

FORT GANSEVOORT

VANITY FAIR

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Chain-Ganger

James Wolcott – February 05, 2012

All Me, a documentary about the African-American artist Winfred Rembert directed by Vivian Ducat, tugs the viewer along amiably and then takes you into a darker place, a chapter of history that even the most well-meaning movies set during the civil rights have prettified, Hollywood being Hollywood. At first All Me seems like a folksy, inspirational, educational portrait of an accidental, self-taught, artist that could be condensed into a segment on CBS's Sunday Morning, the perfect complement to the first sip of hazelnut coffee. Born in Georgia in 1945, Rembert leads us on a tour through his past, the juke joints and barber shops and churches, Saturdays at "Colored Folks' Corner" where you had to watch out for a character nicknamed Black Masterson, who'd hit you with the horseshoe he always carried around just for the hell of it, the daily hell of picking cotton in the broiling sun for fifty cents or a buck a day, which he started doing at the strapping age of six. (Cotton balls are the pointillistic dots of his Southern scenes.) Even the hardship, the indignities of being called nigger by white storeowners, and the thick humid air of intimidation that clung during the Jim Crow era are related in a manner that relegates them to a past that we can feel safely put to bed, this country after all what Gore Vidal called the United States of Amnesia.

But then Rembert recounts (following a series of events better left to his telling) the night he was set upon by a gang of whites and lynched--upside down. Hung by his feet as he was beaten and stuck with a knife, nearly finished off for good until one of the men thought it would be better to use him as an example to the other colored folks, so he was shackled and marched through the black neighborhoods as a warning to others. From this calvary march he was eventually imprisoned and put on a chain gang, which he says in the film was worse than slavery. Short of death, the ultimate punishment on the prison farm was being put in the sweat box, where there wasn't room to sit or stand, only crouch, the heat and isolation and deprivation of everything apart from a bare daily ration of water and bread driving some to mental breakdowns and suicide. This is what men did to other men not in some other country but in this country, and not in the distant past, but in the memories of many still living. It is part of the scar tissue of this nation's heritage.

And yet *All Me* is anything but a bitter downer, a history lesson that goes down like castor oil. Rembert himself is such an individual, genial, un-posing, shambling embodiment of faith, resilience, and realized potential that his triumph in the art world--the sales, the exhibitions, the

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laudatories--is bracing and sunlit despite the dark nights and days. Along with the depictions of the South imprinted on his retina is a portrait of President Obama so powerful and rallying that the Obama team ought to buy the rights and make it their campaign avatar. Rembert has handcarved a handbag for Michelle Obama that he hopes the First Lady may someday swing in her hand.