

Della Wells: Souls Bloom In This Garden

September 6 – October 22, 2022

Andrew Edlin Gallery is pleased to present its first solo exhibition of works by Della Wells (b. 1951).

When Della Wells began to devote herself to making art at age forty-two, she embarked on a journey to create strikingly emotive works that merge her personal narrative with sociopolitical realities. Born in Milwaukee at the height of the Civil Rights era, Wells' scenes recall in her art the cacophony of her midwestern upbringing—defined by her fractured home life, the palpable political climate, and the vibrant ethos of Black artistic culture.

Wells's imaginative impulses were sparked as a child, through fantastical allegories, cartoons, and folktales. Her mother recited stories to her, recalling her own youth in North Carolina in the 1920s and 30s. Wells embellished the stories she heard or read with her own fictional characters which later influenced the iconography of her collaged works. As her mother's mental health declined, the artist's understanding of strained parental relationships grew, leaving her to contend with the dissonance between her personal experience and societal exaltations of the faultless nuclear family. From such realities, Wells culled a world of her own creative invention, complete with captivating characters and distinct scenes of domestic life—both of which display Wells as a skillful visual storyteller.

For some, imaginative worlds offer escape; for Della Wells, they provide an opportunity to reimagine societal structures. In *Mambo Land*, the world Wells created for her characters, she centralizes women of the African diaspora, who are consistently rendered invisible and relegated to the margins of society. *Mambo Land* personifies feminist scholar Audre Lorde's 1984 book *Sister Outsider*, whose paradoxical title suggests Lorde's ability to cultivate community because of her existence as "other." Della Wells encourages the same—depicting spirited figures, either at rest or active, but definitively powerful. "In *Mambo Land*, Black women rule," says the artist, "They roll with the punches; they experience tribulations and know how to deal with them."

Souls Bloom In This Garden features ten new collages created by the artist in 2022. Vivid scenes are crafted from magazine clippings, creating geometric and quilt-like compositions. Throughout the series, found objects are scattered like constellations—organized amidst the paper clippings to create works in which texture abounds. Giving new life to used materials remains at the fore of the artist's practice; she continues to avoid using any new materials in her works.

Symbolic references are present throughout. Her distinctive chicken makes an appearance in each of the works, recalling an indelible childhood memory. Blooming flowers are abundant,

signifying for Wells emergence, growth, and renewal. In another work, an image of David Hammonds' *African American Flag* rests behind two figures who advance towards an unknown destination.

Della Wells's works serve as a counternarrative to the societal rhetoric that encourages conforming to a mutable ideal. Instead, the artist imagines an escape to a place where community is fostered in light of difference, not in spite of it.

— Jenée-Daria Strand

Della Wells's work has been widely exhibited, including at shows at the Museum of Wisconsin Art (West Bend), and the Outsider Art Fair New York in 2022, the Cedarburg Art Museum (WI) in 2020, the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design in 2019, the Loyola University Museum of Art (Chicago) in 2018, and the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2013. A play about her life by Y York, *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly*, which was part of the New Voices/New Visions Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C in 2010, premiered in 2011 at the Marcus Center in Milwaukee, and has been staged in Nashville (TN), Charlotte (NC), and Richmond (VA).

This exhibition is in collaboration with the Portrait Society Gallery, Milwaukee.