

FORT GANSEVOORT



Visceral Take on Jim Crow South in “Winfred Rembert, 1945-2021”

Ilana Novick – November 30, 2021



Winfred Rembert, Dinnertime in the Cotton Field, 2011. Dye on carved and tooled leather. 26 x 31.5 inches.

Artist Winfred Rembert carved leather the way a master carver would shape wood or stone. He learned to do so in prison, where he survived a near lynching, a jail sentence that included time on a Georgia chain gang, and the everyday violence and racism of life in the Jim Crow South. He eventually settled and started a family with his wife Patsy in Connecticut, but it wasn't until he was fifty-one that he began his artistic practice, using leather carving and dyeing techniques to tell his life story.

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Winfred Rembert, 1945-2021, on view at Fort Gansevoort in New York City is a brutal but necessary show spread over three floors, tracing the chronology of Rembert's life. The exhibit coincides with the publication of his memoir, *Chasing Me To My Grave: An Artist's Memoir Of The Jim Crow South*, written with Erin I. Kelly, from which the wall text and captions are largely taken, ensuring that his voice and artistic vision is centered.

Carving the leather before painting over it makes the works almost three-dimensional, adding weight and texture to the scenes of Rembert's early life growing up in Georgia. It gives heft to the cotton bolls in *Dinnertime in the Cotton Field* (2011). Even in what should be a relaxing moment at the end of the day, the specter of the hard labor of picking cotton, which he did in his childhood and teen years sits over the scene like fog.

The carving technique also heightens the rage in the subjects of *Angry Inmates* (c. 2007), a closely cropped portrait of three men facing straight ahead, their gazes just slightly off-center, as if they're following you around the room. The man in the middle clutches a bright red ax, the tension in his grip palpable and kinetic. If anyone was planning to look away from the reality depicted in these pictures, these men ensure that viewers will rightly absorb every inch.

When Rembert first went to prison he was held for a year without charges. Multiple paintings tell the story of what happened when he tried to escape. The most heartbreaking is *Wingtips* (2001-2002), in which he is hung naked by his ankles, in front of an angry mob of white police officers and other onlookers. The perspective makes this one especially harrowing; the contrast between his small body in the background, and the crowd in the foreground, a sea of green uniforms and brown sticks poised to strike. The suggestion of the crowd's impending violence is as terrifying as the act itself. Rembert survived, but was sent back to prison and placed in a chain gang.

Two of the show's most striking works depict the artist's experience in the chain gang. In *All Me* (2002), a repeated image of a lone chain gang member fills the space with a sea of striped uniforms and sticks. Rembert explains in the wall text that the painting is about a survival mechanism, splitting himself into multiple personas in order to survive the work, but there's a price for that too. The figures are zombie-like as they raise their hammers, drained of individuality.

In *Cracking Rocks* (2011), multiple members of another gang perform that back-breaking work, and each swing of the ax is a reduction of a human being to a machine, the subject's humanity and personhood ground into dust just like the rocks.

Not all of Rembert's work was focused on violence and prison. He also painted scenes from juke joints and billiard halls, but as Fort Gansevoort's co-owner Adam Shopkorn explained in a press talk, it seemed more important for viewers to confront the hardest moments of Rembert's life, even if the impulse is to look away.

Forcing viewers to contend with the work is also forcing them to contend with history, but I wonder if there was another way to include the juke joints and the billiard halls, not to make

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anyone more comfortable, but to show even more of the breadth and depth of Rembert's work, to show that he was just as capable of depicting joy as pain.

It's not joy, but there's an unlikely reminder of Rembert's own personal triumph, at the top floor of the exhibit. The last painting, *Almost Me* (1997) is a sobering vision of an end that Rembert might have met, but didn't. A man, his face gone slack, drained of light and muscle, kneels shirtless in green pants, hanging from a noose. In such a harsh moment, the wall text offers a bit of defiant hope. As Rembert wrote in his memoir, "And when I die, I didn't die by the rope. I just died from being an old man. I lived my life out." And he did.

Rembert died in March of 2021, before he could see the exhibit come to fruition. But he knew the history. He lived it. For those of us that didn't, the best way to honor that memory is to see this show.