

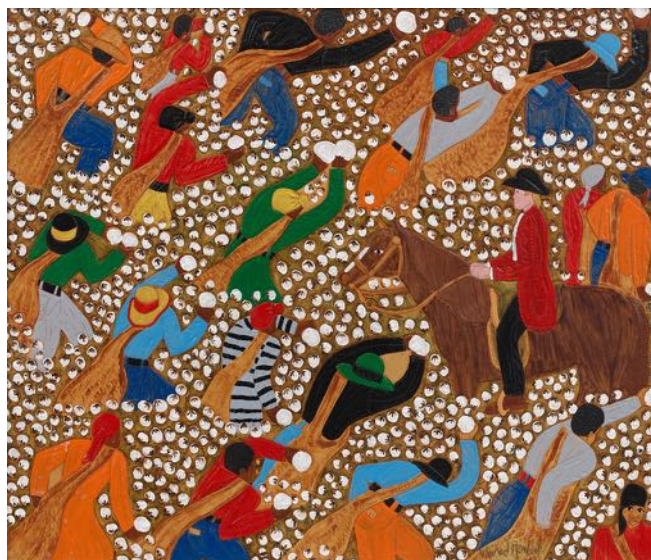
Press Release

## Winfred Rembert. Hard Times

30 May – 25 August 2024

Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles

North B Gallery



**Los Angeles...**Working in his signature medium of carved and painted leather, late American artist Winfred Rembert (1945 – 2021) dedicated the last thirty years of his life to creating a striking visual memoir. The consistently powerful and original oeuvre he left behind is a testament to the improvisational skill, determination and resilience required of a visionary shaped by a lifetime of extreme adversity. On 30 May, when Hauser & Wirth debuts the first-ever Los Angeles exhibition devoted to Rembert at its Downtown Arts District complex, West Coast audiences will finally have the opportunity to experience his story, told with beauty on leather.

'Winfred Rembert. Hard Times' includes paintings from two of the artist's most recognizable bodies of work—the Cotton Field and Chain Gang collections. Reflecting his upbringing on a sharecropping field in Georgia in the 1950s and his labor on a prison chain gang in the 1960s and '70s, the exhibition is dedicated to a pair of harrowing but formative chapters in Rembert's life. At once figural and abstract, painted and sculptural, Rembert's compositions feature varying palettes, ranging from the natural tones of the leather and the graphic use of black and white to the incorporation of vibrant blocks of color.

In his Pulitzer Prize winning memoir, 'Chasing Me to My Grave,' Rembert describes the cotton fields as his very first memory. He underscores the gravity of this nascent but indelible image, noting, 'Looking up at his parents is the first thing a child is supposed to remember. Not me. It seemed like I opened my eyes to cotton.' On view in the exhibition, 'Hard Times' (2003) is one of many paintings that depict workers bent over endless rows of white tufts that dot the landscape and subsume the visual plane. The sculpturally carved and painted leather here bear exquisite detail—each worker's clothing is adorned with carefully crafted seams, featuring intricate beveling that adds unexpected depth. Equally novel is Rembert's perspectival daring; the horizontal foreground sharply transitions to a rising verticality, absent of a discernible skyline.

Rembert's works range from straightforwardly illustrative to extremely complex compositions that verge on abstraction. In the latter category is 'All of Me,' a work that teems with the bent bodies of men in black-and-white



striped prison uniforms digging ditches and breaking rocks on the chain gang. Recalling the grueling physical labor he endured, Rembert states, 'The mental cruelty may have been worse than the physical cruelty.' Collectively the figures in 'All of Me' represent the multiple personae he adopted to survive such inhumane treatment while incarcerated. Refusing to be what the guards wanted him to be, he chose to evade their psychological traps by assuming all identities. In his memoir Rembert writes:

'You have to play a role that isn't really you. It's like slavery. You have to meet all those demands and keep a sense of yourself as well. You don't want to be identified with any of the roles you have to play, so you are all of them. It's like all of you and everybody else around you are all tied up into one.' Reflecting on this survival strategy, he stated, '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.'

It was Rembert's wife Patsy who encouraged the artist to begin tooling and painting the story of his life on leather—a skill he first learned from a fellow incarcerated man in Georgia—to transform his pain into redemption. Accompanying the exhibition at Hauser & Wirth is a presentation of their love letters written while Rembert was imprisoned from 1965 to 1974. These documents of their extraordinary exchange, shared here with the public for the first time, chronicle the journey of mutual affection and hope they took together during this traumatic period. In his memoir, Rembert marvels at the impact his writing had on Patsy, noting, 'I convinced her to wait for me, just through letters,' and adding, of their budding romance, 'I just couldn't believe good things finally happened to me.'

#### **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

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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 was taught how to tool and craft leather from a fellow incarcerated person named 'T. J. the Tooler'—the same techniques 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 31 March 2021, at the age of 75.

Over the course of his career, Rembert embraced a variety of styles and pictorial strategies. 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 complement 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 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.

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,

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Gallery hours:  
Tuesday – Sunday, 11 am – 6 pm

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Hard Times  
2003  
Acrylic paint on carved and tooled leather  
90.2 x 78.1 cm / 35 1/2 x 30 3/4 in  
Private Collection of Michelle and Joseph Pratt

Cotton Pickers with Overseer  
ca. 2006  
Acrylic paint on carved and tooled leather  
88.3 x 103.5 cm / 34 3/4 x 40 3/4 in  
Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer

All of Me  
Acrylic paint on carved and tooled leather  
85.7 x 77.5 cm / 33 3/4 x 30 1/2 in  
Private Collection, New York  
Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer

Cotton Pickers  
2011  
Acrylic paint on carved and tooled leather  
67.3 x 68.6 cm / 26 1/2 x 27 in  
Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer