

'A bridge to each other'

Women stir cultural melting pot with digital art on COVID-19 Pages



LaVerne Wells-Bowie re-discovered her fabric prints of blues singer and Golden Age of Jazz icon, Bessie Smith for an exhibit at the Anderson Brickler Gallery. LAVERNE WELLS-BOWIE

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

“I’ve always wanted to use the past and make present statements,” says artist and architect LaVerne Wells-Bowie. • Locked up in her home during quarantine, Wells-Bowie was in the midst of an artistic block. Typically she would be traveling internationally and collecting vernacular art pieces to adorn her studio space. She is moved by textures and three-dimensional work, and typically uses found materials.

During the lockdown, she decided to rummage through old boxes of textiles and prints she had at home, searching for inspiration. That’s when she re-discovered her fabric prints of blues singer and Golden Age of Jazz icon, Bessie Smith. She re-imagined these fabrics into cameos and created “Cameo for a Crown Jewel” and “Cameo for a Poor Man’s Blues.”

Both pieces examine the impact of Black women on culture and are part of the virtual COVID-19 Pages exhibition at the Anderson Brickler Gallery (ABG). ABG partnered with the Wells International Foundation to feature artists from around the world, including five local Tallahassee artists, Wells-Bowie, Candace Allen, Katie Clark, Carucha Bowles and Mary Proctor.

The exhibit launched on International Women’s Day and is available for viewing online.

For Wells-Bowie, the exhibit was an opportunity to reflect on women’s experiences across the globe during this pandemic, and how each artist coexists in an era of “women being able to name their rights and sorrows.”

“This period of time has not only given us solitude, it’s given us a bridge to each other through the use of digital media,” says Wells-Bowie. “It is nice to see what people in other parts of the world and the U.S. have done in practicing their craft as an outlet or a way of understanding and expressing this time in history and moment in their lives.”



LaVerne Wells-Bowie created fabric artwork of Bessie Smith for virtual exhibit. PROVIDED BY LAVERNE WELLS-BOWIE

If you go

What: COVID-19 Pages Art Exhibition

When: Multiple Events

Where: Online

Contact: For more information, visit <https://wellsinternationalfoundation.org/covid-19-pages-exhibit/>.

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Wells-Bowie

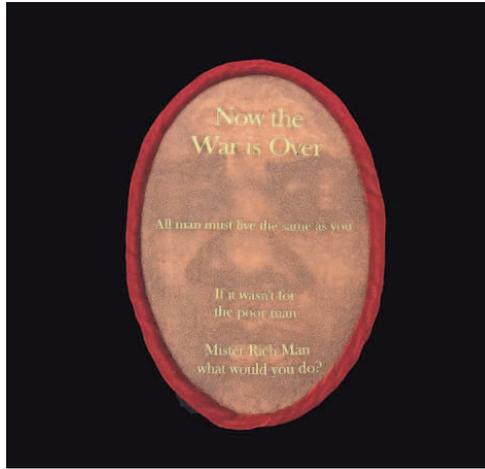
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Wells-Bowie's portfolio of art and architecture makes a case for this kind of connection. She terms her research as working towards a "spatial resilience." Her work has been supported by awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the Arts, and as a recipient of the Fulbright and McKnight Fellowships.

Wells-Bowie is a recently retired senior architecture professor at Florida A&M University where she worked for 30 years. Her research brought students to different geographic locations, such as the Gullah Sea Islands, and used them as laboratories to investigate the connections between environment, culture and community.

"I'd have students start projects by making art because art can be so viscerally rewarding and you can communicate personal experience through artistic manipulations and that encourage self-awareness," says Wells-Bowie. "It introduces a person to themselves. In turn the student cultivates new ways of understanding and communicating with others unlike themselves. Doing that can also introduce a community to itself by lifting them up to understand the historic and ingenious significance of their architecture."

Specifically, Wells-Bowie uses the example of a shotgun house as a quintessential marriage between African and European architecture and the larger implications that has had on culture. The bilateral symmetry of the Georgian house with one window on each side of the front door also resembles bilateral hut



Bessie Smith's face is printed on fabric that is overlaid with her lyrics in architect LaVerne Wells-Bowie's cameo.

dwelling.

Wells-Bowie would teach her students how enslaved African builders innovated porches and porticos as passive air conditioning systems given their experience in hot, humid climates. She would then ask students to explore the dynamics of this kind of cross-cultural conversation by finding the "deep root" of these artistic and architectural interventions.

"Nothing belongs to just one culture," says Wells-

Bowie. "People didn't bring over patterns or drawings or pieces of architecture, but they didn't bring over jazz either. As the saying goes, drums have been our lives for thousands of years. Culture is not always tangible."

Wells-Bowie seeks to capture culture in her constructed "assemblages." She worked in textiles for 14 years before going back to school for a graduate degree in architecture. Her fabric printing business silk-screened bolts of fabric with designs based on African folktales, stories and interpretations. However, she wanted her fabrics to live beyond the home furnishing items they would eventually become.

Present in her cameos is that same desire to make pieces that would be used for more than decoration. The oval jewelry pieces have been used to capture the silhouettes of royalty. Their history renders Wells-Bowie's poignant statement pieces a commentary on Bessie Smith's legacy and the impact she continue to have on music and culture.

Smith's face is printed on fabric that is overlaid with her lyrics. They ask "Now the war is over, all man must live same as you, if it wasn't for the poor man, Mister Rich Man what would you do?" While Smith was singing about the hardships of the 1930s Depression Era, Wells-Bowie sees many similarities to today's pandemic-induced paradigm shifts.

"A cameo is a piece of jewelry, but it's also a moment in time," says Wells-Bowie. "At this point, we're having a moment in time, particularly as black women. I'm really curious about how this time will be remembered."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).