Overcoming the Double Whammy

By April Kingsley

ART

Intentionally non-political black artists get a double whammy: shunned or treated as tokens by the white art community, they are also attacked by blacks, such as Imamu Amiri Baraka ("They are within the tradition of white art, black face or not, and to try to force them on black people as examples of what we are at our best is non-sensical and ugly"). But great political art is a rarity, and the best art by blacks usually hasn't even been representational, much less polemical—in fact it tends to be abstract, tapping into a heritage of great formal compression and assurance that has always set African art on a plane apart.

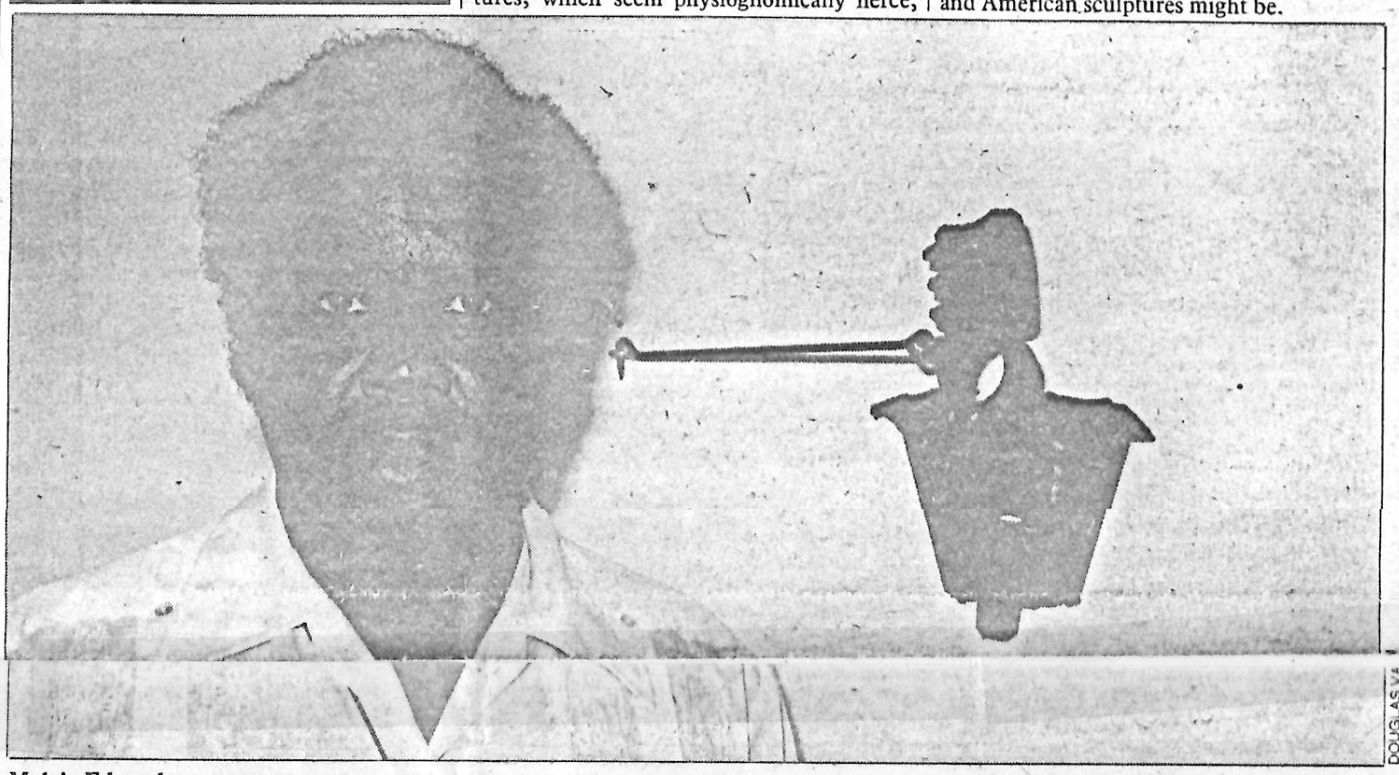
BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD, MELVIN EDWARDS, and RICHARD HUNT—three of our finest black sculptors—are showing examples of their work from the past decade at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (851 Grand Concourse to June 29), and it could hardly be "non-sensical and ugly" to expose the black community to them. All three artists use their black experience to fuel their art in some way, and also draw upon their connections, however tenuous, with primitive and non-Western (particularly African) art forms as well. They subtly and eloquently translate their heritage's formal strengths into abstract modernist terms, saying more in the process than they could by picturing the inequities suffered by their people.

