

WINFRED REMBERT

James Barron Art

Independent 20th Century

September 7 - 10, 2023

Booth F1

James Barron Art is proud to exhibit a selection of paintings by self-taught artist Winfred Rembert. Rembert's tooled-leather paintings portray scenes from his childhood in rural Georgia and his young adulthood spent on a prison chain gang. Rembert's colorful, textured surfaces create a vibrant stage for him to share his story and the legacy of the Jim Crow south. In addition to his work as a painter, Rembert wrote his life story in *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South* (Bloomsbury, 2021) in collaboration with Erin I. Kelly, for which he was posthumously awarded the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography.

Winfred Rembert was born in 1945 in rural Americus, Georgia and grew up in nearby Cuthbert. Born out of wedlock, at three months old Rembert's mother gave him to his great aunt to raise him. Rembert began working in cotton fields and peanut farms in early childhood. He received very little schooling and by age 14 had dropped out to work full-time in the fields. At age 19 in 1965, Rembert attended a peaceful Civil Rights demonstration. The demonstration turned violent, and, fearing for his life, Rembert stole a car to escape two white men with guns. He was arrested and sent to prison without trial. He later escaped and survived a near-lynching after he was caught, an experience that would haunt him and his work. Rembert was then sentenced to twenty-seven years in prison, of which he served five years on a chain gang, followed by two years of construction work for good behavior. While in prison, Rembert learned how to read and write. He also learned to tool leather from "T.J. the Tooler" and began making leather wallets, purses, and belts.

Rembert eventually settled in New Haven with his wife Patsy, who he married after his release from prison in 1974. In 1996, when Rembert was 51, Patsy urged him to record his memories in tooled and dyed leather paintings: stories

of his youth in the cotton fields, genre scenes such as *Black Playground* (2003) and *Watermelon, Saturday Evening* (2003), and exuberant church scenes like *Leaning on the Everlasting Arm* (2008). Perhaps most importantly, he portrayed his memories of prison, including his iconic chain gang paintings, which stand as some of the most important depictions of the Jim Crow era in modern and contemporary art.

Rembert's vibrant compositions chronicle his experience as a Black man during one of the most historically significant eras of the 20th century. Rembert's paintings are remarkable not only for the stories they tell, but also for their sophisticated compositions, which sometimes verge on abstraction. We see this in his rhythmic bands of pickers and rows of cotton, as well as the cross-hatched black and white chain gang uniforms. His work stands as a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of artistic expression.

“The cotton field was the first thing in my life. The very first thing I remember... I opened my eyes and I saw that cotton, and it was a beautiful thing. When you get out there picking in it, though, you change your mind about how beautiful it is.”¹

Rembert's cotton picker paintings depict the flow of workers in vast expanses of cotton. With astounding attention to detail, Rembert records each cotton boll with an abbreviated brown pod. In *Cotton Passion Workers* (2011), Rembert captures the psychological cruelty of the scene. Rembert wrote, “The cotton field is tough. You got a person, a Black person, hired to push you on... And every now and then you got a White overseer coming by on a horse or in a truck, trying to make sure you're working hard. And you ain't never working hard enough—for them.”²



Cotton Rows with Baby and Dog (2006) features a swaddled baby resting underneath an ad hoc tent overseen by a dog. Just as startling is the birth in *Labor Pains* (1999). Rembert wrote, “Women gave birth in the cotton field too. That was a tough thing. Some older lady who was used to seeing births was there to help someone having a baby. She would wrap the baby up in her apron, put him under the cotton stalks, and that mama would go back to work. At the time, I didn’t think anything about that. I thought maybe it was the right thing to do, because nobody said it wasn’t. Women had their babies and they would go right back to work, right then and there.”³ Labor is an unusual subject in art, but *Labor Pains* is reminiscent of a Madonna and Child painting. The abstracted cotton is luminous, almost a gold ground, sanctifying the scene.

In Rembert’s genre scenes, we’re given a glimpse of the beauty of Black life in Cuthbert, Georgia. *Black Playground* (2003) captures a moment of communal joy with makeshift toys and playground equipment. Though Rembert had no toys as a child, typical of the artist, he was resourceful:

“My first toy I made from a bicycle rim. You bang out all the spokes out of it so you have the rim by itself. Then you get a stick, a green stick, not wider than your finger. You put the stick in the groove of the rim and guide the rim along as it rolls.”⁴





Music was very important to Rembert. He had a remarkable voice and would sometimes break into song at his exhibition openings. In *Jazz Singer* (2002), Rembert records his experiences of listening to jazz in 1960s Georgia, and in *Leaning on the Everlasting Arm* (2008), he captures the exuberance of a church scene set to his mother's favorite song:

“[Leaning on the Everlasting Arm] was Mama’s favorite song. She sung that song all the time when she was working by herself. I can see Mama just like it was yesterday, when I think about that song. I would like to think that’s what they’re singing in this picture while the preacher is waving his Bible.”⁵

Many of these paintings are set in locations along Hamilton Avenue in Cuthbert, which Rembert recalled as “a place for Black people. Everything on Hamilton Avenue was Black... and I never knew Black folks could have businesses.”⁶ *Hamilton Ave* (2006) includes a police car moving towards the viewer, and a red Ford pickup with the license plate 55147 moving away from us. Rembert said, “55147, that’s my prison number. I was the 55,147th person to go through the door of Reidsville State Penitentiary.”⁷ The painting points to the past and the future in one subtle gesture: two cars moving in different directions.

