

Andrew Edlin GALLERY

Della Wells: Mambo Land

May 31 – July 19, 2024

Andrew Edlin Gallery is pleased to present its second solo exhibition for Della Wells (b. 1951). The gallery first showed her work in 2022 with the exhibit, “Della Wells: Souls Bloom in This Garden.”

Technically self-taught, Wells is inspired by the collages of Matisse, Romare Bearden, and fellow Milwaukee artist Beverly Nunes Ramsay. Her work reflects a visual idiom that art historian Patricia Hills identifies as uniquely American, seen in the patch-work wallpaper of magazine clippings and newspaper that appeared across homes of the American South, and in the cubist collages of Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, where “pleasing environments” are made “from piecing, from making do, from improvisation.” Wells began making art in earnest at age forty-two, imbuing this mix of cubist formalism and folk-art memory to tell the stories that she felt compelled to share. In the process, she conjured up the contours and characters of Mambo Land, a world where “Black women rule.”

In the roughly two dozen new works in Mambo Land, women metamorphose, flowers sprouting forth from their heads like locks of hair. They live in grand homes, fantastical Milwaukee mansions; they wave American flags for a country that cares about them, where promises of freedom and opportunity are held sacred. The artist knows well the chasm between idealism and reality and chooses to focus on what can be salvaged when circumstances are confronted. In *Let’s Move on Little Sis*, Wells’ ever-present chicken, a memento mori from childhood, sits placidly on a straight-back chair labeled “M♡M.” The chicken is always watching, or quietly striding along, never too far behind, with a flag hanging from its beak. In *Seeking My Summer Song*, it pokes its head over a fence, looking warily at the woman in the foreground, who herself gazes into the distance, where two signs read: FUTURE. TAKE CARE.

True to her folk-art influences, Wells improvises with materials that are readily at hand. Her kinetic tableaux reveal a world that has been flattened, yet still possesses a vibrant, rumpled surface. She transforms reality into fable, melding together images, each one of which is a distinct token of her heritage. Collectively they serve as threads that embroider life in Mambo Land.