

Press Release

## Winfred Rembert. All of Me

23 February – 22 April 2023

Hauser & Wirth New York, 69th Street



**New York...**On February 23, Hauser & Wirth will present 'All of Me,' its first exhibition of works by late American artist Winfred Rembert (1945-2021), in collaboration with Fort Gansevoort. Occupying all three floors of the gallery's 69th Street location, this immersive tribute to Rembert's incredible life and artistry will include more than 40 works made in his signature medium of carved, tooled and painted leather, including several never before seen. Produced during the last three decades of his life, the objects on view offer a striking visual memoir and will take visitors on a journey through key chapters of the artist's personal history. Rembert's paintings recognize the people and places—from pool halls, juke joints, and civil rights protests, to cotton fields and chain gangs—that shaped his worldview, uniquely rendered through technical mastery of his chosen medium into something arresting and astonishing.

Born in 1945 in Americus, Georgia, Winfred Rembert was a son of the 'Jim Crow' American South. In 1965, he was thrown in jail after a Civil Rights demonstration, and two years later survived a near lynching. This pivotal, harrowing experience was followed by seven years in the Georgia prison system. During this time, Rembert was taught how to tool leather from a fellow inmate named 'T. J. the Tooler,' who was allowed to create small functional leather items such as wallets. After his release from prison, Rembert moved North, eventually settling in New Haven, Connecticut where he lived for the remainder of his life. In 1996, at the age of 51, and with encouragement from his wife Patsy, he began to document his memories of life in Georgia in an outpouring of incredible narrative paintings.



'All of Me' opens with two powerful depictions of the immense cruelty of the America Rembert experienced during his time in the segregated South. This pair of works introduces viewers to motifs the artist deployed repeatedly over the years, and which became icons of his oeuvre. 'Cain't to Cain't II' (2016) is one of many works that evoke the long hours Rembert toiled picking cotton. In this vibrantly colored landscape, workers on the left and right sides of the composition are obscured by dark bands of dye representing dawn and dusk, because as Rembert said, 'You can't see when you go, and you can't see when you come back.' Adjacent to this painting, 'All of Me' (Date unknown), is one of the most complex of Rembert's entire body of work. Recalling his time on a chain gang, this daring work teems with the bent bodies of men in black-and-white striped prison uniforms while working on a chain gang. Collectively the figures in 'All of Me' represent the multiple personae he adopted to survive the inhumane treatment he experienced while incarcerated. As Rembert stated, '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.'

The painting titled 'Civil Rights - I Have A Dream' (1999) recounts an experience from 1965, that marked the beginning of the most devastating period of Rembert's life. Attacked during a peaceful demonstration in Georgia, he fled in a stolen car, only to be arrested and thrown into jail. After a year without charges, Rembert managed to escape, but was caught and put inside the trunk of a police car, a chilling scene that the artist revisited in the work titled, 'Inside the Trunk' (2014). 'When they opened the trunk, I saw all these white people and I see these ropes hanging in the tree.' Rembert recalled in his Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography 'Chasing Me To My Grave' (2021), 'I thought that was the end of my life.' 'Wingtips' (2001–02) depicts the near-lynching of Rembert by the mob who abducted him. This work takes its title from a tiny detail—the shoes of the man who stepped forward to object to Rembert's torture—observed by the artist while hanging upside down from a tree. The trauma of surviving this incident is then recreated in 'Almost Me' (1997), which shows the viewer what might have been, had Rembert's life not been spared.



While these gorgeous yet heart-wrenching works tell the story of life in an America hobbled by racism and bigotry, the exhibition also presents the artist's celebration of the joyful moments from his youth and warm memories of family and community. Paintings such as 'Jeff's Pool Room' (2003) and 'Soda Shop' (2007) commemorate many of the people and social settings Rembert knew and loved from his birthplace of Cuthbert, Georgia. In 'Doll's Head Baseball' (c. 1990), Rembert paid homage to a game he loved watching the locals play, in which a rubber doll's head and paper bags replaced the customary baseball and catcher's gloves, and the doll heads were named after plantation owners.

One section of the exhibition focuses exclusively upon Rembert's paintings of the women in his life, whose love and companionship shaped his spirit. 'Flour Bread' (1998) is a tribute to Lillian Rembert, the artist's great-aunt and adoptive mother, also known as Mama. In this work, she is shown as the epitome of familial dedication, wearing a mask that allowed her to bake for her family in spite of an acute allergy to flour. Rembert's wife Patsy is affectionately portrayed in the double portrait 'Patsy and Me' (2000), a testament to their enduring love and a recognition of Patsy's unwavering encouragement of his talents, as it was Patsy who encouraged Rembert to begin tooling and painting the story of his life on leather, thereby transforming his pain into redemption.

