

Melvin Edwards

*Agua y Acero en Papel*



## Dieu Donné Lab Grant Program: Melvin Edwards

### *Agua y Acero en Papel*

February 1 - March 17, 2001

#### INTRODUCTION

We are very pleased to inaugurate this Lab Grant Program publication series with the artist Melvin Edwards. With the support of the New York State Council on the Arts, The Nathan Cummings Foundation and The Greenwall Foundation, we were able to bring Mel into the studio for twelve days to collaborate with Studio Director Pat Almonrode. Utilizing objects that he normally incorporates in his sculpture, Mel developed with Pat's assistance a "blow-out" stenciling technique to produce this remarkable new body of work. Along with the chains, steel plates, locks and work gloves, Mel brought good humor, great conversation, and a wonderful richness of experience into the studio. We hope that the conversation that follows in this publication captures well the enthusiasm of this collaboration and the deeply human spirit that resonates in Mel's work.

In addition to the institutions which support the Lab Grant Program, we would like to extend our warm thanks to Gail Deery at Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper in New Brunswick, New Jersey for introducing us to Mel and encouraging us to work together. Special thanks also to Alejandro Anreus, curator of the Jersey City Museum in Jersey City, New Jersey, for his assistance during this project. Works from the Lab Grant program residency are included in a travelling survey exhibition of works on paper by Melvin Edwards, curated by Dr. Anreus.

Mina Takahashi, *Executive Director*

Conversation between Melvin Edwards (ME) and Pat Almonrode (PA), moderated by Mina Takahashi (MT), December 11, 2000 at Dieu Donn  Papermill, New York City

MT Mel, how did this collaboration come about?

ME My office at Rutgers is on the same floor as the printmaking and paper area. I had been taking trips to Senegal and started bothering Gail Deery [Director of the Paper Facility at Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper] for handmade paper in advance of these trips, to take with me, because I was doing prints over there. The idea of actually making some paper was always tossed around, but I never did anything about it. Then when I told Gail about my show [a retrospective of works on paper] at the Jersey City Museum, she thought it would be a good opportunity for Dieu Donn  and for me. I'd be putting in more recent work, and experimenting with another medium. I knew your place because I'd come to a couple of exhibitions, and I thought it would be a good idea. But I certainly didn't anticipate what we've actually done, so it's all a pleasant surprise.

PA Once we got you over here and realized what a good time we were having with you, and what tremendous work you were doing, at that point we decided that you'd be a real good candidate to launch our Lab Grant Program.

MT You were the guinea pig...

ME That's quite alright, so long as the guinea pig isn't being led to the slaughter [laughter]... It was just a matter of trying things and, as they worked, continuing them...and what's interesting is how we didn't necessarily end up using things in anticipated ways, but we certainly got very interesting things out of the process.

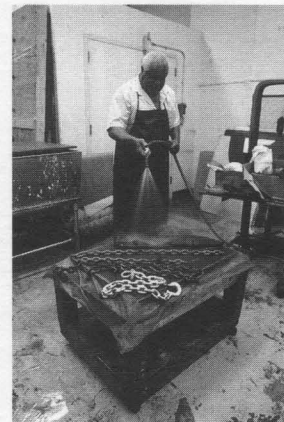
PA It's always the case when somebody comes in, especially someone who doesn't have prior papermaking experience, we need to play around a little bit, and find how we can adapt our medium to the artist's needs, and how they can adapt their vision to the medium. I think the work you did here is such a nice continuation of the sculpture and the drawing and the printmaking of yours that I've seen – it really fell right into place.

ME For me, the past is never gone. Often, an idea that I used when I was very young and very much a beginner might get transposed to another level down the road, as though on a parallel track rather than a 1-2-3-4 kind of progression. When it comes to being on paper – or IN paper in this case – it's very related to ideas where the sculpture and graphics come together. Using the stencil process and the concept of negative space – to be able to use the waterhose and blow stuff away, but at the same time to leave stuff – it's almost like the process of painting with washes and solid areas. And here, we used three-dimensional objects as stencils – we've got shape and form. But I was used to thinking that way –

MT – from your experience in printmaking?



