



DECEMBER 2019

FOOD, FARMING, HISTORY, MEMORY

Agricole | Melvin Edwards



Melvin Edwards (American, born 1937). *Agricole* (Detail). 2016. Welded steel and chains.

Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A sharp, beak-like metal object attached to what looks like a two-rung ladder is suspended at the intersection of three thick, rusted chains hanging from the ceiling. A fourth chain hangs from the central object with a hook dangling from the end. The taut chains create a path for the viewer's eye as it focuses on the central object. In fact, this object is part of a plow blade that holds cultural, historic, and nostalgic importance for the artist, Melvin Edwards. The title of the work, *Agricole*, is French for "agricultural," and evokes Edwards' time in Dakar, Senegal.

Edwards lives and works in New York, Baltimore, and Senegal, and the exhibition in which this piece is presented reflects his complex and intense engagement with a variety of African countries. Each work featured connects a person (friend, artist, poet), idea, word, or political movement from the many places on the African continent in which the artist has spent significant time.

The plow blade connects the rural East Texas of his childhood with farming he did in Dakar around 1999–2000. At this time, he purchased land adjacent to that of his friend, Senegalese painter Souleymane Keita. Edwards had already built a small house and studio and took the opportunity to cultivate peanuts and cassava (a root vegetable).

Edwards describes this intentional act of growing and consuming food in Senegal as a kind of connector to his family history.

A lot of African Americans who were really digging into their historic cultures often visit Africa and do all kinds of things. But very few go back and buy a piece of land and grow food on it, and at the end of the year eat the food that they've grown there . . . I know what I was doing when I planted the cassava. It took a year for it to be ready, and we dug it up, it was cooked for us, and so I could say for myself, for the first time in 300 years, someone in my family has done that.

CLASSROOM CONNECTION

Melvin Edwards has talked about creating sculpture as a process of addition and subtraction. For *Agricole*, he has taken part of a plow blade and attached the three chains to it to create something new that reflects important truths about his life. Ask students to look closely at and discuss *Agricole*. Give students a variety of materials and found objects and ask them to bring one object (large or small) that has significance to them that they would be willing to transform into a sculpture. Guide students in the process of taking something away from the object and adding other elements to express something about why their core object is important to them.

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**SEE AGRICOLE IN MELVIN EDWARDS:
CROSSROADS AT THE BMA.**



Agricole, 2016

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