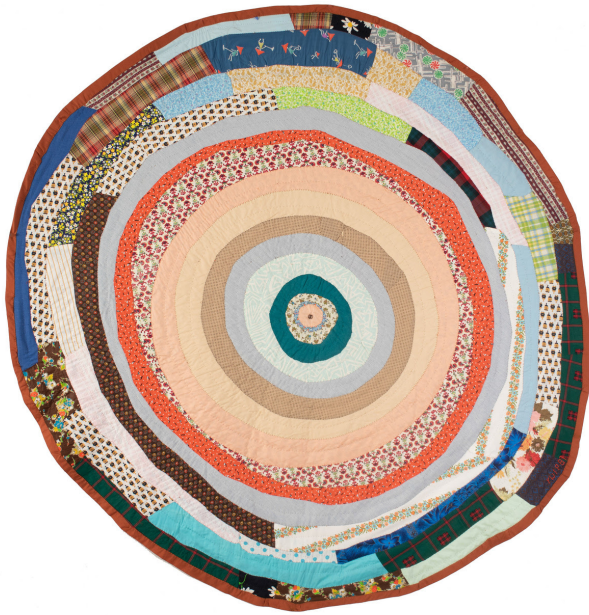


FORT GANSEVOORT



Yvonne Wells

Beyond Patchwork: The Abstractions of Yvonne Wells

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Thursday, September 19, 2024, 6-8 PM

On View: September 20, 2024 – November 2, 2024

New York...Beginning September 19, 2024, Fort Gansevoort will present *Beyond Patchwork: The Abstractions of Yvonne Wells*, the gallery's second solo exhibition of the Alabama-based artist. Born in 1939 in Tuscaloosa, Yvonne Wells is a self-taught textile artist living and working in the same region that was home to the enslaved female quilters of the rural community known as Gee's Bend. While versed in the heritage techniques associated with them, Wells possesses a deeply maverick attitude that has freed her to break the rules of traditional quilt-making and forge a decidedly individualistic artistic path with her own invented visual vernacular. Wells has attracted acclaim over past decades for works that assert a bold narrative figuration, taking on cultural and socio-political topics that range from portraits of Pop icons to the ongoing struggle for rights and equality. Against that backdrop, the exhibition at Fort Gansevoort will be the very first to elucidate a different aspect of Wells' practice—her unique relationship to abstraction as an intuitive and improvisational method of construction and a liberating form of self-expression.

Beyond Patchwork coincides with a milestone in the artist's career. Wells' work is being written into the canon of exceptional Black American textile arts via the first monograph devoted to her career, to be published by University of Alabama Press in September 2024. Co-authored by Wells and University of Alabama Professor Stacy Morgan, this comprehensive publication will span nearly five decades of Wells' output and include scholarly essays as well as more than 100 color plates of her quilts. The related exhibition *Picture This: The Story Quilts of Yvonne Wells*, will be on view at Paul R. Jones Museum in Tuscaloosa, Alabama from August 2 to September 27, 2024.

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Wells first took up quilting in the winter of 1979. With no prior sewing experience, she pieced together found scraps of fabric with the practical intent to keep her family warm. To this day, Wells uses repurposed fabric and found objects as the primary raw materials in her work, a generative process of reuse and adaptation that fuels her creative production. Guided by the patterns and textures that appear before her, Wells' spontaneous aesthetic choices reflect the resourcefulness, adaptability, and radiant imagination that characterize her spirit and define her art. Improvisation and chance are integral to her artistic process. Instead of planning compositions in advance, she embraces an intuitive approach, sewing together fragments of fabric by hand as the materials speak to her. Thus, Wells' quilts are often irregular in shape—an outcome she welcomes. There is a deliberateness to Wells' seemingly spur-of-the-moment arrangements which beguile the viewer through their eccentricity and immediacy. Wells' early quilts often drew inspiration from traditional patterns, such as Log Cabins, Dresden Plates, Strip Quilts, and Eight-Pointed Stars. However, the variations in shapes and sizes of fabric pieces, unconventional color and pattern combinations, and prominent stitches reveal her instinctual compulsion to break from convention and apply her ingenuity to the expression of a new voice.

