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Yvonne Wells Doesn't Care If You Call Her Art 'Folk or Fine.' She Just Wants to Keep Creating

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The artist has been making quilts out of her Alabama home for over four decades. This fall, her renegade practice gets its due with a new monograph and two exhibitions.



Portrait of Yvonne Wells. All images courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

Yvonne Wells was almost 40 when she began quilting.

A self-described tomboy turned high school P.E. teacher, she turned to the craft for warmth in the winter of 1979. “I was just making quilts to cover the kids and keep my legs warm by the fire,” the Tuscaloosa native recalls over the phone.

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She used what was around her—curtains, her children’s clothes, her husband Nathaniel’s pants—to elaborate the spreads she’d seen her own mother make growing up. What she found in quilting went far beyond the quotidian. “Something was burning inside me,” Wells, now 84, remembers. “It made me say, *Yvonne, don’t turn this loose. This is something that has to come out.*”



Yvonne Wells, *Crazy Quilt*, 2017.

The moment when an artist meets their medium—that instant when a compulsion to create finds its vocabulary—is the stuff of biopics and memoirs. But Wells didn’t identify as an artist from the get-go. “I just thought I was somebody making quilts,” she says with a laugh. And quilts she did make: Over the decades, Wells has crafted more than 500 pieces and shown them across the United States, with some of her designs even making their way onto Hallmark cards and the White House Christmas tree.

Early on, when she landed on an idea, she’d make it in multiples—three, to be exact, which she identifies with the Holy Trinity. “I believe in God, and I believe in the symbols of God,” she explains. “The first one never said [everything] I wanted to say. The second one didn’t either. By the time I got to the third one, it did.”

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Yvonne Wells, *Bird + 3 Flags*, 2017.

Wells's approach to her subject matter, like to the medium itself, has always been instinctual. Whether she's depicting biblical scenes, pop culture figures, or civil rights struggles, her visual language is sui generis: Stitches are prominent, colors collide, and shapes warp, giving the impression that the quilts are in perpetual movement. "I can't draw a straight line," Wells confesses. "If you look at my quilts, everything is slightly off-center. It's just the way the fabric flows."

This fall, her off-kilter abstractions will be the focus of a solo show for the first time, opening at Fort Gansevoort in New York on Sept. 19. Because Wells believes in the power of threes, it's fitting that this milestone is accompanied by two others: the publication of the first monograph devoted to her practice, and a retrospective at the Paul R. Jones Museum in her hometown, on view through Sept. 27.

Have these, and the many accolades she's accumulated throughout the years, changed how she feels about the word artist? "Whatever they call me is what I am," she concludes. "It doesn't matter if I'm folk or fine. I just continue to do what I do. My head sees, my heart feels, and my hands create."