

FORT GANSEVOORT

BROOKLYN RAIL

Winfred Rembert: 1945–2021

By Ann C. Collins, December–January 2021



Installation view: Winfred Rembert: 1945–2021, Fort Gansevoort, New York, 2021. Courtesy Fort Gansevoort, New York. Photo: Jeremy Lawson.

In 1965, a civil rights demonstration in Americus, Georgia ended in violence when law enforcement and white civilians began attacking protestors. Winfred Rembert, a Black teenager active in the Americus movement, ran down a side street as two white men chased after him. Spotting keys in the ignition of a parked car, he made a quick escape, but was apprehended and held at the county jail for nearly two years without bail or trial. In a small act of resistance, he clogged the toilet in his cell. A deputy entered and beat Rembert before drawing his gun. Rembert lunged and the gun fell to the floor. He took hold of it and fled. When local authorities caught up with him, they drove him to a remote location where a crowd lay in wait. Rembert was stripped of his clothes and strung upside down from a tree. A man approached and grabbed him by his genitals, gashing a knife into his crotch. But then a second man stepped forward and hollered to let him down. Winfred Rembert would spend the next seven years in the Georgia state prison system working on a chain gang, breaking rocks and digging ditches.

More than 30 years later, Rembert, who was then living in Connecticut, began creating a visual memoir of his experiences with the encouragement of his wife, Patsy. Tooling then painting large swaths of toffee-colored leather—a skill he learned from a fellow inmate—Rembert crafted scenes of his childhood and early adult years in

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the Jim Crow South with meticulous detail, working until his death earlier this year. Some two dozen of these panels make up Winfred Rembert: 1945–2021, Fort Gansevoort Gallery's first exhibition of the artist's work since they began representing his estate. The works are paired with wall text featuring short excerpts from Rembert's autobiography, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South* (as told to Erin I. Kelly), culling the show into one cohesive story. QR codes allow visitors the option of listening to the excerpts read by prominent visual artists, a novel idea, but one I felt ultimately distracted from the immediacy of seeing the work.

Taking its name from a casual phrase used by fieldworkers, *Cain't to Cain't II* (2016) recalls long days spent laboring to pick cotton, beginning before the sun rose and ending past dark. "You can't see when you go, and you can't see when you come back," Rembert explains. "You'd say, 'From cain't to cain't.'" Fieldworkers emerge from a shadowed column at the edge of the frame and make their way across rows of cotton before disappearing into shadow again. In the center of the image, a red sun burns in the sky. A small child holds a bucket of water, and a woman kneels before him, drinking from a dipper. Hunching and reaching, the workers pause to inspect bolls of cotton, unaware of the yellow and orange trees that stand beyond the field and the birds that fly overhead.

Cotton being an ineliminable subject of the South, it appears again in Rembert's work in *Picking Cotton with Boss Men* (2007). The vertical composition shows a bird's eye view of inmates clad in black and white stripes, picking their way through a field under the watchful eyes of three uniformed men on horseback. Diagonal bands of green grass intersperse white-dotted cotton rows, giving the image a sense of unending movement as waves of prisoners, eyes cast downward, work their way up and out of the frame.

In *All Me* (2002), Rembert illustrates the shifting personas he assumed so as not to be bullied in prison. Throngs of anonymous Black men in prison stripes swarm the frame, each holding a sledgehammer for breaking rocks. Most wear their caps pulled over their eyes. Some hold their hammers across their bodies, to protect, others swing them overhead, ready to strike. One figure, back to the viewer, has the name "Winfred Rembert" hastily scratched across his back. Considering the scores of men incarcerated alongside him, Rembert recognizes "I couldn't walk around and be nobody, so I became all of them."

Most chilling is *Wingtips* (2001–02), in which Rembert recalls the moment during his near lynching when an anonymous man stepped forward to object; hanging from his ankles, Rembert could only see his defender's wingtip shoes. Moving from recollection to nightmare, *Almost Me* (1997) shows Rembert alone and hanging from a tree, a noose around his neck, an image of what might have been that must have risen from the trauma indelibly carved into the artist's memory.

Like Jacob Lawrence and Horace Pippin, Rembert's series examines America's shameful and not-too-distant history with heartbreaking honesty, bearing witness to the ferocious opposition waged against civil rights and the use of incarceration as a means of silencing individuals. As a work of memoir, it chronicles Rembert's determination to maintain his dignity and sense of identity within a system designed to break him.