Exhibition Details

Fort Gansevoort will showcase fifteen quilts by Wells including very early examples of her work along with more recent quilts such as *The Gees Bend Way* (2022) which pays honor to her artistic predecessors. Exemplifying Wells' early foray in quilt making, *Lone Star* (1987) takes the form of a traditional pieced quilt. Its design is based on a photograph of a quilt that appeared in the local Tuscaloosa newspaper and which Wells' husband challenged her to copy. Although the precision of *Lone Star* is atypical of Wells' signature aesthetic, this object demonstrates her ability to meticulously cut and assemble a uniform pieced quilt—a ridged style she soon thereafter deliberately disavowed in favor of her own approach. The patriotic color pallet Wells chose for *Lone Star* foreshadows the political direction her narrative “story quilts” would take.

In the same year, Wells created *Round Quilt* (1987), in which the artist liberated the traditional square format patchwork quilt, translating the archetype into an irregular circular composition. This quilt exemplifies heritage techniques typical of African American “crazy quilts,” but showcases Wells' vision and prerogatives in its determined departure from the expected. As the artist proudly exalted, “Let's see: Is it crooked? Is it not level? That would indicate that it's really mine.”

The quilt *African-American Squares* (1994) is composed of stripes of different brightly colored African print cloth—fabric pieces gifted to the artist over time—superimposed with a grid of solid-colored red squares, punctuated by narrow black stripes. Perhaps one of the most symmetrically balanced compositions among Wells' abstract quilts, *African-American Squares* is unique in her oeuvre because it has lived many lives as a functional and cultural object: For many years it was used as a tablecloth at Wells' church during Thanksgiving gatherings. During her time as a public-school teacher, Wells also used this quilt as a didactic tool. Though it is absent of figurative imagery, its different compositional textiles tell important stories about African cultural history. Originally reserved for Asante royalty, Kente cloth has become more accessible through increased production and continues to be associated with wealth, high social status, and cultural sophistication. Dutch wax print, also known as African wax print or Ankara, is an omnipresent material for clothing in West Africa and Central Africa introduced by Dutch merchants during the 19th century, who took inspiration from native Indonesian designs. Wells' repurposing of these materials into her own work speaks to the inevitable transformation and reappropriation of artistic traditions that have taken root in America as the result of the African Diaspora. *African-American Squares* celebrates a variety of cultural traditions while the materials from which it is constructed intrinsically trace the history of forced movement and subjugation of African peoples, raising questions for the viewer about the continued struggle for equality and equanimity.

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Beyond the aesthetics and subject matter of her quilts, Wells has confidently described her artistic process as a natural extension and expression of her identity: “If you are looking for stitches that are not seen, you’re in the wrong place. If you’re looking for squares that are squarish, you’re in the wrong place. There isn’t anything that I do that is measured by a tape. I use my arms and say, ‘Well, maybe this is what it should be.’ You will see colors that will blow your mind. But you see, I am a person of color—in more ways than one.”

About the Artist

Yvonne Wells’ work is included in the current exhibition Patterns in Abstraction: Black Quilts from the High’s Collection at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA until January 5, 2025. From 2023 through August 2024, Wells’ work was featured in the Art Bridges Cohort Program’s Spotlight exhibition series which traveled to the 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. In 2023, Fort Gansevoort presented Play The Hand That’s Dealt You, the artist’s first solo exhibition in 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, AL. 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; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; International Quilt Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE; Kentucky Art Center, Northport, AL; Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, AL; Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Montgomery, AL; Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C.; 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.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Yvonne Wells

Round Quilt

1987

Assorted fabrics

77 x 68.5 inches

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