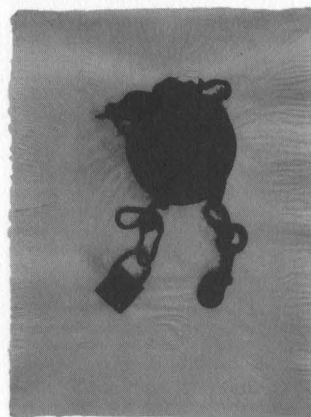
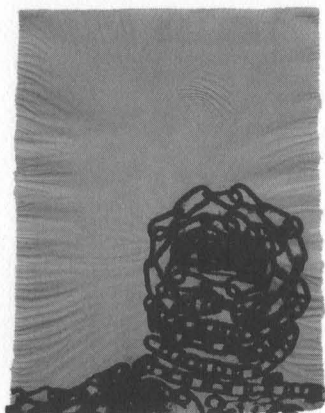
Melvin Edwards composing an image by placing objects on freshly-made black cotton rag paper.



The artist creating the image, using water to spray away pulp that is not covered by the objects.



Studio Director Pat Almonrode, assisted by Sharon D rr, removing protective netting from the sprayed-out image. The image will then be transferred to a linen base sheet.



ME Let's just say my understanding comes more from sculpture. Through the years, because of sculpture I understand a lot of things about painting better than I did when I was painting. And that has to do with really making sure there's a difference between the terms "shape" and "form." Form is three-dimensional and "negative space" is rhetoric, not a fact. It's a term that we use to help us describe a situation but there's no such thing as "negative space" – there's just space, and it's occupied or it's not. So with the spaces between the forms, in this kind of process – some people might say, "Well, you're just stenciling," but it isn't just the image you put down. It's also the image that happens because of the way those shapes occupy space. In our case, here we take some stuff and we blow it away and we can't save what we blow away...and then we flip it, and so you have to be able to see it in reverse. There's a certain amount of trying to anticipate how that's going to look. And your ability to do that only develops in process.

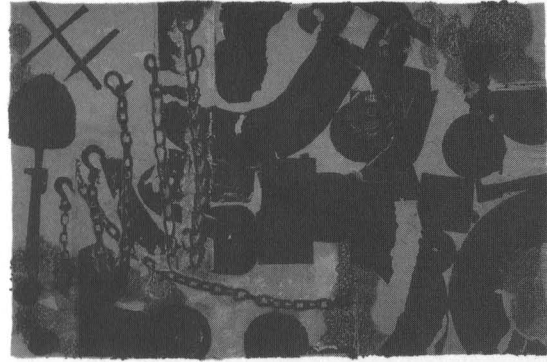
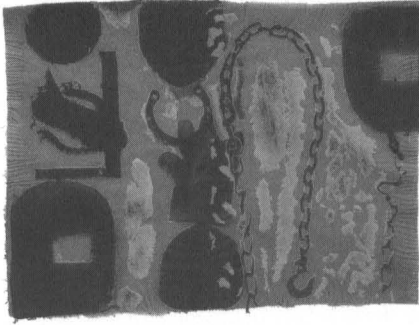
MT Pat, in a collaboration when you're passing on a technique to someone who's unfamiliar with the medium, how do you go about expressing that, and how do you react to the way the artist responds when you're in process?

PA Well, I'd have to say in this case, once we began to settle on the idea of doing the washouts, Mel took to that process like a duck to water. I think one of the things you responded to, and one of the things that I see clearly in the work, too, is the physicality, the "activeness" of that process, creating those negative spaces by washing things away, and also of course using these actual objects to create the imagery, as well.

ME And things happen that you just can't anticipate. There was no way for me to know, December of last year, when I had just come back from Angola, that I would be doing this body of work – and there are some references straight out of Angola, you know. The working tools, for instance and the importance of water in life and art...

MT What were you doing in Angola?

ME [My wife] Jayne [Cortez] and I went over for a conference. Jayne focused on OMA [Organization of Angolan Women] and we met writers and artists and I went to the National School of Fine Arts and saw artists working with their students under the dynamic conditions of wartime. Angola is one of those places where there



are land mines and you can't easily go outside of the cities. You see amputees – it's horrible – but they have hope and the people creatively continue their struggle.

