

FORT GANSEVOORT

YVONNE WELLS

The Stories We Tell

October 28- December 18, 2021

**An online exhibition
in collaboration with
Jessica Lynne**



Yvonne Wells, *Miss Liberty Up Close and Personal*, 1995
Assorted fabrics, 53.25 x 46 inches.

Fort Gansevoort is proud to announce its representation of Alabama-based artist Yvonne Wells.

Beginning Thursday, October 28th, Fort Gansevoort's first presentation with the artist, *The Stories We Tell*, will debut online. This digital exhibition of Wells' vibrant quilts will be accompanied by a conversation between the artist and noted critic and curator Jessica Lynne. This presentation is a precursor to the forthcoming 2022 solo exhibition of Yvonne Wells' work at Fort Gansevoort's gallery space in New York City.

Yvonne Wells was born in 1939 in Tuscaloosa Alabama, where she continues to live and work. Her narrative quilts often depict religious subject matter, empowered female figures, and imagery related to American history and politics. An inheritor of the legacies of enslaved female quilters from the rural Alabama community known as Gee's Bend, Wells embraces a contemporary visual vernacular in her art, and has attracted attention for a style that uniquely melds traditional geometric abstraction with bold figuration.

Instead of planning her compositions in advance with preparatory drawings, Wells embraces an intuitive approach, sewing together fragments of fabric by hand into striking graphic forms. As the artist describes her process, "When it's right, let me tell you—and this might sound crazy—but there's a feeling, when you are quilting a piece of art and it speaks to you...When I am sitting down, quilting it and putting its last stitches in, it begins to speak. Not verbally, but internally..."

In Wells' *Miss Liberty Up Close and Personal* (1995), the iconic statue appears as a fragmented form. The organic shapes of the disjointed figure provide striking visual contrast to a colorful patterned background. Unlike the Statue of Liberty as it appears in five other quilts, which feature this motif, the figure here no longer holds her signature torch. Instead, the dislodged object partially obscures the American flag positioned behind it. While speaking to the artist about reoccurring themes in her work, Jessica Lynne observed, "Something that you address so well in your quilts are ideas of patriotism and citizenship, and maybe the conflicts that those ideas bring up for different people."

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Packed with symbolic imagery, *Miss Liberty Up Close and Personal* dismantles the myth of liberty as it is so often presented, to reveal the fraught reality of liberty as experienced by many Americans.

In a sentimental work titled *The Mother II* (1994), Wells celebrates the dichotomy of strength and tenderness inherent to the maternal role. Although the artist is a mother herself, she asserts that the mother in this work is not a self-portrait, nor any other specific mother. Instead, this female figure represents the universal experience of motherhood in all its complexities. The apron worn by the subject is formed from a dense collage of garment tags removed from the artist's own clothing. As Wells explains, the apron is a symbol of all the labels foisted upon mothers and the many personas they are expected to inhabit. In addition to the clothing labels, a tangled mass of black yarn, used for the mother's hair, inflects this quilt with a dynamic textural quality.

Faith plays a central role in Wells' life and art. She has proclaimed that every quilt she makes is infused with a religious tone, be it subtle or overt. Wells often incorporates traditional religious iconography into her work, such as a triangle, which is a symbol of the Christian holy trinity, or the color purple to represent God.

In *Signs in the Sky* (2005), two purple hands, holding a bell, extend from the top of the composition into a cloud-patterned rectangle of fabric. With this articulated division of space, Wells establishes a visual hierarchy: the celestial heavens above, the secular realm below. Four female figures at the bottom of the work appear as amorphous blue silhouettes with minimal facial features. The babies on their backs are similarly simplified oval forms. At once representational and decorative, these figures exemplify Wells' sophisticated amalgam of figuration and abstraction. In addition to employing a variety of visual strategies, she describes the melding of religious and secular elements in this work: "...these people down here are walking. They're walking through faith hoping they can get to (not the promised land) but north where they can have a better life than what they are experiencing now." Wells' imagery conjures a variety of allusions from the historical event of the Great Migration to the Biblical Nativity story. At the center of *Signs in the Sky*, a stained fabric remnant serves as an unexpected focal point of the composition. As a conceptual gesture, Wells transforms the blots from material flaws into a striking artistic element. The stains thus manifest as the "signs in the sky" to which her subjects look for hope.

Works by Yvonne Wells are currently on view in the traveling exhibition Charlie Lucas and Yvonne Wells: What I Knew How To Do at the Wiregrass Museum of Art in Dothan, Alabama. The exhibition was previously on view at The Shelby County Arts Council's EBSCO Fine Art Gallery in Columbiana, Alabama. In 2020 Wells' quilts were included in the exhibition Pieces and Patterns: Quilts of West Alabama at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Art in Montgomery, Alabama. Her work has been featured in exhibitions at the International Quilt Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, the Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama, Carnegie Visual Arts Center in Decatur, Alabama, and the Gadsden Museum of Art in Gadsden, Alabama. Wells has also exhibited her art internationally in France, Italy and Japan. Her work is included in the collections of the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL; the International Quilt Museum, Lincoln, NE; and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C.

Wells is the recipient of the 2019 Governor's Arts Award from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the 1998 Alabama Arts and Visual Craftsmen Award.

A forthcoming monograph on Yvonne Wells' work, written by University of Alabama professor Stacy Morgan, will be published by University of Alabama Press in 2023.