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Melvin Edwards' *In Oklahoma* Tells Stories Old and New

Each piece of sculptor Melvin Edwards' work has a story. Sometimes it's technical, about how an installation was constructed or a piece was welded. Sometimes it's the meaning behind a title. It could be tied to movement or material, scale or color, geography or language. But for every single piece of his artwork, Edwards has a story.

This week, Edwards has at least 12 additional stories to tell, context for each of the new works in *In Oklahoma*. (The exhibition opens Thursday, Oct. 20 and runs through Dec. 27 at Oklahoma Contemporary.) These new pieces will be displayed together with a group of works that he produced over the past 30 years.

Edwards is known for his creation of powerful abstract sculptures from common materials, including scrap metal and barbed wire. He created many of the *In Oklahoma* works onsite, in Oklahoma Contemporary's gallery or in a nearby studio, from materials he found in Oklahoma City scrapyards. Though new, the works reflect ideas and visual forms he's been developing for more than 50 years. Edwards' first half-century of work was recently chronicled in a nationally touring retrospective that began at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas.

"The retrospective reminded me there were ideas from the same kind of thinking, ideas that would now produce different works than those that came before," Edwards said. "I develop maybe one idea out of 20. So for each piece I complete, I could have 20 more."

And Edwards is prolific in both ideas and execution. His three-week residency in Oklahoma, along with a two-day visit to gather scrap, has been incredibly productive.

"It's been amazing to watch his creative process, from gathering materials that appealed to him to developing them into forms and then installing them in ways that responded to the galleries at Oklahoma Contemporary," said Jennifer Scanlan, curatorial and exhibitions director.

In *Lynch Fragments*, begun in 1963 and continuing through today, objects such as chains, tools and steel scraps are welded into compact, evocative forms. While the title reflects the series' birth in the civil-rights era of the 1960s, these works are also inspired by place. The older works in *In Oklahoma* show his connection to Africa, where he has often traveled and worked; the newer were welded during his time here. All are the result of Edwards' intuitive process, in which he combines found and fabricated steel pieces until he senses that they are complete.

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The large installations emerge from ideas that Edwards often works on and revisits for years. The sketches in the exhibition illustrate his idea of “drawing lines in space.” Each of these new installations responds to the architecture and layout of Oklahoma Contemporary.

“For this exhibition, Mel has applied new ideas and integrated experimental concepts into his site-specific installations,” said Jeremiah Matthew Davis, artistic director.

Originally from Houston, Edwards emerged onto the art scene in Los Angeles in the early 1960s. In 1970, he became the first African-American sculptor to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. That exhibition showed, like *Lynch Fragments*, his interest in working within and against the boundaries of abstraction and minimalism, using materials with immense cultural and personal resonance.

While social justice is a major theme of Edwards’s life and work, his many interests also play important roles in his sculptures. He was a star athlete in high school and college, and his compositions often reflect the dynamism and physicality of sports. (A favorite story: His first trip to Oklahoma was for high school football, a game in which Douglass High School walked all over the boys from Houston’s Phillis Wheatley. He’s quick to point out both schools were named for historic African-Americans.)

The titles of sculptures often pay homage to the people that have inspired him, from jazz musicians, authors and historical figures to friends and family, including his late wife, the poet Jayne Cortez.

He and Cortez traveled frequently to Africa, eventually establishing a second home in Dakar, Senegal. His work often incorporates elements of African and African Diasporan cultures and histories, through which he investigates history, language, exchanges between cultures and the significance of personal relationships.

One of those relationships is referenced in the title of *Whispers*, one of the *Lynch Fragments*. “If I choke up on that one, it’s real,” he said, explaining that the piece was named for friend Wilfred G. Cartey, who died the year it was made. Cartey wrote *Whispers From a Continent*, one of the first books to explore African literature.

Scanlan notes: “Melvin is interested in, and extremely knowledgeable about, so many aspects of culture, from literature to history to music, and all of this information finds its way into his work.”

In conjunction with the exhibition, Oklahoma Contemporary is organizing a special series of events that will take place in the galleries, in dialogue with his artwork. Highlighting Edwards' interest in jazz, performances are scheduled throughout the exhibition, including at the opening on Thursday, A Nov. 3 evening, planned in conjunction with the Ralph Ellison Foundation, will include music and dance, as well as poetry readings.

This historic show and the collaborations surrounding it are a glimpse of things to come, said Davis.

“This show represents what Oklahoma Contemporary can do as an organization — provide a home for living artists to experiment and spark conversations in our community that resonate around the world.”

Sidebar: Melvin Edwards' work is in the permanent collection of major institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Chicago Art Institute; and the Dallas Museum of Art. Recent shows include the Venice Biennale (2015), Art Basel Miami Beach (2011-2015), Frieze New York (2014) and Art Dubai (2012).

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A media kit, including this release and high-resolution photos of Edwards and his works, is at bit.ly/OCEdwardsDrop. Interviews with Edwards, the show's curator and other staff can be organized through Director of Communications Lori Brooks (lbrooks@okcontemp.org). Past press releases and additional information are archived at oklahomacontemporary.org/about/media.

About Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center

Currently located at State Fair Park, Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center aims to encourage artistic expression in all its forms through education and exhibitions. We endeavor to instill in the public a lifetime appreciation of the arts and enthusiasm for creative practice through a broad range of educational programs, exhibitions and cultural offerings, including:

- Youth art camps that help students begin a lifetime relationship with art and creativity.
- Art classes and workshops where students of all ages find the chance to learn and grow.
- Exhibitions that feature the work of emerging and mid-career artists.
- Free public lectures, artist talks and events that enrich Oklahoma City's cultural offerings.

Oklahoma Contemporary is in the midst of a capital campaign to create a spectacular new arts education and cultural resource on a 4.6-acre site at NW 11th and Broadway in Oklahoma City. The arts education campus will include:

A four-story, 50,000-square-foot building with classrooms, galleries, a dance studio and a black-box theater to promote learning about the artists of our time and educating those to come. Expanded classes in ceramics, fiber, painting, sculpture, drawing and dance, plus a new media curriculum with programs in filmmaking, animation, photography, web design and 3-D printing. A remodeled 10,000-square-foot building will house an Industrial Arts program, focusing on wood, ceramics, metal and jewelry. Grounds with space for outdoor sculpture exhibits, children's art education activities and outdoor music, movie and drama productions.

Oklahoma Contemporary is a regional 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization founded in 1989 by businessman and philanthropist Christian Keesee and Kirkpatrick Foundation Director Marilyn Myers. Marfa Contemporary is the organization's first regional extension.