

FORT GANSEVOORT

**JOAN MITCHELL
FOUNDATION**

In the Studio: Yvonne Wells

by Jenny Gill, April 21, 2025



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

Yvonne Wells is an artist from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and a 2024 Joan Mitchell Fellow. We interviewed her about her work and creative practice in January 2025. The following is excerpted and edited from a transcript of that conversation.

I'm a quilter. I deal with fiber. I say that I make story quilts, because I feel that my work cannot be understood if I'm not there to explain some of the signs and symbols that are on it. I work with different categories of stories, which could be drawn from anything I love, or could be socio-political, biblical, or spiritual.

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When I start a quilt, I don't just go pick up a piece and say, "I'm going to make up a biblical quilt." The story has to come first through my mind. I have to see it first. Then I have to feel it in my heart. Then my hands need to be able to create it—what I'm seeing and feeling.



Yvonne Wells, Seven Deadly Sins "Lust", 2008. Assorted fabrics, 90 x 75 inches.

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After I have the thought or the picture in my mind, I gather up stuff. When I say "stuff," I don't mean just material. I gather things that are going to highlight what I'm seeing, place it all on the floor, look at it for a while, maybe a week or so, and talk to it. People have said I must be crazy—well, I don't doubt that—but it speaks back to me, and therefore I know which way I am going.

From there, I get the scissors and start to cut. After about three or four weeks of putting it together, depending on how big my story is, I pick it up off of the floor and I put it on the frame. From there, that's where I start to do my real talking. I'm quiet, and the movement is basically the same, because I'm not being interfered with by another piece of cloth, another color that was on the floor. It's a steady beat until I complete it. Depending on the size, it'll take about three weeks to get one quilted. I have had some that took longer, because they were a little bit more difficult or a little bit larger.



Yvonne Wells, Bird + 3 Flags, 2017. Assorted fabrics, 28 x 36 inches. © Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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After I take the piece off of the quilt frame, then I start to hem it. The quilt is not finished until I complete that hem. When the hemming is done, I put in a triangle, which is Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost—that is my signature. Each piece has it in there. If I somehow forget it, it doesn't feel complete.

It's so much fun. I used to work on five quilts at a time. Now I might have two or three going at a time. And the fact is, I didn't have to start quilting. I just did it because of the availability of the materials that were around me, like the curtains on the wall, my children's clothes, sheets, or anything that could tell that story. I'm self-taught. And since I've been doing it this long, I don't want anyone to come and try to give me instructions at this time, because I'm molded where I am.

When I complete a quilt, it may not look like a man to you, or whatever is in my story, but to me it does. That's all that matters. That is satisfying to me, and I hope that others will be satisfied as well.

