‘It is hanging there like a lynching.’”



12



13



14

15, 16. *Ace*, 1963
Welded steel, 21.5 x 14 x 12.5 cm



15



23, 24. *Mamba*, 1965
Welded steel, 26.5 x 23 x 25 cm

Mamba is one of the *Fragments* created in 1965, the year that African-American leader Malcolm X died. Inspired by Malcolm X (1925–1965), the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was founded the following year. The work's title comes from the name of a poisonous snake found in sub-Saharan Africa, and creates a link with Edwards' home state of Texas, where similarly dangerous snakes can also be found. In this work, Edwards seems to suggest that if taken to an extreme, African Americans could become as lethal as a venomous snake. In this sculpture, a phallic shape in the center of concentric structures projects out of the wall towards the viewer, a hybrid between a machine and a snake on a prow.



23



32, 33. *Koyo*, 1973
Welded steel, 29 x 18 x 30.5 cm
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody

In 1970, Melvin Edwards received a grant and made his first trip to Africa with a group of teachers and his wife and collaborator Jayne Cortez (1934–2012), a performance artist, poet, and activist. For six weeks, they toured four countries: Ghana, Togo, Dahomey (now Benin), and Nigeria. Edwards was inspired by the languages and cultures he encountered on his trip. Experiencing a new sense of belonging, he realized that the African continent would leave an indelible mark on his practice. Africa's impression on Edwards is illustrated in this work's title, which adopts the Edo word "koyo." Used in Benin as a greeting, "koyo" is akin to "hello" or "hi."



32



*38, 39. *Chain and Diamond?*, 1979
Welded steel, 33 x 30.5 x 15 cm
Private collection

Melvin Edwards' artworks are sophisticated hybrids of abstract forms and found materials, articulating their original uses, notions of place, and social history. *Chain and Diamond?* features a corrugated metal plate that evokes a manhole cover, recalling the steel used in the construction of the urban landscape. Against this plate, two metal rods are connected by a suspended chain whose twisted, dynamic form suggests movement and musical rhythm. Reflecting on his use of abstraction, Edwards states: "One of my discussions within the black art community was with people who said, 'Abstraction can't be black.' Well, I don't know why not. It always was. Besides, we do new and experimental stuff with music, with any number of other things. Why not with art?"

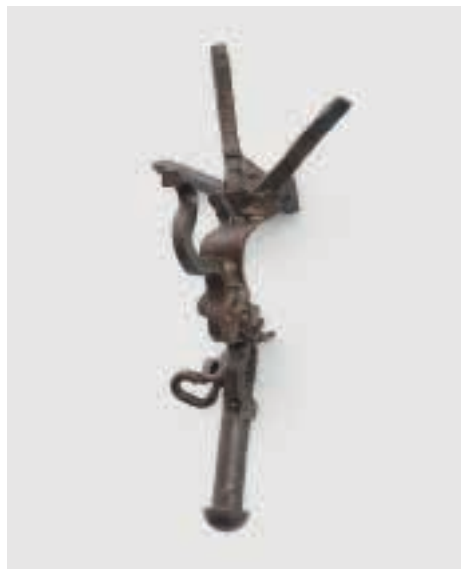


38



*66, 67. *Ngangula*, 1983
Welded steel, 46 x 33 x 16.5 cm

After his first trips to Africa, Edwards began using words in different African languages to title his works. "Ngangula" is the word for blacksmith or locksmith in the Kikongo language, spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, and Angola. The physical work of forging metal has a long tradition not only among African peoples, but also in Edwards' own family; his mother's great-great-grandfather was a metal craftsman brought from Africa to the Americas.



66



68, 69. *Festac 77 Lagos Reunion, 1985*
Welded steel, 21.5 x 19.5 x 30 cm

This work commemorates the international large-scale interdisciplinary Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (known as Festac '77). The festival was a momentous occasion in Edwards' artistic practice. The sculpture pays homage to the different types of African and African Diaspora music, art, and theater he experienced throughout Festac village, as well as the artists he met. Edwards established lifelong friendships with many of these artists, such as Cuban painter Gilberto de la Nuez. As he summarizes the festival, "The diaspora, the variety of places and people that we consist of ... It was more than exciting—it was important."

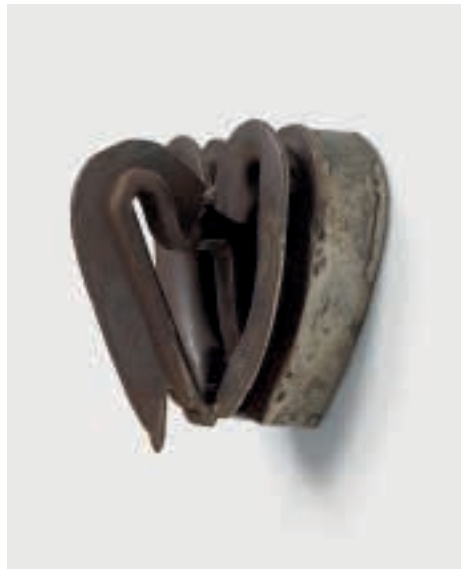


68



*70, 71. *Sankofa*, 1985
Welded steel, 19 x 24 x 17 cm
Collection Jayne Cortez

"Sankofa" can refer either to a word or to a visual sign. The interaction between words and images is common in the work of Edwards, who utilizes titles and images charged with different meanings, creating semantic exchanges. According to the Adinkra, a pictographic system made by the Akan people of the West African coast, "sankofa" means "come back and take it." The word is represented by the image of a bird with its head turned backwards or by the stylized shape of a heart, like Edwards' sculpture. The symbol can be interpreted as "learning from the past to re-signify the present, and build the future." This motto is illustrated in Edwards' work, which synthesizes various cultures and histories to reflect and build on the legacy of the African Diaspora.



70