Barbara Chase-Riboud dedicates pieces to black heroes—one of the major works in her series dedicated to Malcolm X, number IV, is in the Bronx show—and has been known to fill her exhibition catalogues with political statements, but her sculptures are cleanly abstract, even elegantly beautiful. Her early work, cast in bronze (by the lost-wax method perfected so long ago in so-called "primitive" Africa), featured mask-heads and schematized, geometric bodies directly related to African prototypes. But the upright bronze sculptures she now makes, incorporating masses of hanging, looping silken cords, though abstract, relate to African dancing masks with their schematized physiognomies surrounded by straw or rope or other organic materials. Something, too, of the spiritual, evil-repelling function of the African object rubs off onto the totemic, ritualized aura of Riboud's stately pieces.

While her work has a solid grounding in her blackness, it is also based in her femaleness. She draws upon woman's traditional role as hair and fiber-handler in the methods of knotting and braiding the silken threads she uses in almost every work; psychologically, she expresses the female's biological condition in the alternation of containment and spillage, of protection and vulnerability, of hard and soft materials and imagery. The way she lets the soft stuffs appear to ooze between the margins of hard materials in the *Bathers*, or seem to be slipping out of its control in *Time Womb* (where one thick knotted fall of silk pours out of a boxy white aluminum form) shows definite, though undoubtedly not programmed connections with birth, menstruation, arousal lubrication, and lactation.

Riboud is obviously involved with opposites, describing the idea of coupling as ". . . banal and impossible, the need to join opposing forces, male/female, negative/positive, black/white. One never stops demanding the impossible. It's touching and diabolic." Impossible unions are also the apparent subject matter of her drawings, in which rock-like units tend to be cleaved in two by gushing streams of matter, and of the poetry which accompanies the drawings on each sheet. Yearning contours and open mouths reappear frequently in her verse: "My lover left me with mouthfuls of pearls made of tears . . ." She has published two volumes of poetry (a novel based on the life of Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson's black mistress, is due out momentarily), and poetry is also intricately entwined with her visual art, somewhat surrealistically in her sculptures, tenderly in the poem/drawings.

Melvin Edwards believes that works by black artists ought to "use our lives and feelings as their basis for existence"; part of his experience has been four trips to Nigeria, where he studied African architecture. Inevitable childhood hours spent in playgrounds, plus what he learned in Africa, are probably at least as important to him as any formal or technical precedents in David Smith or Anthony Caro. These experiences lend his work its offhand air, a casualness reminiscent of the pieced together shantytown shelters or enclosures so often celebrated in surveys of vernacular architecture. The fact that many of his sculptures (*Jagun-Jagun* and *Coco* in the current show) can rock back and forth in happy geometricity reveals sources in playground equipment and construction toys.



Melvin Edwards

Edwards's large scale indoor/outdoor pieces, such as the marvelous *Thelmarie*, enclose as well as fill space. They are linear in the David Smith drawing-in-space tradition (particularly in their intelligent use of plane edges as lines); planar in that they are composed of slat sheets of steel, none twisted in torsion; and volumetric, both in their way of enclosing space and in the way their arcs and circle segments imply positive space shapes. By resting on arcs, *Thelmarie* also portends the kind of rocking motion actualized in other works, like *Coco*, 1979, which is made of barbed wire and steel. Edwards has returned to barbed wire after a few year hiatus since his environments of the early seventies, and his use of it is now so formal it somewhat softens the brutal implications of the material. More often than not, Edwards's large sculptures have flat tops or include table-like parts. The action takes place below these planes (often located about waist or chest height), reversing one's normal expectations of sculpture's upright posture as a monument marker. Looking down on the pieces—and the inviting potential they have for being rested upon—triggers an unexpected somatic response. When Edwards breaks this "rule," the piece can seem curiously unfinished or out of scale. *Jagun-Jagun*, for example, might be very effective three times its size, but it seems too active as is, perhaps because of the broken angles at the top. But for the most part, Edwards's medium-size pieces, like those of all three artists in this show, look just as good small as they indicate they would large.