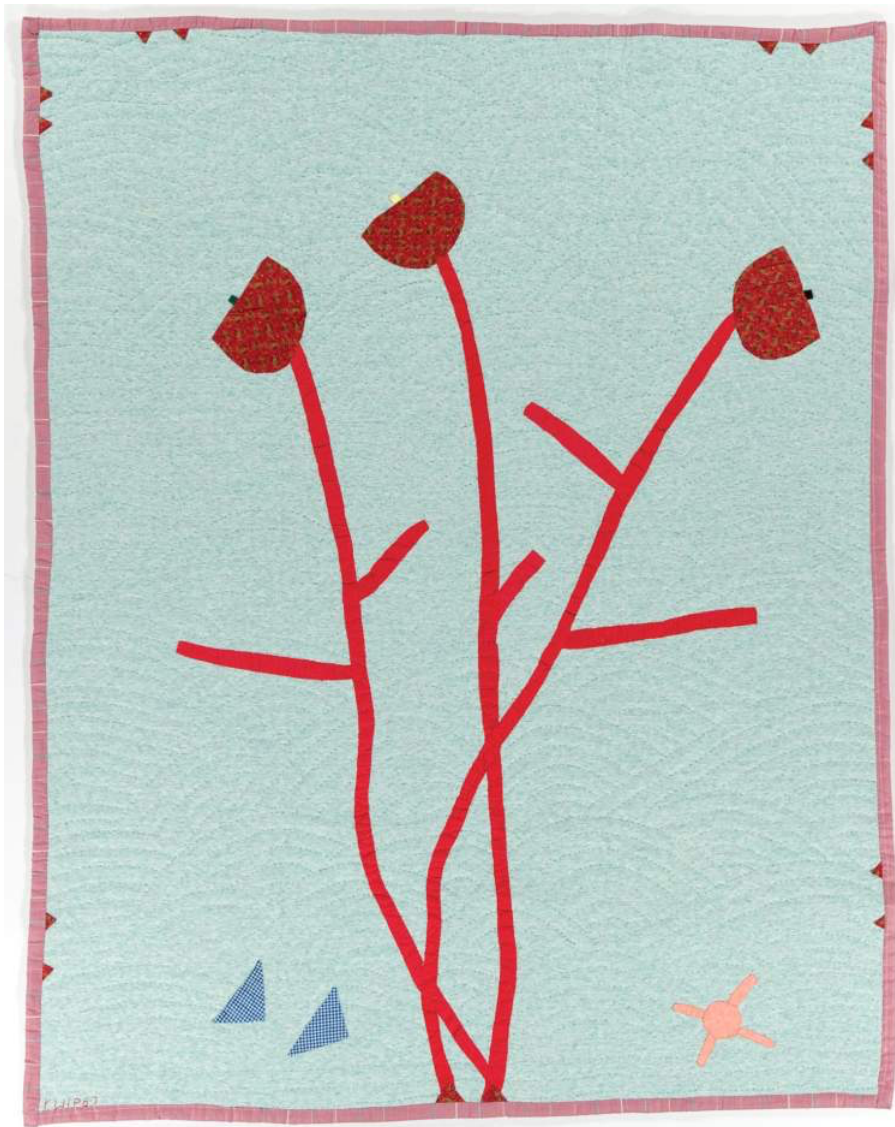


Yvonne Wells, Portrait of the King II, 1992. Assorted fabrics, 105 x 77 inches. © Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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I taught physical education for 35-plus years, and when I was growing up, I always thought I could be a runner. It was my desire to compete in the Olympics, but after my mother became ill, I didn't have the time to go off and do the training. I stayed with her until she passed, but my desire was to run. Or if not run, some other sports—baseball, softball—that I was interested in, too.

I don't know if I was an artist then or not. When you come up in the years that I came up in, there were very limited materials and things that I could use to make art. I do remember, however, making dolls out of a Coca-Cola bottle and grass, and putting ribbon on the hair. And I'd place her up so we could see it. If that's art, I don't know. I know it falls in the category of folk art, because folk art could be anything. It can last a long time, or it can last until you destroy it.



Yvonne Wells, *The Gossip Quilt*, 1987. International Quilt Study Center, Robert & Helen Cargo Collection of African American Quilts

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I started quilting in 1979, and that was the year my daughter went off to college. I was piecing at the time, and I put some squares and strips together, and my daughter took it to college with her. That made me feel so good.

I started telling stories through quilts around 1984, and I had my first show in 1985 at the Kentucky Festival of the Arts—a folk art show in the woods, I call it, a beautiful place to be. I only went there after being persuaded to show my quilts, because at first I didn't want anybody to see this stuff. It was personal, and mine didn't look like the “real” quilters' did. Mine looked crazy. But I did show my work at the festival, and at the end of the night I got Best of Show.