“Hamilton Avenue was just fantastic. It has a hold on me, even now. Being introduced to Hamilton Avenue was the best thing that’s ever happened in my life... I walked from one world into another when I came out of the cotton field and discovered all those smiling faces, all those people doing well and not picking no cotton.”⁸

Among Rembert's most important works are his chain gang paintings, which he considered self-portraits. These paintings are kaleidoscopic blurs of black and white, faces looking out at the viewer, at each other, and down at their hammers as they pound unseen rocks. Rembert stated that he was embodied in every figure in the chain gang—a remarkable and revealing psychological posture.

“Each person in the picture has a role to play. I didn't want to play any of the parts, but I had to be somebody. I couldn't walk around and be nobody, so I became all of them. It's like I was more than one person inside myself. In fact, I think if I hadn't decided to play the all me role on the chain gang, I wouldn't have made it. Taking that stance—all me—saved me.”⁹

Looking for Rembert (2012) shows the artist at the pinnacle of his practice.

Remembering his life in both paintings and the written word not only allowed Rembert to process all that had happened, but also offered to the world one person's history of the South, a life fully lived with both hardship and joy.

Just as we cannot forget his life story, Rembert could never escape the harsh facts of his life, once remarking, “That lynching is on my back. And it's dragging me down. Even today, it happened forty-something years ago, and even today it's dragging me down. I can't rest. I lay in my bed and I can't rest. I'm running for my life every night. Somebody's after me, and I don't know what to do.”¹⁰

Of his paintings, Winfred Rembert said:

“I want to tell the truth with this art. I've got so many stories to tell, I'll never get to tell them all, but I'll do the best I can.”¹¹

Rembert's work has been the subject of major museum exhibitions, including shows at Yale University and the Muskegon Museum, and a retrospective at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, NY, which traveled to the New Haven Museum (New Haven, CT); the Greenville County Museum of Art (Greenville, SC); the Flint Institute of Art (Flint, MI); and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (Montgomery, AL).

His work has been widely collected across the United States, with permanent collections including: Blanton Museum of Art (Austin, TX); Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH); Crystal Bridges Museum of Art (Bentonville, AR); Glenside (Potomac, MD); High Museum of Art (Atlanta, GA); Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH); Hudson River Museum (Yonkers, NY); Legacy Museum, Equal Justice Initiative (Montgomery, AL); Lucas Museum of Narrative Art (Los Angeles, CA); Menil Collection (Houston, TX); Milwaukee Art Museum (Milwaukee, WI); Minneapolis Institute of Art (Minneapolis, MN); National Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.); Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Hartford, CT); and Yale University Art Gallery (New Haven, CT).

Rembert's life and work were also documented in the 2011 documentary *All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert*, directed by Vivian Ducat, and in the 2021 documentary *Ashes to Ashes*, directed by Taylor Rees for *The New Yorker*.



James Barron Art LLC first showed Winfred Rembert's work at the Outsider Art Fair in New York in January 2020. In his *New York Times* review, Will Heinrich wrote, "In Mr. Rembert's rippling panels, crowds of colorfully dressed field hands pick cotton, and men swing hammers on a chain gang. They're all the heroes of their own stories, but also one another's context, raising the impulse to fill all available space—a common characteristic of outsider art—to a philosophical pitch."

Martha Schwendener wrote in the *New York Times*, "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 Rembert's incredible spirit... You feel it throughout these works, which refuse to shrink from the horrors, but especially in [Rembert's memories] about singing: Even in the dreaded cotton fields, Rembert could find something to love."

Credits:

All works © the Estate of Winfred Rembert.

1. Rembert, Winfred, and Erin I Kelly, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2021), 19-20.
2. Ibid, 23.
3. Ibid, 23.
4. Ibid, 82-3.
5. Bland, Bartholomew, *Winfred Rembert: Amazing Grace* (Hudson River Museum, 2012), 110.
6. Rembert, Winfred, and Erin I Kelly, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2021), 45.
7. Ducat, Vivian, director, *All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert*, Ducat Media, 2011.
8. Rembert, Winfred, and Erin I Kelly, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2021), 64.
9. Ibid, 148.
10. Rees, Taylor, director, *Ashes to Ashes*, The New Yorkers, 2021.
11. Oppenheimer, Ann and William, "The Indelible Images of Winfred Rembert," Folk Art Society of America, 2003.

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