

FORT GANSEVOORT

Winfred Rembert

Refuge

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Thursday, May 8, 2025, 6-8PM

On View: May 9, 2025 – July 12, 2025

New York...Fort Gansevoort will present *Winfred Rembert: Refuge*, its second exhibition of works by the late American artist Winfred Rembert (1945-2021). Showcasing twenty paintings made in the artist's signature medium of carved, tooled, and painted leather, the exhibition will elucidate the themes of community, spirituality, and music as touchstones of Rembert's autobiographical artmaking.

Born in Americus, Georgia and raised by his great-aunt in nearby Cuthbert, Georgia, Rembert began working in the cotton fields at a young age and received limited formal education. The circumstances of his upbringing as a Black American in the Jim Crow South propelled him into the fight for equality through the Civil Rights Movement. While fleeing assailants during a peaceful protest, he used a nearby car to escape from harm, which resulted in his unjust incarceration from 1967-1974. Rembert's unique technique of carving and tooling leather is a craft the artist learned from a fellow inmate during seven years of hard labor in the Georgia prison system. Nearly 20 years after his release, at the age of 51, Rembert was encouraged by his wife to create narrative paintings on leather that document the harrowing experiences of his youth and celebrate the people and places of the Black communities in which he lived.

About the Exhibition

Divided into three sections, the Fort Gansevoort exhibition will highlight Rembert's depictions of music and spirituality, leisure activities, and community gathering spaces. His colorful genre scenes, filled with vibrant activity, illuminate the ways in which the artist found levity and refuge from the hardships he experienced growing up in the segregated South.

Music played a vital role in Rembert's social and spiritual life, serving as an important source of inspiration for his artistic production. Many of his paintings depict animated figures dancing to live bands playing in the cabarets and juke joints that the artist frequented as a teenager, while other compositions are populated by field workers singing spirituals in the cotton fields.

Ben Shorter IV (2010) depicts a lively band playing jazz music on a stage while joyous spectators dance below. Ben Shorter's band played in many of the clubs in and around Cuthbert, Georgia during Rembert's youth. In this and other exhibited paintings, the artist depicts the band members dressed in their distinctive fashion of matching red suits. Through the brightly colored clothing and energetic dance moves of his subjects, *Ben Shorter IV* celebrates the creative modes of self-expression that Rembert witnessed and admired in the juke joints he frequented as a teenager and young adult.

In *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms* (2007), the subjects are arranged in three horizontal registers which echo the lined pattern of sheet music. The figures are superimposed with musical notes reinforcing this visual analogy between rows of cotton and rows of musical notation. A dense accumulation of white circles of cotton covers the

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remainder of the surface. The varied body language of the workers adds to the painting's rhythmic quality. Like the lyrical repetition featured in the hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," after which Rembert titled his work, the layering of forms creates a dynamic visual counterpoint within the composition.

In *Cotton Wagon Race* (2012), one of Rembert's most complex and detailed compositions, the artist envisions a scene in which two field hands, neglecting their work, have seized cotton wagons for their own amusement. The hats flying off the heads of the wagon drivers emphasize the speed of the racing vehicles and embody the carefree energy of the scene. Beyond the fence, workers engaged in the arduous labor of cotton picking provide a visual foil to the activities of the main figures who relish in their liberation (even if only temporarily). Rembert's articulation of the horses' leather bridles and reins—rendered with precise stitching—exemplifies his own mastery of his chosen leather craft. The use of illusionary perspective, along with the nuanced details of the surrounding environment, asserts Rembert's rightful place in the canon of Contemporary Black American narrative painting.

In the preface to the artist's Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Chasing Me to My Grave*, he stated, "I want Black 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." The stories chronicled in Rembert's captivating paintings do not relay a history of a people defined by their trauma but of individuals characterized by their ingenuity and self-determination. His nostalgic scenes emphasize depictions of joyous Black life in the Jim Crow South from a personal perspective. Rembert's paintings are a testament to levity, humor, and love as universal forms of refuge.

About the Artist

Winfred Rembert's deeply personal artworks document his memories of growing up in the Jim Crow era of the American South. Rembert's life story, which began in 1945 in Cuthbert, Georgia, and concluded in New Haven, Connecticut, where he died in March 2021, is one of perseverance and resistance in the face of racial violence and inequity, and of the power of art as a form of witness and reckoning. Rembert's narrative paintings foreground truths about the aftermath of slavery and the persistence of racial injustice in America. They also celebrate the people and places of the Black community in which he lived. Rembert survived a near lynching in 1967 and served seven years of a twenty-seven-year sentence in the Georgia prison system. He was taught how to tool leather by a fellow prison inmate. Later in life, many years after his release from prison, Rembert combined his mastery of leather working with his skilled draftsmanship to create an outpouring of autobiographical paintings in his unique chosen medium of acrylic paint on carved and tooled leather.

Winfred Rembert was posthumously awarded a 2022 Pulitzer Prize for his memoir, "Chasing Me to My Grave." From 2021-2022, Fort Gansevoort presented its inaugural exhibition of the artist's work, "Winfred Rembert: 1945-2021." In 2023, Fort Gansevoort and Hauser & Wirth presented their first collaborative exhibition, "All of Me," at Hauser & Wirth's 69th Street New York gallery. In 2024, the galleries' second collaborative Rembert exhibition, "Hard Times," was presented at Hauser & Wirth in Los Angeles. From 2012-2015, the museum survey exhibition, "Winfred Rembert: Amazing Grace," traveled to Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI; Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL; Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY; Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC; The Citadelle Art Foundation, Canadian, TX; and the New Haven Museum, New Haven, CT.

Rembert's work is represented in the permanent collections of Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Flint Institute of the Arts, Flint, MI; Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, CT; Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA; Glenstone, Potomac, MD; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Hood Museum

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of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY; Legacy Museum, Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, Los Angeles, CA; Menil Collection, Houston, TX; Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; Muskegon Museum of Art, Muskegon, MI; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; Richard M. Ross Museum of Art, Wesleyan University, Delaware, OH; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

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