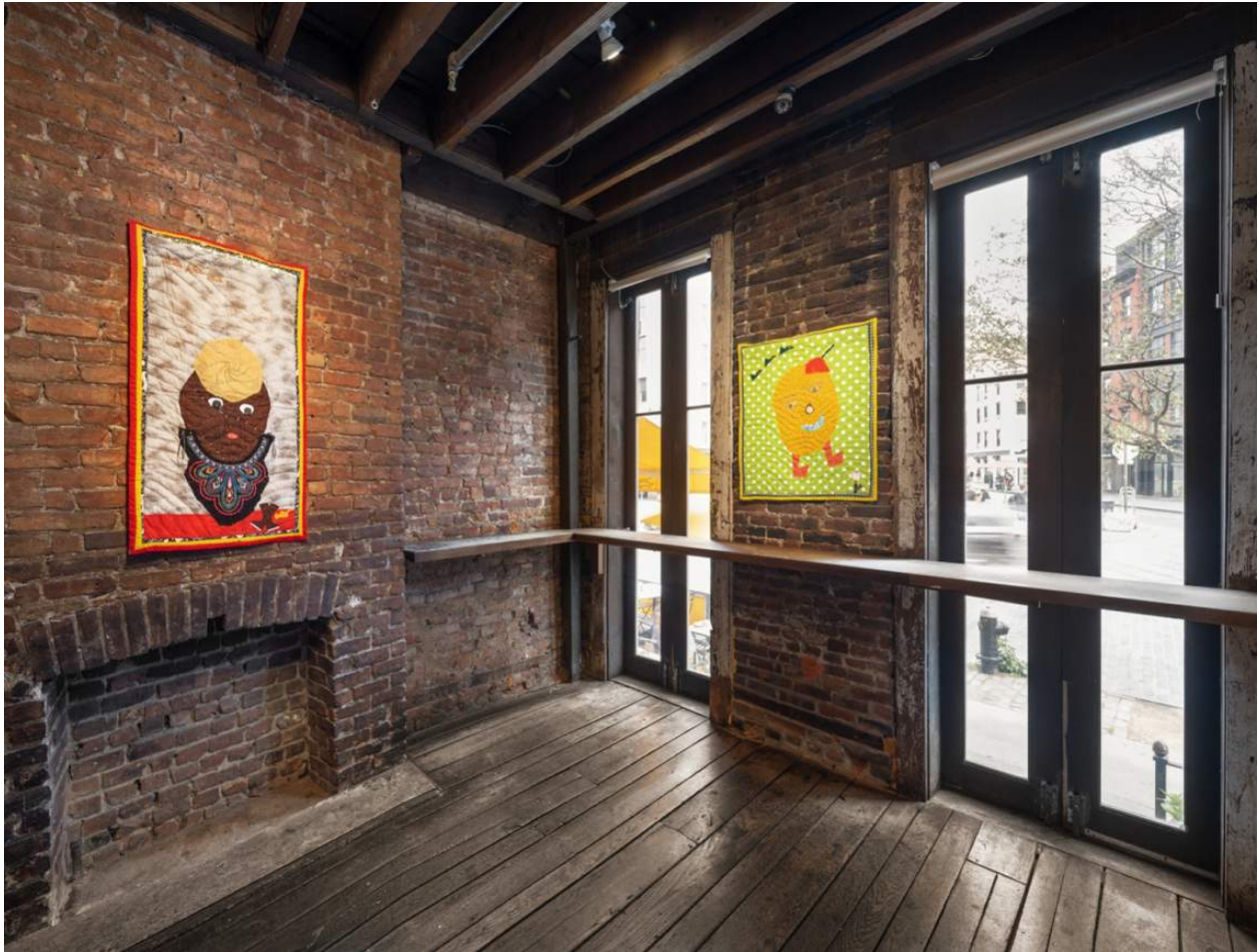
When I came home the next day and I said to my agent at the time, Robert Cargo, "Something happened that's not correct. We need to change this, because I got Best of Show." He looked at me and said, "Yvonne, you deserve it." I said, "Well, I don't look like anybody else." He said, "Well, you deserve this."

So that's how I got started. From then on, I think I've won Best in Show at that festival six times. And it just started to just climb, climb, climb. Still, I'm in awe. And I'm grateful as well to have done it long enough so that my children, my grandchildren, and my great-grands can see.



Installation view of Yvonne Wells: Play The Hand That's Dealt You, Fort Gansevoort, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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Installation view of Yvonne Wells: Play The Hand That's Dealt You, Fort Gansevoort, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

I didn't see myself as an artist until I was told I was one. I just didn't know I was an artist. A quilter being an artist? Well, that's true, because anything can be art. I don't know who I am, but I love what I am.

But I'm glad that I'm being identified as an artist, and now I'm told that I'm not only a folk artist, I'm a contemporary artist. It's good to have that identity, and I hope someone sees my work and wants to do something similar. Not exactly what I do, because they don't have the same mind. But they can look at it and say, "Maybe I can do some of this."

I do know that my quilting has brought a lot of attention to the quilt—not just the stories, but the quilting itself. I was asked once, "Yvonne, what kind of quilting is that?" I said, "Well, I'm just putting this together, and this is all I know." I hadn't been taught anything, but I knew every time that I would make a quilt, I wanted to make that quilt so it would last. Therefore, I was thinking about putting heavier thread in it. I use embroidery thread, and I use upholstery thread. I wanted to secure it, so it will last a long time.

