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Odyssey Through Jim Crow Era, Carved in Leather

By Martha Schwendener – March 16, 2012



A LIVED HISTORY "Amazing Grace" includes a musical staff with the score for the spiritual. Credit...Collection of the Richard M. Ross Art Museum, Ohio Wesleyan University

Most histories of the segregated South and the civil rights movement have taken the form of books, films or music. Winfred Rembert's is carved in leather. You could call it folk art, since he wasn't trained in any art school — he learned the craft in prison — and like many folk narratives, it is couched firmly in the details of simple, everyday life. But the work on view at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, which has distinct echoes of Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden and Mexican revolutionary art, also offers a harrowing account of one man's odyssey through the Jim Crow South.

For Mr. Rembert, the odyssey begins with fond memories of growing up in rural southwest Georgia. Several works in the exhibition, "Winfred Rembert: Amazing Grace," with figures carved and tooled into sheets of leather and then painted or dyed, recount his upbringing by Mama, the great-aunt who took over his care after his mother gave him

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up as an infant. In “The Beginning” (2002), the infant Winfred is handed over to Mama, and “What’s Wrong With Little Winfred” (2002) shows him being held as a baby on the edge of a cotton field.

“Saved and Saintified” (2005) and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” (2008) show parishioners engaged in ecstatic worship, and one work commemorates Mr. Rembert’s baptism at the age of 9. There are images of “The Dirty Spoon” (2005), the juke joint where Mr. Rembert got his ideas for fashion, and of Homer Clyde’s cafe, an establishment with a “Colored Only” sign posted outside and text describing how Mr. Clyde fed even those who couldn’t pay (although he wouldn’t let you shoot pool free).

Another work celebrates “Mary Douglas” (2005), better known as Miss Mary, one of the best midwives in Cuthbert, Ga. As Mr. Rembert recalls in accompanying wall text, she wore her uniform and carried her medical bag “even when she had to spend her last days at the convalescent home.”

Mr. Rembert’s story is really shaped, however, by poverty and the effects of racism — which is to say, violence. He started picking cotton at age 6, and the experience of that hard labor, which extended into adulthood, is engrained in his being, as well as in his pictures, which include fields of endless white dots.

“Curved cotton rows make a beautiful pattern,” Mr. Rembert says in the catalog. “But as soon as you start picking, you forget how good it looks and think how hard it is.”

Wall texts offer detailed accounts of how workers were paid — even how they had to pay to rent straw hats from the commissary to protect themselves from the scorching summer sun — and how labor, tied to the post-slavery sharecropping system, was stratified by discriminatory racial distinctions. These practices permeated everyday life, of course. “Hamilton Avenue” (1999) comes with a description of how the only two whites in the Cuthbert area were the two policemen who parked in the middle of the street, “watching us.”

Mr. Rembert’s life became more difficult in the 1960s, when he joined the civil rights movement. A room in the exhibition entered through a glass door comes with a warning at its entrance that the material there is disturbing. Here, we learn about Mr. Rembert’s arrest after a protest and a jailhouse beating that led to his escape, which involved stealing a car and his nearly being lynched (and castrated). After that, he was sentenced to a chain gang, where he worked — picking cotton again — for seven years. (An essay in the catalog describes how blacks were disproportionately represented in chain gangs because of the heavy sentences they received for misdemeanors.)

Text accompanying “Almost Me” (1997), which depicts a black man hanged by the neck from a tree branch, is a heartbreaking account of the post-traumatic-stress effects of Mr. Rembert’s own near-lynching: “I never stopped thinking about it and having nightmares about it almost every night. Lots of times I’d get up out of the bed with Patsy and go in the bathroom and just sit there and cry.” (Patsy Gammage married Mr. Rembert five years after he was released from prison; they have eight children.)

Beyond his own story, Mr. Rembert has also made some works that offer an amazingly cunning commentary on African-American life. “Michael Jordan Cemetery” (1998) pays homage to the basketball star, but at the same time critiques the expensive basketball shoes made by Nike that “cause problems for black kids.” The composition includes tombstones with the names of young people who have died in altercations over the basketball shoes, and an amazing depiction of a young man, recently shot, bleeding Nike insignia.

There is usually little overlap between the art you see in museums and art in which the therapeutic benefits of its making are key. But you can almost feel the way that carving leather pictures has healed Mr. Rembert, in such a way that more recent works are celebrations of pattern and color — and blackness liberated. “The Struggle” (2010) is a clever work in which famous African-Americans are depicted in a field picking cotton, but also doing what they are known best for doing: Michael Jackson is singing and picking cotton; Mr. Jordan is playing basketball and picking

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cotton; Louis Armstrong has his trumpet; Oprah Winfrey is next to Sojourner Truth, and President Obama, in overalls, is picking cotton right below Michelle Obama. The largest figure in the painting is Malcolm X, and he, too, is picking cotton.

The compositions of Mr. Rembert's recent works, with their white dots and figures lined up in pattern formation along dark strips representing rows of soil, look like African textiles. "Amazing Grace" (2008) includes a musical staff with the score for the famous spiritual, which Mr. Rembert remembers hearing in the cotton fields. "I just loved to listen to the singing," he remarks, since "singing was the only thing about the fields that I loved."

Mr. Rembert's work is important because it offers an unvarnished view of the segregated South, from the vantage of a lived history. What makes it resonate, however, is Mr. Rembert's incredible spirit — what one writer in the catalog calls his "grace." You feel it throughout these works, which refuse to shrink from the horrors, but especially in that comment about singing: Even in the dreaded cotton fields, Mr. Rembert could find something to love.