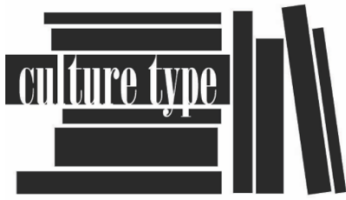


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Winfred Rembert's Painful Memories of Jim Crow South Produced Powerful Images: 'Nobody Else Was Putting Their History or Their Life Story on Leather'

By Victoria L. Valentine – April 22, 2023



WINFRED REMBERT, "All of Me," date unknown (dye on carved and tooled leather, 85.7 x 77.5 / 33 3/4 x 30 1/2 inches). I © 2023 The Estate of Winfred Rembert/ARS NY, Courtesy the artist, Fort Gansevoort, and Hauser & Wirth

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THE WHITE CUBE GALLERIES of Hauser & Wirth on the Upper East Side of New York stand in stark contrast to the vivid scenes Winfred Rembert (1945-2021) painted on carved and tooled leather--the joys and pain of the Jim Crow South where he grew up. Housed in pristine white frames, the paintings reflect his memories of Georgia - profound cultural experiences in pool halls, juke joints, and church, and racial violence, carceral injustice, and back-breaking work in cotton fields.

"Winfred Rembert: All of Me" is the late artist's first exhibition with Hauser & Wirth. Paintings produced over the last three decades of his life are displayed on all three floors of the gallery. Walking through the show was an affirming experience for Patsy Rembert, who encouraged her husband to visualize his dramatic life story.

"Once I saw his ability and the patience that he had, I felt like he could make a living out of drawing...and he could tell the story of his life that I thought people would want to know," Patsy Rembert

"He hadn't opened up completely about what had happened to him, but he had opened up enough for me to know that he had more to say. It was just a matter of getting him to say it and to put it on the leather. Nobody else was doing that. You know they were making different things, but nobody else was putting their history or their life story on leather."

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BORN IN AMERICUS, Rembert was raised by his great aunt in rural Cuthbert, Ga., where she worked in the cotton fields and he would eventually spend long hours picking cotton, too. In 1965, at age 19, a series of tragic and consequential events forever changed his life. Rembert was working in a pool hall when he decided to attend a civil rights demonstration that landed him in jail, where he sat for more than a year without being charged. In 1967, he escaped, was caught, nearly lynched, and ended up serving seven years in the Georgia prison system, held in multiple penitentiaries where he worked on chain gangs.

While he was in prison, Rembert learned leathercraft from a fellow inmate named "T.J., the Tooler." He was incarcerated until 1974. When he was released, Rembert married and headed North, eventually moving to New Haven, Conn., where he raised eight children with Patsy and lived for the rest of his life. Two decades later, Patsy, who first laid eyes on her future husband when he was working on a chain gang, encouraged Rembert to develop his leather skills into an artistic practice. It was 1996 and he was 51 years old.

In his memoir, Rembert recounts his traumatic and compelling life story--both the harrowing details of his near lynching and his triumphant rise in the art world. The book is illustrated with his art. Published months after he died in 2021 at age 75, "Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South" won a Pulitzer Prize in the Biography category.

His recognition continues posthumously. In 2021, Fort Gansevoort gallery announced its representation of The Estate of Winfred Rembert. Last year, mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth with 10 locations in New York,

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Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and Europe began representing the artist's estate in collaboration with Fort Gansevoort, a rare feat for a self-taught contemporary artist.



WINFRED REMBERT, "Jeff's Pool Room," 2003 (dye on carved and tooled leather, 59.1 x 88.9 cm / 23 1/4 x 35 inches).

I © 2023 The Estate of Winfred Rembert/ARS NY, Courtesy the artist, Fort Gansevoort, and Hauser & Wirth

THE EXHIBITION AT HAUSER & WIRTH features more than 40 paintings. Some of the works are being shown publicly for the first time. One gallery is focused on hard-to-see images of the artist's near-death episode: behind bars, freeing himself from jail, being caught, thrown in the trunk of a police car, and hanging naked by his feet from a tree surrounded by a white mob. According to the New York Times, his life was spared when the deputy sheriff he eluded emerged and said, "Don't do that. We got better things we can do' with him. using a racist slur."

Another gallery is dedicated to works depicting the women in his life, including Patsy and her mother, "Sugar Cane." The most striking paintings are figurative compositions that read almost as abstractions. Employing rhythm, pattern, and rich color, Rembert brings beauty to some of his toughest subjects. His paintings of Black men working on chain gangs dressed in black-and-white stripes and Black people bent over picking cotton in endless fields illustrate his individual story and the experiences of countless others.

"My pictures tell about cotton plantations Jim Crow the Civil Rights Movement and my time as a prisoner. They celebrate the people I knew and loved and how they lived. These are my memories of Black life in the 1950s and 1960s and how those of us who left the South took it with us and kept it," Rembert wrote in the preface to "Chasing Me to My Grave."

He continued: "I want to share my memories with people who lived through what I lived through. Even after I found success as an artist in Connecticut and New York City I dreamed of going home. I want Black

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people to be proud of what their families sacrificed and how they survived. I want people who have lived in the South to talk about their history."

Earlier this month (April 6), the gallery's exhibition programming included a panel discussion about Rembert's work with his family in attendance, including Patsy and Winfred Rembert Jr. The conversation among Kate Capshaw, the retired actress, philanthropist, and artist whose portraits focus on the invisibility of unhoused youth; Russell Craig, a justice-impacted artist and co-founder of Right of Return, a fellowship program for formerly incarcerated artists; and Amy Sherald, the Columbus, Ga.-born portrait artist who is also represented by Hauser & Wirth, was moderated by Kate Fowl, the gallery's curatorial senior director. At the conclusion of the program, Fowl passed the mic to Winfred Jr., who was in the audience, and asked if he would close out the evening.

The artist's son stood, said he wasn't expecting to make remarks, and went on to speak eloquently about what his father envisioned for his art.

"This is what my father would have wanted. He wanted to be acknowledged by different people, different races, different cultures. He'd be happy to see the different types of people that are in here. He would be brought to tears, he really would be," Winfred Jr., said

"And to hear your three panelists. To hear you Amy talk about the rich history of actually physically living down there and knowing the undercurrent of it. Kate, how you speak to my mother's struggle, to the artwork, knowing what it takes to put artwork up there. And Russell, hoo bruh, it's like talking to my dad. There's things he would say to me and I'm hearing some of that stuff from you. How being alone, being in the dark, having to be alone to do your artwork. You want to come in and help them and he won't let you in. He's sitting there crying and you can't help him. That's rough when you love somebody and there's nothing you can do to heal them and that's what it was like growing up with him.

Gesturing toward Rembert's paintings installed throughout the gallery, he continued: "This is what he tried to do to heal that. To put his artwork out there, get it out of his head and onto a piece of paper," and eventually leather. CT

"Winfred Rembert: All of Me" is on view at Hauser & Wirth, 32 E. 69th Street, New York, N.Y., Feb. 23-April, 22. 2023