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Quilts in the home of Yvonne Wells, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Photo by Daonne Huff.

I work here at home. When we added on to our house in the 1970s, we added a large room downstairs for the playroom, and that's where I did all of my creating. When the quilt is finished, I take them upstairs and put them in the kids' room since they are all gone now. When they do come back, they have to move quilts out the way to go to sleep. I used to call it my library, but it has lots of my awards up there, ribbons all over, everywhere.

I was asked one time, "Why don't you get a studio?" I could do that, but I think it would take the personal aspects out of it for me. And I think I would have more people visiting than I wanted to, because they would drop in and you have to stop working. I'm a loner when I do this kind of work, and I like it that way.



Page spread from *The Story Quilts of Yvonne Wells*, by Stacy I. Morgan and Yvonne Thomas Wells, 2024, The University of Alabama Press.

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I recently worked with Stacy Morgan on a book *The Story Quilts of Yvonne Wells*, which was published in 2024. We were taking down all the names of the quilts and counting and all this kind of stuff. We could put our hands on just about 700 quilts. And I know there were more because I gave them away at that time, early on—just to maybe help somebody and give it to them.

I do have a quilt hanging in the next room. It's called *Wedding*. It really doesn't look like a wedding until I tell you all of the things in it. You see those cattle at the top—in some countries, they worship them and use them in the wedding as part of the decor. So I put them in there. That's the bride and the groom there [gestures to the quilt]. And the groom is giving the bride a bouquet of flowers. Then there's a broom. In some cultures, the bride and the groom jump the broom, for good luck.



Yvonne Wells, *The Wedding I*, 1989. Assorted fabrics, 74.5 x 62 inches. © Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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There's a black shape—it looks like a bat, that's what it's supposed to be to me—over something that they have for decorations at their wedding. They would ring the bell, and the bride and groom would ascend into the hut and they would become husband and wife. So, it's a very simple thing. You can see, I used my skirt there [gestures to a fabric piece on the quilt]. I loved that skirt very much, but it was time for it to be used. It's very, very simple—in this piece, I think the quilting stands out more so than the story—but it means a lot to me.



Yvonne Wells, *Woman I Am*, 2002. Assorted fabrics, 102 x 69 inches. © Yvonne Wells. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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When people ask about the quilt *Woman I Am*, I say, "That's Yvonne." I have a graduation cap—that's for education. I have two different shoes. One is a tennis shoe, where I work by night, and the other is a dress-up shoe where I work by day. I have two jobs, one out and one in. But that did not stop me from getting an education. I say that, because everybody in my family of eight went to college, and it was just emphasized that's what we would do. We all went to college.

You also see there's a triangle right in her center—that's bearing fruit. I'm a lady, so I had babies—two babies. You can see one baby that she had fell on the floor, and the umbilical cord is still there. That is to say that a woman, at that time I made that, is capable of maintaining more than one job, in the community. I think very highly of this piece, as I was able to put down some of the things that I think I do. Even so, that quilt does not say all that I do. I'm a volunteer, I do everything just about for everybody.