All quotations from the artist included in the exhibition's wall text have been excerpted from 'Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South,' by Winfred Rembert, as told to Erin I. Kelly, published in September 2021 by Bloomsbury.



#### **About the artist**

Winfred Rembert (1945 – 2021) was born in Americus, Georgia and grew up in nearby Cuthbert, a rural railroad town located in the southwest region of the state, once at the center of the Deep South's plantation economy. Living in Cuthbert during the era of Jim Crow, Rembert was exposed at a young age to the exploitative practices of the sharecropping system. Spending much of his childhood alongside family members working in the fields, Rembert received a limited education. Despite the infrequency of his attendance, a dedicated teacher by the name of Miss Prather recognized Rembert's artistic talent and encouraged him to express his creativity through drawing.

As a teenager, Rembert was deeply influenced by the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in Americus, where his active participation led to confrontations with law enforcement. In 1965, while attending a peaceful protest which was attacked by white antagonists, he fled from the assailants in a stolen car and was subsequently arrested for the theft. In 1967, still incarcerated while awaiting charges, Rembert escaped from jail. Following his ensuing capture by an angry white mob, Rembert survived a near-lynching. For the next seven years of his life, he was transferred to multiple penitentiaries within the Georgia prison system, enduring taxing physical labor while working on various chain gangs—a harrowing experience that would later prove central to the narrative of his extraordinary art.

Rembert learned how to tool and craft leather from a fellow prisoner—the technique he would later use to share his story with the world. Following his release from prison in 1974, Rembert married Patsy Gammage; the couple eventually settled in New Haven, Connecticut, and raised a family there. At the age of fifty-one, with his wife's encouragement, Rembert began a full-time artistic practice. Combining his mastery of leather working with his skilled draftsmanship, he built a unique body of autobiographical paintings and continued to make art for nearly twenty-five years, before his death on March 31, 2021, at the age of 75.

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Over the course of his career, Rembert embraced a variety of styles and pictorial strategies. His works range from purely illustrative to extremely complex compositions that verge on abstraction. In many of the early paintings, the materiality of Rembert's media is immediately apparent. In such works, he rendered his figures in muted tones to compliment the natural color of the leather backgrounds. In other works, bright-colored pigments cover the entire surface of densely packed compositions. Over time, Rembert's compositions accrued as a chronicle of his life, through pictorial landscapes of cotton fields and rhythmic compositions of field workers, freedom marches, church services, juke joints, and chain gangs in the Jim Crow south. In its narrative and formal qualities, Rembert's work, with its corporeal texture, intense color, powerful patterns, and depictions of both hardship and pleasure, takes its place among the oeuvres of the most influential American figurative masters.

The York Square Cinema in New Haven launched a solo exhibition of Rembert's leather paintings in 1998. Exhibitions followed at the Yale University Art Gallery and in New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, among other locales and, in 2012, the artist received his first major solo museum presentation: 'Amazing Grace' debuted at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, before travelling to four additional venues. This survey included more than fifty works and incorporated historical photographs of Georgia, as well as gospel music recorded and performed in the Museum's galleries by Rembert. 'Amazing Grace' also showcased the feature-length documentary 'All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert' (2011), produced and directed by Vivian Ducat. When reminiscing on the title of the exhibition, the artist stated, 'Amazing Grace is one of the songs I remember that was sung in the fields. I just loved to listen to the singing. Singing was the only thing about the fields that I loved.'

Winfred Rembert's work is represented in the permanent collections of Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH; 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 of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; Legacy Museum, Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL; Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY; Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, Los Angeles, CA; Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; Muskegon Museum of Art, Youngstown, OH; National Gallery of Art, 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. Rembert's work was highlighted in major exhibitions at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL in 2013; the Flint Institute of the Arts, Flint, MI in 2013; the Citadelle Art Foundation, Canadian, Texas in 2012; the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY in 2012; the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC in 2012; the Adelson Galleries, New York in 2010, and the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT in 2000.

The artist's memoir 'Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South' (with Erin I. Kelly, Bloomsbury, 2021) was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 2022.

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**Caption and courtesy information:**

All works:

Winfred Rembert

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Courtesy the estate, Fort Gansevoort, and Hauser & Wirth

Caint to Caint II

2016

Dye on carved and tooled leather

87 x 97.8 cm / 34 1/4 x 38 1/2 in (framed)

All of Me

Date unknown

Dye on carved & tooled leather

77.5 x 85.7 cm / 30 1/2 x 33 3/4 in

Civil Rights - I Have A Dream

1999

Dye on carved and tooled leather

104.8 x 74.3 cm / 41 1/4 x 29 1/4 in (framed)

Jeff's Pool Room

2003

Dye on carved and tooled leather

59.1 x 88.9 cm / 23 1/4 x 35 in

Patsy and Me

2000

Dye on carved and tooled leather

81.3 x 87.6 cm / 32 x 34 1/2 in