

FORT GANSEVOORT



Dawn Williams Boyd: *FEAR*

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Wednesday, November 19, 2025, 6-8PM

On View: November 20, 2025 – January 24, 2026

New York...Beginning November 19, 2025, Fort Gansevoort will present *FEAR*, its third solo exhibition with Dawn Williams Boyd, the Atlanta-based artist widely celebrated for textile works that construct powerful, socio-political narratives. Boyd’s “cloth paintings” layer and stitch history and contemporary political references into striking tableaux that openly question America’s social structure and its citizens’ received knowledge. Populated by life-sized figures, her works teem with elaborate textures, ornate patterns, and virtuoso technique that match the complexity of her subject matter.

With *FEAR*, Boyd will debut a new series based on canonical American ephemera—photographs, etchings, advertisements, and the like—depicting racist imagery and historical accounts of subjugation. But in her appropriation, Boyd flips the script: white aggressors and Black victims trade roles, yielding an uncanny cognitive dissonance that draws the viewer toward a confrontation with ingrained ideas about race, power, and violence. Her reimaginings probe the relativity and instability of historical “truth,” raising urgent questions about how narratives are constructed, rewritten, and weaponized. At a moment when censorship and regressive government initiatives threaten to silence public discourse and erase truths from historical record, Boyd’s cloth paintings open a space for honest conversation.

Boyd is deeply attentive to the provenance of her working materials: they often underscore the context of her subject matter. She frequently uses salvaged clothing and fabric. In the *FEAR* series, she also incorporates textiles imported from Africa, sourced from a Black, female-owned specialty fabric store in the United States. Her preference for 100% cotton holds symbolic meaning, recalling the fraught history of cotton as a central export of the Confederacy, cultivated through the exploitative labor of enslaved Black people.

In a work titled *Cultural Appropriation* (2025), the artist reimagines historical photographs of the Cotton Club, Harlem’s legendary Prohibition era nightspot known for showcasing legendary African American entertainers while catering to a whites-only audience. In Boyd’s scene, white dancers in banana skirts evoke the stage costume made famous by Josephine Baker (an artist-activist predecessor), while the well-dressed Black patrons wear African print clothing and jewelry featuring cowry shells, gold, and diamonds. The elaborate adornment of the Black patrons asserts their cultural and class dominance over the bare-breasted performers on stage. By swapping the races of her subjects in this Jazz Age milieu, Boyd highlights the exploitation inherent to the veneration and consumption of Black culture that has for centuries been intertwined with disregard for Black lives.

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Another work on view, *The Lost Cause Mythos* (2025), draws inspiration from the classic 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, itself based on Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel. Boyd upends the paradigmatic Antebellum-era narrative by presenting her own version of Scarlett O'Hara as a Black queen attended by her white maid. The pale Mammy's despondent gaze can be read not only as a counter to the "happy slave" myth, but to a role reversal in which a resplendent Black protagonist stands confidently in her chamber, surrounded by lush red tapestries (red is a recurring symbol of power throughout the *FEAR* series). The carved bed posts reference commemorative bronzes from the historical West African Kingdom of Benin, which depict the queen mother figure. This specific detail points to the historic precedent of Black women's political influence, while acknowledging how Black women were—and still are—simultaneously forced to uphold white society in America.

With these and the other works on view in *FEAR*, Boyd interrogates the legacy of racist imagery that has long permeated American culture, transforming images of oppression into powerful counternarratives. Such work resonates within a broader project of contemporary Black artists—among them, Betye Saar, Michael Ray Charles, and Kara Walker—who deploy and tinker with the dominant language of American visual culture to investigate racial stereotypes, collective memory, and structures of systemic racism. The alternate histories in Boyd's cloth paintings issue a call for critical reflection and implore us to engage in difficult conversations about race rather than succumb to ennui and fear.

About the Artist

Dawn Williams Boyd was born in 1952 in Neptune, New Jersey. She earned her BFA at Stephens College in Columbia, MO in 1974. Boyd's work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, Stuttgart, Germany; and the Richardson Family Art Museum, Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC. Boyd's art has been exhibited nationally at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; the Everson Museum in Syracuse, NY; The California Museum, Sacramento, CA; Mingei International Museum, San Diego, CA; Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, Winchester, VA; Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY; Hauser & Wirth, New York and Los Angeles, Brown v. The Board of Education Historic Site, Topeka, KS; Southwest Art Center, Atlanta, GA; Hammonds House Museum, Atlanta, GA; Bulloch Hall, Roswell, GA; Callanwolde Fine Arts Center, Atlanta, GA; Contemporary Craft, Pittsburgh, PA; Kniznick Gallery, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; the Gallery at Heimbold Visual Arts Center, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY; Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC; the Lamar Dodd School of Art's Dodd Galleries, the University of Georgia, Athens, GA; and Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA. Her work has been exhibited internationally at Mercedes-Benz Art Collection, Stuttgart, Germany; Hauser & Wirth, Somerset, UK; and Almine Rech, Brussels, Belgium.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Dawn Williams Boyd

The Lost Cause Mythos, 2025

Assorted fabrics and cotton embroidery floss

56 x 70.5 inches

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