PA It's interesting to me to hear this about Angola. We haven't talked a whole lot, over the course of the collaboration, about the thematic content in your work. And we've been talking now about the formal content. But I know that these are themes that you've worked with over a long time too, and it's interesting to hear how your experience in Angola is amplifying those themes and continuing them. I find this particular wash-out technique to have a special poignancy, really. I think the fact that we're looking at, in effect, "shadows," traces of these things – the tools and the chains and the gloves and the helmets and what all of those mean – I find that, as I said, especially poignant.

ME You're right. I have a perennial interest in those themes. I've used Angola as a subject in my work many times. With my particular focus on Africa...I don't know why, but Angola always touched me. In my search to try to find things in my African heritage to use, well, utilitarian objects are all over the place. Only if you spend time there will you see how people use them. You know, how you see a thing that's used for cooking, or for the hair, and then you see somebody using it for a textile process, and it's the same tool. And if they can do that, then I can go straight to paper and ink, or to something else.

MT And what about the idea of shadows?

ME And apparitions, silhouettes...you know how when we were kids and we would play with our own shadows in relation to the sun? You know, you'd stand up and make this long or that short? Well that means you're aesthetically aware of what reality and proportion are. Because you know you're not that tall, and you know your legs are not that long, or your head is not that small. But it's interesting to make it happen. That's playing with visual possibilities. On the other hand, the shadow can fix the moment. And one of the most poignant variants of this that I ever saw, when I went to Hiroshima, that figure that's impressed on the wall because [of the atomic blast] –

PA I've heard about that... A fireman friend of mine told me one time about going into houses where fires had occurred, and seeing beds where people had died, leaving behind the white shadow with the ash all around it – what a powerful image...

ME Yeah. And then there's Vesuvius, and Pompeii... Artwise, of course, you don't dare to try to appropriate that, but you can do a variant. These are impressions of our existence... And then the tools that appear in the work...when anthropologists want to see early traces of humanity, they look for something that indicates tools. That's as early as it gets. If it has no indication of tools, there's no way to know we were there. But if it's something we cooked with or cut with, then, we were there.

PA The scientific name for human being is homo sapiens, but it's also been suggested that it might be appropriate to call us homo faber – humans that MAKE, tool-users. And what I see in your work, and what I certainly think comes across to an attentive viewer – it's technically interesting, it's visually engaging, but it's also deeply human. There's a real human record there, not only of the process that went on here in our studio but also of all of the processes that went into making Mel Edwards.

ME Well, when you've been at it as long as I have, you figure out how to isolate things at the opportune moment.

MELVIN EDWARDS [b. 1937, Houston, Texas] is best known for his large, public-site welded steel sculptures and a continuing series of small-scale wall reliefs entitled *Lynch Fragments*. He was educated and began his art career in California, before moving to New York City in 1967. Since 1972, Edwards has been on the visual arts faculty at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick, NJ. Edwards' primary medium is welded steel, although he also creates installations, prints and drawings. He has completed fifteen public art projects across the United States, most recently for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Station in Jersey City, NJ. His sculpture and works on paper are in over thirty-six public collections including the Museum of Modern Art, NY; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NY; and Los Angeles County Museum, CA. Edwards has received many honors, awards and fellowships from institutions including the National Endowment for the Arts, Guggenheim Foundation, John Jay Whitney Fellowship Program, Joan Mitchell Foundation, and the Fulbright Fellowship Program. He is represented by CDS Gallery in New York, NY.

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donn  Papermill, INC is a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing the art of hand papermaking by collaborating with artists to produce two and three-dimensional works in handmade paper, manufacturing sheets of archival handmade paper, presenting exhibitions and conducting educational programs for adults and children.

The Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donn  Papermill. Through this program, Dieu Donn  intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field.

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In conjunction with this Lab Grant residency, Melvin Edwards and Dieu Donn  Papermill co-published *Fragments & Shadows*, a paperwork in an edition of 20. Proceeds from sales of the editioned paperwork will fund the Lab Grant Endowment to support future residencies under this program.

This is issue number 1 of the Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program publication series documenting Dieu Donn 's residency program for mid-career artists.

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Dieu Donn  Papermill, INC

433 Broome Street

New York, NY 10013

tel 212.226.0573

fax 212.226.6088

info@papermaking.org

www.papermaking.org



