

# FORT GANSEVOORT

# W

## At 85, Artist Yvonne Wells Is Having a Milestone Moment

Maxine Wally –September 19, 2024



Yvonne Wells at Fort Gansevoort, New York.  
Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

From the floor of her home in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the artist Yvonne Wells creates mind-bending quilts patched together with found objects, wonky shapes, and a look that Wells describes as being “different” from what the rest of the art world finds beautiful and trendy. Wells—who, despite growing up in a region known for its rich Black quilting history, did not make her first quilt until she was middle-aged in 1979—is a prolific, self-taught artist. Since the 1980s, she’s stunned critics with her quiet but impactful approach to quilting—using her medium to tell Bible stories, or recount events from the Civil Rights Movement. And now, the artist is finally getting her due with back-to-back art shows, a 350-page book about her extraordinary work and life, and a fellowship prize from the Joan Mitchell Foundation.

# FORT GANSEVOORT



Yvonne Wells, *That's Me*, 2000, Assorted fabrics, 92.5 × 73 inches.  
© Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

"I just wish it could be spread out as opposed to all happening in the span of two months, but I'm dealing with it pretty good," Wells tells me with a cheeky grin on a recent afternoon over Zoom. She has the jolly yet grounded energy of your favorite aunt—albeit one with an impeccable eye and a true artist's heart. "But I'm excited. I never thought they would all come at one time."

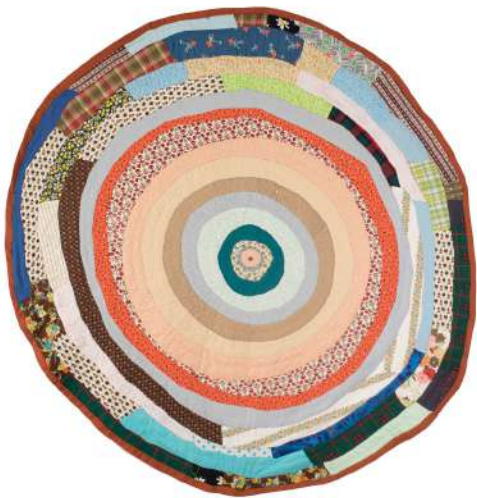


Yvonne Wells, *Sit Down*, 2003, Assorted fabrics, 84 × 80.5 inches.  
© Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

# FORT GANSEVOORT

And yet, come they have: first, a show called “Picture This: The Story Quilts of Yvonne Wells,” at the Paul R. Jones Museum in Tuscaloosa, which will be running through all of September—something of a retrospective, with works spanning Wells’s early career to recent pieces she’s never shown before. Concurrently with the exhibition, the University of Alabama Press will release the book devoted to Wells, titled *The Story Quilts of Yvonne Wells*. Plus, the New York City art scene is getting a dose of Wells, too—with a show at Fort Gansevoort called “Beyond Patchwork,” which highlights her more abstract works. The latter opens on September 19 and runs through November 2.

The monograph features text written by Dr. Stacy I. Morgan, a professor at U of A who spent over five years visiting Wells at her home for hours-long conversations, which will be included in the book. “I never have experienced anything like it before,” Wells recalls. “I never thought I could write, but he said, ‘You *are* writing because you’re telling me everything to say.’” The artist describes the process as “long and fierce, but good. I learned a lot from him, because I’m not a person familiar with the art world, nor am I familiar with quilts, until I started to make ‘em. I didn’t know this much was said about a quilt!”



Yvonne Wells, *Round Quilt*, 1987, Assorted fabrics, 72 × 68.5 inches.  
© Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Wells made her first quilt out of necessity; she says she wanted something warm and comfortable to drape over her body. But by 1985, Wells’s signature story quilts had become a favorite at the Kentuck Art Festival in Northport, Alabama, where Wells’s agent urged her to show her work publicly. At her first unveiling, she was awarded Best in Show (an accolade she also received in 1990, 1991, 1995, 1997, and 2004). “I’m the happiest when I’m sitting down, seeing a quilt in my head, and continuing it to the finish,” Wells says. “It’s a gratifying feeling. I have made quite a few, and I’m still making them, but not at the pace that I once did.”

The artist was born in Tuscaloosa in 1939 to a family of nine siblings. “My father was a minister. He was away most of the time. Mama, who was a teacher, was home and trying to raise us,” she says. “I was the one they would call on to do the harvest work because they knew I could do it, and I could do it quick. I’m the outsider. I’m the tomboy, so they say.”

Wells developed a love for all things “irregular,” as she puts it, early on. “That’s why most of my quilts are irregular—and I don’t want to straighten ‘em up. I can have a raggedy piece, and I can make that piece fit, whereas the traditional quilter wouldn’t even bother with it. But I make it talk.”

# FORT GANSEVOORT

To create her quilts, Wells's process goes a little something like this: she'll envision a quilt in her mind, a key first step. "It happens any time of day or night," she says. "I've gotten up at 3 in the morning and my husband would say, 'What are you getting up for?!' I'd say, 'I see something.'" Then, she "finds all the stuff," or the materials she will incorporate into a quilt. "It gives me great pleasure to go to a thrift store and find something on the floor to use in a quilt," Wells adds.



Yvonne Wells, *Sea Monster*, 1990, Assorted fabrics, 49 x 42.5 inches.  
© Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

That same artistic process applies to the works that'll be on view at Fort Gansevoort, the Paul R. Jones museum, and in the book. It's led her to make "over a thousand quilts" during the span of her career, she estimates. She keeps the lot of them "upstairs, in my quilt cave," which Fort Gansevoort reps visited a couple of years ago to photograph each piece they wanted to include in the upcoming exhibition.

"My work has been called a lot of things: 'that junk.' 'I wouldn't show this to anybody.' All that kind of thing," Wells adds. "But this has been the greatest thing that's happened to me. I don't want to stop. I want to continue to make quilts with stories so that the younger generation can look and see. If it's an inspiration to them, it's definitely worth it."