Edward Clark by Jack Whitten

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JACK WHITTEN: Ed, what's your definition for art?

EDWARD CLARK: I always wanted to be an artist. I always wanted to be the best. When I was in grammar school, I started with a lot of problems in the South. It was a black school. But by the time we got to the third grade, the nun asked, "Could you copy this and put it on the blackboard?" And that started it. I was the star of the school. Still to this day I'm wondering, what did that give me?

JW: So what are you trying to tell us about the meaning of your art?

EC: That I always felt I was the best. Even in Louisiana … at that point, I knew I was the best at copying. Other students were drawing bubbles for leaves when I was doing branches. I knew I could be the best. I'm not the only artist who thinks that way.

JW: What does that have to do with your meaning of art?

EC: I'm a painter and nothing else. I could have probably been a scientist. When I got out of the military, I wanted to go to the University of Chicago. When they told me you had to write—I couldn't even spell. I can't spell *centrifugal*, *inertia*. So I said, I'd better go to an art institute.

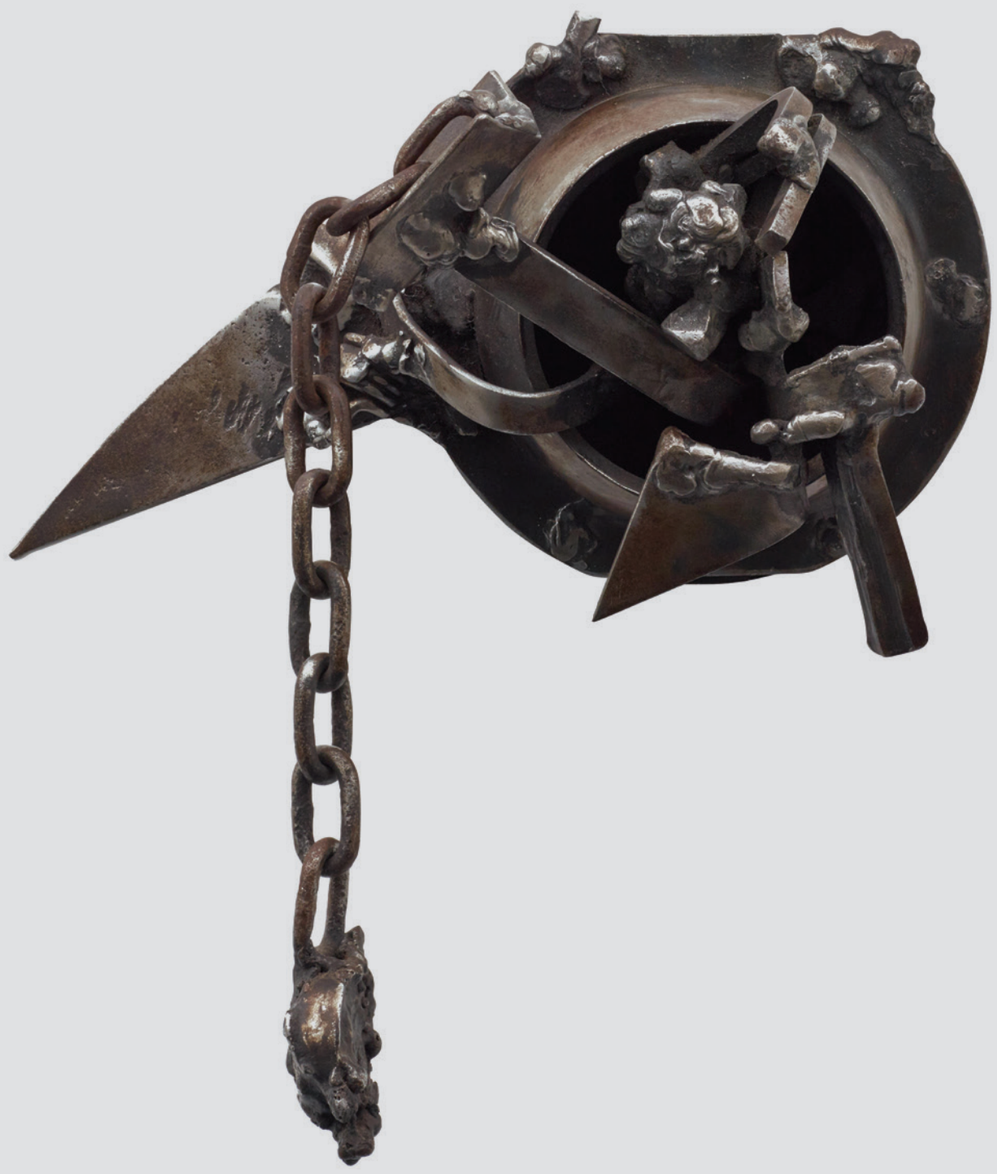
JW: How would you describe yourself today as an artist? If you had to put yourself in a proper perspective, in terms of art history—

EC: Like a master. I feel like that. I'm eighty-five and I just feel like I'm ahead of everybody. That's my own ego, right? It's not written on the walls that I am, but when I look at other artists … I like Warhol's idea. It's almost poetic. He'll do, for example, somebody in an automobile accident. He'll silkscreen an electric chair and make it pink. He's hitting on something like that. And I like Lichtenstein, who I met, when he first came from Ohio State. I like when you take those dots … I never met Warhol. But Bill Hudson did. I've seen him, though, in the news on modern art.

