

FORT GANSEVOORT

BROOKLYN RAIL

Winfred Rembert: 1945–2021

By Dan Cameron, December 2021



Winfred Rembert, *All Me*, 2002. Dye on carved and tooled leather, 31 1/4 x 31 1/4 inches. Courtesy Fort Gansevoort, New York.

The art and life of Winfred Rembert (1945–2021) offers a double reflection of two of the most glaring injustices in the US over the past century: the forceful imposition of Jim Crow laws of racial segregation in former slave states in the South, and the explosive growth of the prison industry as a tool of social control over individuals and groups whom the system finds troublesome or a threat. In recent years, the art world has had multiple opportunities to consider artists whose work represents both sides of this situation, including the rich tradition of self-taught Black artists stretching from Bill Traylor to Lonnie Holley, and a handful of recent group exhibitions that examine mass incarceration as a blanket phenomenon that—instead of being invisible to society at large—exposes ways in which the American criminal justice system reveals more about life on the “outside” than most people (who are personally unfamiliar with its inhumane conditions) might have imagined.

Winfred Rembert was born in rural Cuthbert, Georgia, where his adoptive mother and everyone he knew as a young child picked cotton from before daybreak to after sundown, toiling under a system of indentured servitude that maintained many of the strictures of slavery while its benefactors insisted that its Black labor force was working

FORT GANSEVOORT

entirely of its own free will. It wasn't until his late teens and early adulthood that Rembert discovered that not all Black people in the South lived that way, while at the same time learning that the nascent civil rights era was slowly but steadily challenging the repressive norms of white supremacy. The rapid progression of events from that moment—from participating in NAACP-organized protest marches to surviving a near-lynching to serving seven years behind bars, much of it spent at hard labor—was emblematic of the injustices that countless others endured. The primary differences in Rembert's case can be attributed to his extraordinary capacity for perseverance, as well as the skills he developed at tooling and dying leather, both learned from an older inmate.

Following his release from prison in 1974, Rembert married his longtime sweetheart, Patsy, and together they moved north, eventually settling in New Haven. Another quarter-century would pass before he began making his trademark leather paintings, encouraged by his wife, as a way of sharing his story with the world. From the cotton fields of Cuthbert to his struggle to stay sane while incarcerated, the works bridge historical documentation with an intensely subjective viewpoint, as is the case with the painting *All Me* (2002), which shows the artist in prison stripes, his image multiplied dozens of times so that it becomes transformed into a visual pattern of stripes, sledgehammers, and Rembert's face, hands and shoes. As he later explained of the title, surviving prison meant adopting a multitude of different personalities, each one in response to the next, unpredictable challenge to his humanity.

The purely autobiographical dimension of Rembert's art rescues it from any potential label of politics or dogma, since everything depicted in his compositions represents an actual event, place, or situation that he experienced directly and then recreated from memory in colorful patterns and shapes that tilt slightly toward abstraction. This consistent devotion to firsthand truth helps explain why the works depicting more or less benign scenes from his childhood meld effortlessly with those whose imagery is centered on his surviving the twists and turns of the white supremacist system. One painting, titled *Cain't to Cain't II*, is derived from the literal darkness that began and ended each plantation worker's day, but Rembert has chosen to highlight the visual rhythms and dynamic colors of the workers' clothing and unpicked cotton balls with such verve that one doesn't immediately identify the figure of the white overseer on horseback, ready to impose arbitrary violence on a whim.

The current exhibition of Rembert's work coincides with the posthumous publication of his memoir, *Chasing Me to My Grave*, for which most of the pictures on view double as illustrations. The book is written in the plain speech of Winfred Rembert's own voice, and its narrative veers from tenderness to trauma as the author gradually comes to embrace the challenge of relating his life story through a series of individual set pieces. As the press release notes, this act of self-realization through narrative falls within the Black artistic tradition defined by the work of Jacob Lawrence and Horace Pippin, who both employed pictorial story-telling as a vehicle for universalizing the specifics of each incident. Unlike their cases, however, Rembert's narrative almost never strays from his own experience, nor does it focus on his life after prison, underscoring his evident conviction that the arc from childhood to incarceration, which in turn reveals the key to his self-invention as an artist, contains both the essence and the urgency of his message.