

FORT GANSEVOORT



Yvonne Wells

Play The Hand That's Dealt You

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Thursday, June 8, 2023, 5-7 PM

On View: June 9, 2023 – August 12, 2023

New York...Beginning June 8, 2023, Fort Gansevoort will present *Play The Hand That's Dealt You*, the first New York solo exhibition of Alabama-based artist Yvonne Wells. Born in 1939 in Tuscaloosa, Wells is known for her intricate narrative quilts depicting American history subjects, pop culture figures, and religious subject matter. As a self-taught artist living and working in the same region as the enslaved female quilters from the rural Alabama community known as Gee's Bend, Wells is aware of heritage techniques, yet cleaves to her own contemporary visual vernacular. Through a practice that illuminates the craft of quilt making as a form of fine art, in addition to its utilitarian function, she has developed a style that uniquely melds geometric abstraction with bold figuration. The evolution of Wells' personal aesthetic and technical mastery will be seen through over a dozen large works on view, spanning three decades of the artist's career.

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Improvisation and chance are integral to Wells' artistic process. Instead of following a pattern or planning her compositions in advance with preparatory drawings, she embraces an intuitive approach, sewing together fragments of fabric by hand into the compositions she envisions in her mind. Wells primarily uses repurposed fabric and found objects as the raw materials for her quilts. This generative practice of reuse and adaptation continues to fuel her creative production. The patterns and textures in front of her guide her spontaneous aesthetic choices. As the artist has said, "the materials I use have their own stories and histories... the quilts talk to me, and I listen."

In 2022, a solo exhibition of Wells' quilts was presented at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama. This year, Wells' work is featured in the Art Bridges Cohort Program's *Spotlight* exhibition series. Over the next year and a half, the exhibition will travel to all the museums that comprise the American South Consortium: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL, Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC, the Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, AL, and the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. Beginning in 2024, the *American South Consortium* will present an expanded exhibition at each venue including works by Wells and other *Spotlight* series artists.

A monograph devoted to Wells' career will be published by University of Alabama Press in 2024, co-authored by the artist and University of Alabama Professor Stacy Morgan. This comprehensive publication will include scholarly essays, a chronology of Wells' artistic production to date, and over 100 color plates of her quilts.

Exhibition details

Yvonne Wells' exhibition at Fort Gansevoort examines the role of play in her practice, both as process and subject matter. The show takes its title from the featured artwork *Play The Hand That's Dealt You*, 2011. At the center of this composition, an isolated black hand holds four playing cards. Facing the viewer, the cards clearly read as aces in every suite—one of the best poker hands possible. Rather than depicting the odds stacked against her subject, Wells deploys visual economy to symbolically depicts a Black subject with good fortune. Wells asserts that regardless of one's fate—whether one holds good or bad cards—we must all make the best of any given situation, a philosophy she carries into her art making. Extending this visual metaphor, a bright yellow pitcher and three lemons on a table allude to the aphorism "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." Wells' pairing of pictorial elements with well-known maxims and proverbs emphasizes her central message: the importance of resourcefulness. Sometimes intentional and other times internalized, Wells often uses games and sports as metaphors for human conflict. A football game is a simulation of war or combat, a card game is an exercise in strategy and luck used against one's opponent.

The theme of play also appears in Wells' depictions of musicians and pop culture icons who play an instrument or play a character in a movie. In these works, play functions as a performative act with an implied audience. *B.B. King Concert In The Garden*, 2019, features a portrait of the famous musician playing his guitar in Overton Park, in Memphis, Tennessee, where passersby stop to listen. Geometric rectangles of various patterned fabrics combine with figurative elements, such as a bird in a tree, and the multi-colored arch of Overton Park Shell amphitheater, to articulate this setting. On B.B. King's blue-and-white-striped guitar Wells has embroidered the name "Lucille"—an allusion to the song *My Lucille*, in which King personifies his instrument as a female companion. At the bottom of the quilt, a small, silhouetted figure rides a bicycle across a floral-patterned strip of fabric while a man in the background reclines in a red hammock made from an onion sack. Wells' deliberate depiction of these supporting characters in a diminutive scale provides narrative context to the scene without detracting focus from the main subject. The material choice for the hammock exemplifies Wells' resourcefulness and playfulness, enhancing the overall ambiance of leisure.

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Set against a bold cherry-red background, the early abstract work *Three Jugs*, 1995, demonstrates play and improvisation as an approach to making. Discarded, amorphously shaped pieces of black fabric, reminded Wells of vessels, inspiring a new work. Jugs, like quilts, traditionally serve a practical purpose. Yet, by rendering the vessels as aesthetic objects for the viewer's contemplation, Wells dissolves the boundaries between functional and fine art. With the decorative adornment of buttons, the simplified forms also read as garments, thus implying the human figure. Wells welcomes the ambiguity that abstraction provides, allowing for a multiplicity of interpretations. She also enjoys injecting her work with unexpected elements, which she believes motivates closer looking. With clarity and brevity of language, the artist explains: "To see is to know, to know is to understand."

About the Artist

Yvonne Wells' work was recently on view at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, in Alabama as one of the Art Bridges Cohort Program's Spotlight exhibitions. This solo exhibition will subsequently travel to the Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, South Carolina, the Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, Alabama, and the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. In 2023, Wells' work is included in the group exhibitions: Feeling of Light, at Almine Rech, Brussels, Belgium and Strike Fast, Dance lightly at the FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY. In 2022, a solo exhibition of Wells' works was presented at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL. In 2021, Fort Gansevoort presented the online exhibition Yvonne Wells: The Stories We Tell, In collaboration with Jessica Lynne. Wells' works were on view in the 2021 traveling exhibition Charlie Lucas and Yvonne Wells: What I Knew How To Do at The Shelby County Arts Council's EBSCO Fine Art Gallery in Columbiana, Alabama and the Wiregrass Museum of Art in Dothan, 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 permanent collections of Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts, Little Rock, AR; Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI; Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, MI; International Quilt Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE; Kentuck Art Center, Northport, AL; Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Montgomery, AL; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C.; The Bunker, West Palm Beach, FL, Wiregrass Museum of Art, Dothan, AL; and Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN. 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. In 2024, a forthcoming monograph on Yvonne Wells will be published by University of Alabama Press.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Yvonne Wells

Play The Hand That's Dealt You

2011

Assorted fabrics

81.5 x 65 inches

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