Nigba Lai Lai, 1978, incorporates fused chain links, which have obvious implications for blacks, but which also recall Edwards's fellow "frozen expressionist," Mark di Suvero. They remind us that Edwards probably found inspiration the way David Smith did, not only in Julio Gonzales, but also in welder's sheds, body shops, and mechanics's garages. Most of the "found" objects Edwards incorporates in his small pedestal and wall pieces come from that world too. The spikes and gears, bolts, hooks, horseshoes, chains, cogs, and giant screws he fuses into these powerful little works look like they were only recently part of a grease-monkey's debris. The flavor of recent use adds to the workmanlike, no-nonsense appeal of these sculptures, which seem physiognomically fierce, brutally weapon-like, and awe-inspiringly iconic. David Smith could make small sculptures radiate with similar force, but their surrealizing overtones connected them much more firmly with European sculptural traditions than Edwards will allow. There is no doubt that, on large scale or small, Edwards is one of the best, if not the very finest sculptor working today in the medium of open, steel geometric construction.

Blacks have a long tradition of masterful metalworking. The wrought iron grillwork of the south (especially famous in New Orleans), smithing, metal-trimmed cabinetwork, and metallic architectural ornaments like weathervanes, steeple-tops, and so on, were largely made by American blacks until the influx of Germans and other skilled metalworkers in the 19th century. In Africa, the metalwork craftsman (women weren't even allowed near the smithy) was the highest ranking artisan. He was greatly respected and, because of his ability to control fire, was treated with religious awe, although in this country a slave was lucky if he could buy his freedom with these skills. While we now view African metalwork as art—fine art equal to the best from Europe—the artisans were actually forging weapons, both physical and metaphysical, against real enemies and bad spirits. In America, however, the black man's remarkable skills were used to make functional objects for everyday use, out of virgin metals, but also by adapting found metal scraps.

Just as today's retired welder putters about making scrap metal birdbath stands, so Mel Edwards scavenges in the urban wasteland and Richard Hunt reclaims junkyard "readymades" for unique new images, developing "the kind of forms nature might create if only heat and steel were available to her."

Using fire alone, rarely hammering or forging, Hunt assembles his found units into sculptural existence, neither parodying nor disguising their original identity, but metamorphosing them into totally new creatures. He works directly in metal, free-association his guiding principle, as it was for his aesthetic "fathers" Julio Gonzales and David Smith, with some of their unavoidable surrealizing overtones, but none of their Cubist structural tendencies. Hunt now hybridizes his animal/insect/vegetable creatures beyond any human recognizability, but his early work was more anthropomorphic. He worked for six years as a young man tending animals for the zoology lab in the University of Chicago, which must explain, at least in part, his remarkable empathy with animal forms. *Garden Hybrid*, 1977, for instance, while abstract, reminds one of a gazelle or a deer with antlers, poised attentively, fearful yet graceful. Neither the animals of Bayre or Flannagan are precedents for the tensely arched suppleness of this or other Hunt animal hybrids, though some primitive African and American sculptures might be.

Fascinating visual concordances occur between Hunt's compelling images and a number of unexpected European and American sculptors, though they came about accidentally, given his open-ended technique. Boccione's *Fist* and Duchamp-Villon's *Horse* seem to figure in Hunt's *Model of Centennial*, 1977, a small bronze powerhouse of contrasting thrusts and torsion. *Drawing in Space*, literally a David Smith idea, echoes him but also conjures up the farm equipment which litters the plains of the Midwest. He grafts his sources more unobtrusively in his *Natural Form* pieces, which seem fish and fowl, mammal and snake, plant and fungus all fused into one. Unfortunately, none of his large-scale ground-hugging works with "outgrowth" projections are included in the show (though you can see a great one on the grounds of the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn, Long Island). In these works, large carefully shape-adjusted masses are contrasted with squiggling organic forms that seem to be bursting from their interiors. But Hunt's strengths as an exquisitely graceful expressionist, equally at ease with linear, planar, tubular, and volumetric sculptural forms, which can evoke a host of suggestive references from the *Nike of Samothrace* to a John Deere baler without seeming eclectic, come through despite this ommision.

Mel Edwards's studio is in New Jersey, Barbara Chase-Riboud works and lives in Paris, and Richard Hunt is based where he was born, in Chicago. In addition to being to some degree outside the New York scene, they are also outside the ubiquitous Greenberg-Caro style of welded-steel construction—Riboud altogether, Hunt largely, because of his organic bias, and Edwards partially, due to his content. Free of its boring orthodoxy, they draw on their rich racial heritage and surpass the common herd. ■