JW: How do you want to be known? How do you see your position in the history of art?

EC: Well, I want to be called "great."

Top: Edward Clark, *Creation*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 84 inches. Photo by Mark Blackshear. Courtesy of the artist.



Melvin Edwards by Michael Brenson

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MICHAEL BRENSON: There was a point, though, where, instead of a number of African American artists being scattered—at least this is my impression from *Now Dig This!*—it actually began to coalesce into a world where artists were aware of one another. Was it an actual community?

MELVIN EDWARDS: So I was in touch with people, but I wasn't part of what in New York was the specific Black Arts Movement, which people now use as a label all the time, and you are assumed to have been part of it. Which is fine, I don't object to that, but whenever I speak of it, I just say, "You know, the Black Arts Movement always existed, as long as there were black people." It had different emphases and needs. In Africa, culturally, through the years, you didn't have to think about white to make black art. It just was the art of the people; it wasn't in struggle with another culture. Okay, in the United States, our history has been

such that anything we come up with creatively often has that slant to it in some way. Scott Joplin composed symphonic things, but he also was the founder of ragtime. He also was from Texarkana, from that little tribe. I understood a lot of this then, partly because I was reading record covers, and music history, and jazz history. At the same time, one of my housemates when I was at USC, who was Jewish, from Brooklyn, David Lawrence Goldberg, he whistled Bach and painted in the house we had together. Because a lot of his friends were musicians, and USC was a strong school for music, I was exposed to Webern and Schoenberg and stuff. Those names were popping up a little bit in jazz information as well; so I was understanding multiple tracks.

MB: You said you make art for yourself first. But there obviously was a kind of radicalization in the '60s. Certainly, when you started to make the *Lynch Fragments*, there's a purposefulness to that work, a kind of in-your-face intention … You started the *Lynch Fragments* in '63. The first one was *Some Bright Morning*, which referred to a particular event. Did you feel that your work really changed when you started making the *Fragments*? [These are small, abstract sculptures.]

ME: Oh yeah. The change was already coming, but that solidified it. That was like, "Wait, yeah, you got something." I was already painting eight-by-eight-foot paintings; the idea was already there that, if you're going to be a modern artist, you've got to paint big, so here come these little things, just the opposite. But it made sense, and it kept making more sense. I realized that, in some ways, it was what I was trying to do in the paintings, but you can't do this with paintings.

MB: It doesn't seem like one plans to make a *Lynch Fragment*. You just have an idea, maybe you go in, and then they happen. They have their own rhythm, and one succeeds another. Were they essentially done in one sitting? Does it depend on the work?

ME: It depends on the work, and it varies an awful lot. The small size was great for experimenting; you could run through a lot of ideas and a lot of variety on a small scale. It's like a composition on a record; in the club, they may play for forty minutes on it, but those compositions all could be succinctly three minutes. But those first two or three, they happened pretty quickly. It was like what they say about athletes. I was probably in the zone and didn't know it.

Left: Melvin Edwards, *Some Bright Morning (Lynch Fragment)*, 1963, Welded steel, 14.25 × 9.25 × 5 inches, Courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © 2015 Melvin Edwards / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Right: William T. Williams, *1940*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 108 × 84 inches, signed c. William T. Williams. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York.

