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in New York City

7.3.24 — SUNSHINE ON A CLOUDY DAY

Topics: Andrew Edlin, Della Wells

For Della Wells, it is always a sunny day. Butterflies are free, and sunflowers rise with the sun. Sunlight suffuses her exuberant collage, to the point of a bright yellow sky. Even clouds and shadows are blue. Girls and women wear their Sunday best, indoors and out. It will never rain on their parade.

They got sunshine on a cloudy day, every day, so why are their faces sulking, angry, determined, or scared? Wells knows their feelings well, and she is on their side all the same. *This Is Our House*, a title declares, and she is out to make it hers—and to share it with others as African Americans. Her latest work, dense and colorful, is a wild ride. It can be hard to believe how well it coheres into something so recognizable, familiar, and comforting. *Beverly, Don't Let Your Fears Paint Your Picture*, another runs, and Wells never will, but the fears will not go away, at **Andrew Edlin** through July 19.



Nor will the stereotypes in the face of history. Watermelons can turn up anywhere, high up on flagpoles or resting casually on a shelf. So can chickens, gazing up at Beverly herself, peeping out from a tote bag, or behind a brush. Both dare to compete with the American flag. In another artist, like **Kara Walker**, stereotypes would signal satire or shame. For Wells, they are just business as usual, funny, and fun.

Not that her actors will ever settle for stereotypes. That shelf holds books along with a slice of watermelon, looking downright scholarly. This is the black community, and it demands to be taken seriously. It is also changing before one's eyes. The front of one building pasted onto another becomes a church. *Wait a Minute*, another title warns, but do not wait too long.

Think again, it warns, and collage here demands rethinking. It can be hard to know indoors from out—or magazine clippings from drawing and paint. One portrait is *Simply Paul*, but nothing is quite so simple, and Paula has a red circle over one eye like a bruise or a lens, Beverly a black

one. Another clipping turns standard-issue packaging into a yard sign: Fragile / Handle with Care. You had better take care, too, before assigning this art your own stereotypes and expectations.

Wells, a self-taught artist at a gallery dedicated to just that, has the obsessive imaginings of **outsider art** and the subject matter of **folk art** to boot. Still, she is way too self-aware for the labels, and her collage looks back to **Romare Bearden** and others as well. Above all, it will not sit still—not if that would allow white eyes to define it. The show is “Mambo Land,” but another yard sign promises antiques. To Paula’s right, a girl rises past the borders of the picture, literally and metaphorically, leaving only her skirt and feet. Now in her seventies, Wells, too, is rising, but with her feet firmly on the ground.