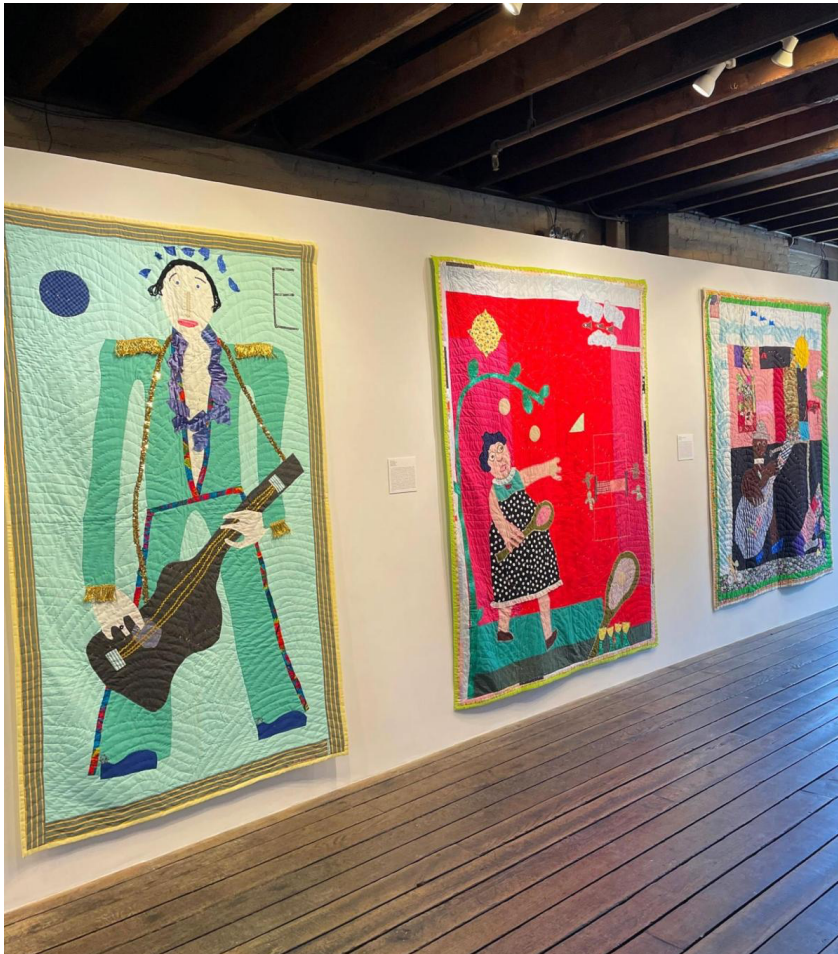


# FORT GANSEVOORT

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## Yvonne Wells at Fort Gansevoort Gallery

By Melissa Stern – June 29, 2023



Installation view of the gallery Credit: Melissa Stern photo

The Fort Gansevoort Gallery in the Meatpacking District (5 Ninth Ave., NYC) has just opened a new show by Yvonne Wells, a self-taught quilter from rural Alabama. Born in 1939, Wells started quilting later in life, after working as a physical education teacher in the public schools during the turbulent era of integration in the South. She turned to quilting first as a utilitarian hobby and eventually as a means of personal storytelling.

Using scraps and found fabric yardage, she began to tell stories of the civil rights struggles in the South as well as document, with a wry sense of humor, her views of American popular culture heroes. Elvis, Michael Jackson, Dolly Parton, and Louis Armstrong all appear in this exhibition. The gallery has opted to present some of these lighter-themed pieces in a way that is delightful in its creative and amused view of pop culture icons.

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Entitled “Play the Hand That’s Dealt You,” the show covers the time period from 1990–2022. It really shows the evolution of Wells’s style and technique. The earliest piece—my favorite—is “Satchmo” (1990).

In this work, a tribute to jazz genius Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong, Wells quilted a sheet of Armstrong’s music that dances across the surface of the quilt. Using a pink-patterned backdrop, she portrays the man through the energetic rhythm of his notes. The bold black silhouettes of the musical notation read as both “music” and strong abstract design. This music is going to rock your world. The actual portrait of Satchmo is small, as if to say “the music is the man.”

Wells’s love of music and pop culture is whimsically addressed in the many portraits of musicians in the show. Her stitched portrait of B.B. King is a great example of how successfully she marries the medium of quilting to her sense of design and color.

“B.B. King Concert in the Garden” shows the musician playing an outdoor concert in Memphis (as stated in the wall label). This quilt uses the juxtaposition of scale and a playful combination of fabric patterns to set a sense of place and time. Using blue-and-white patterned cotton on the sides; on top, she creates a sky; green and floral prints on one side and the bottom create the park. The lines of white quilting stitches look like pathways through the bucolic scene. These elements are both literal and abstract, as are the color blocks within the quilt. The bandshell, a man in a hammock, and a small bike rider all set the tone for a day in the park, listening to the master bluesman. As with most of her quilts in this show, there is a pervasive sense of joy and celebration.

Having looked into Yvonne Wells’s body of work, I admit that I am most taken with her political pieces. Commenting on the Civil Rights Movement and the Southern history that she has lived through, these pieces are potent and have an urgency about them. However, the pieces in her current show are delightful, beautiful, and well worth the trip to the gallery.

It is nice to get a view into an artist’s full oeuvre, and Wells shows her obvious delight in music and her life in this exhibition. You will leave with a smile on your face. Yvonne Wells, “Play the Hand that’s Dealt You,” Fort Gansevoort Gallery. Through August 12.