William T. Williams by Mona Hadler

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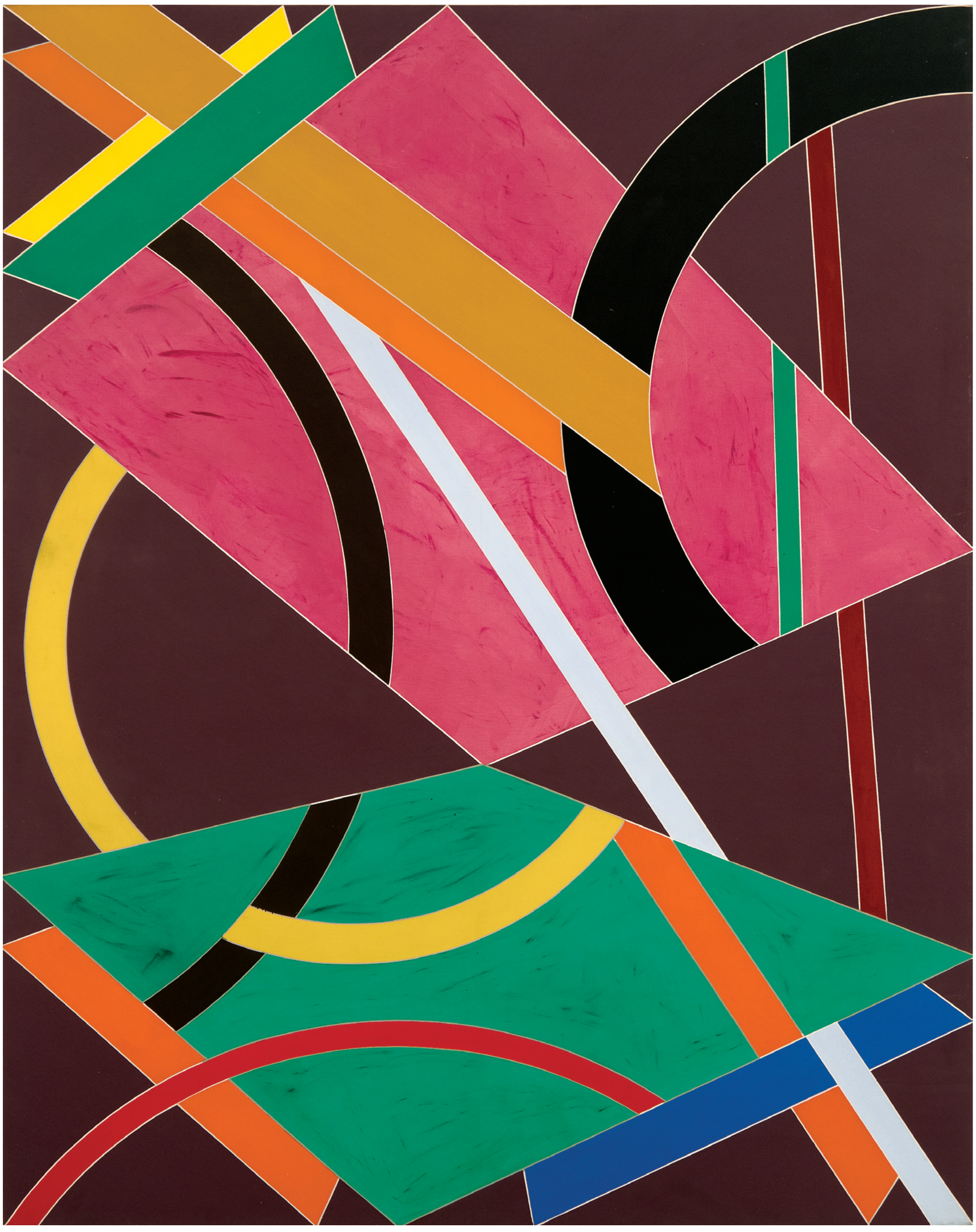
MONA HADLER: A lot of African Americans went to Vietnam, while white youths in university evaded the draft, going to their doctors or getting 4Fs or getting conscientious objector status or going back to graduate school.

WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS: The late '60s/early '70s were a difficult time for art and for artists in general. The personal decisions that artists had to make to function were very different than the decisions they make now. When you put it in context, I was involved in the Studio Museum. Again, it has the same idea. The artist has a role to play in our communities, and it would be best were we to create a climate where artists are not all going to one place to live and function. If artists were to disperse among different communities and become invested in those communities, functioning as both purveyors of aesthetics and as role models, then there can be an alternative way of seeing the world, an alternative thing that art makes kids think about. It may open up a relationship between the visual arts and music, for example. My parents were far more obsessed with the idea of kids becoming musicians than visual artists because they could understand the economics of being a musician. They had no experience with fine art. Music, visual art, dance, for instance—they're all interrelated, and the more people are exposed to them, particularly young people, the better the understanding they will have. It gives them more insight into what it means to be human, and the ways we can express ideas about the commonality of people.

MH: Let's talk about your work specifically. Brancusi's work makes for an interesting comparison to yours. There is a similarity in your desire to produce something abstract that is filled with feeling and resonates in your own life. Brancusi's sculptures draw from his own past but are universal in their abstraction.

WTW: That's important. I think we both want to strip down the work but hold onto heart. That heart is what connects the work to a culture rather than to a movement or a moment in history. If the viewer can sense the reductive part in relation to art history and the relation to that kind of movement of modernism and also sense that there is something that turns on the imagination or turns on a sense of memory, then that is a common experience that everyone has had. A work of art that contains all of those components is a work that breathes. It lives outside of the artist. It lives outside.It's interactive and playful.



Excerpts from BOMB's Oral History Project in celebration of Brooklyn Museum's Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power

BOMB's Oral History Project is a unique series that documents and preserves the life stories of NYC's African American visual artists through in-depth one-on-one interviews. BOMB's oral histories provide an opportunity for these influential artists to reflect on their lives and careers, and are available online at bombmagazine.org for FREE.

BOMB's Oral History Project is funded by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, the Bay and Paul Foundations, the Seth Sprague Educational and Charitable Foundation, Humanities New York, and individual supporter Agnes Gund.

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power offers an unprecedented look at a broad spectrum of work by African American artists from 1963 to 1983, one of the most politically, socially, and aesthetically revolutionary periods in American history. On view September 14, 2018–February 3, 2019 at the Brooklyn Museum.

#soulofanationbkm

The show is organized by Tate Modern in collaboration with Brooklyn Museum and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, and curated by Mark Godfrey, Senior Curator, International Art, and Zoe Whitley, Curator, International Art, Tate Modern. The Brooklyn Museum presentation is curated by the Brooklyn Museum's Assistant Curator, Contemproary Art, Ashley James.

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