Yvonne Wells, *On Bended Knee*, 2008. Assorted fabrics, 80 x 61 inches. © Yvonne Wells.
Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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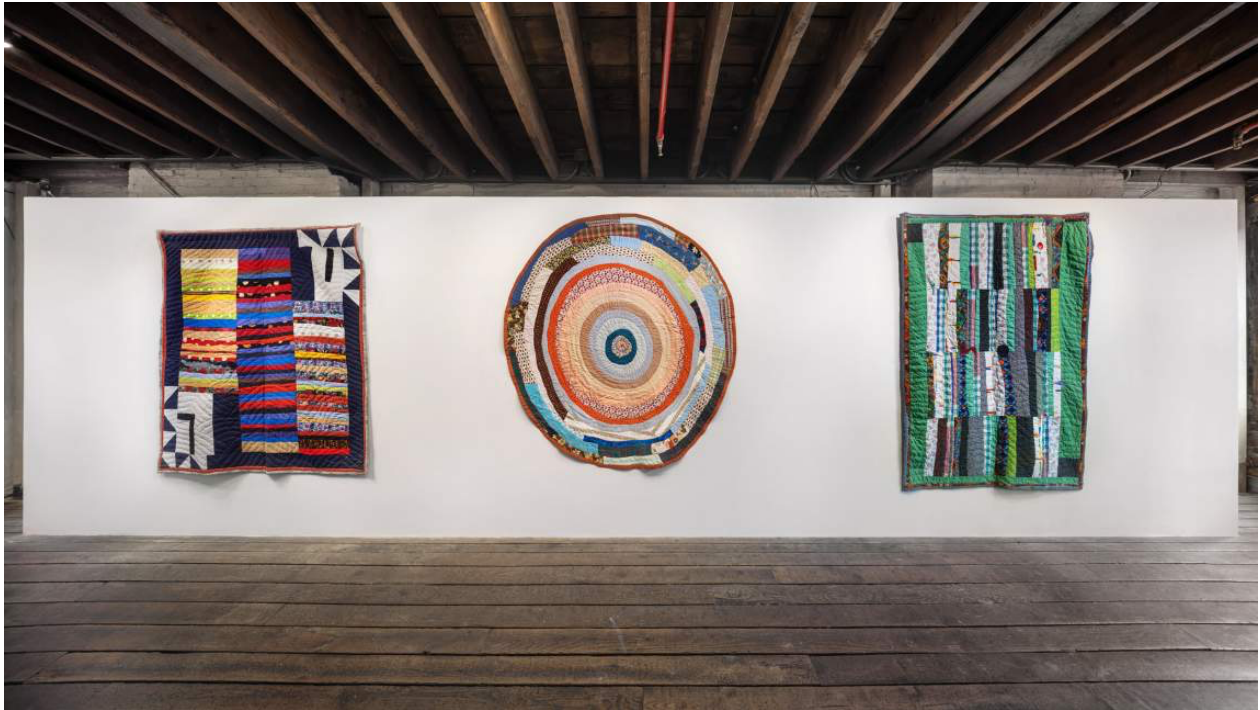
Another quilt, *On Bended Knee*, from 2008, looks quite different from anything that I have done. This image came from what I saw when I was representing the State of Alabama in Pietrasanta, Italy. As we walked around, looked around, and visited as much as we could, I was so impressed by what I called "the unfinished sculptures," that were there. But little did I know, the sculptures were complete and that's what they wanted it to look like. I was so impressed with that.

When I got home, I said, "I think I can do something like that with the fabric." And I did. Because they were kind of squatting, and mine are on knees, that's where the name "*On Bended Knee*" came from. I really liked that quilt a lot, because it's religious and then it's not. There are hands that look maybe prayerful, and then there are some that may not be. There are other things I saw in Italy as well, but that stuck to me like everything. I didn't think you need to make anything without a head. But you can, and it speaks to you as well. I'm thinking I always need to finish telling a story with a face. I think I could do more of those, but you never know what's going to happen in the future.



Installation view of *Beyond Patchwork: The Abstractions of Yvonne Wells* at Fort Gansevoort, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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Installation view of *Beyond Patchwork: The Abstractions of Yvonne Wells* at Fort Gansevoort, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

It has been a big year for me, with shows, awards, travel. You don't know how surprised I was that I was chosen for this Fellowship. I just never thought that I would ever be in a position to be chosen for such a prestigious award. Because I'm such a different kind of artist. I'm a folk artist, and I do funny stuff, so I was comparing myself to the painters and those, and the sculptors, and that kind of thing. But I was so grateful and so humble and so excited, I didn't miss a beat.

But truly, I've been a bit overwhelmed for the last three or four months. I just didn't think I could make it, because I'm an older lady. I just got back from Lincoln, Nebraska, and the International Quilt Museum, where I was meeting with Teresa Duryea Wong, who's writing a book on my *Seven Deadly Sins* series. So that should be coming out next year. I don't know what else is ahead, but I hope I'm able to participate in everything that has to do with my work.

And I'm still producing—not as much as I used to, but I still work on maybe two quilts at a time. Right now, I'm working on one that's going to blow everybody's mind. They are going to say, "I knew you were crazy." But I'm enjoying every stitch of it.