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HYPERALLERGIC

A Black Outsider Artist in a White Art World

By Sabine Heinlein – February 19, 2013



Winfred Rembert, "All Me II" (2002), dye on carved and tooled leather, 31 1/2 x 37 3/4 in (image via Flint Institute of Arts)

I recently went to the National Arts Club to watch *All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert*, a documentary about a 68-year-old African-American outsider artist, which is currently being screened at various locations in New York.

I had come across Rembert's leather paintings at the most recent Outsider Art Fair. I was struck by the artist's decorative, almost ornamental treatment of gruesome subject matter. Rembert's multihued cotton-field paintings depicting women and men performing tedious, backbreaking labor are almost cheerful, considering the theme of racial oppression and injustice. His repetitive handling of characters and paint gives his work a patterned feel reminiscent of some children's books. Yet the contrasts are fierce and unforgettable. The painting "All Me II" (2002) portrays

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countless prisoners in a chain gang holding baby blue hammers for breaking rocks. While there is something whimsical about the depiction of the prisoners, the way they are crammed onto the leather canvas, their bodies interlocking, suggests the iconic images of Auschwitz's mass graves. People considered dead while still alive.

The narratives of Rembert's impoverished childhood, his time in prison, and the emotional and physical torture he had to endure at the hands of whites are all drawn from his "photographic memory," as the artist explained during the Q&A following the screening of *All Me* at the National Arts Club. Joining Rembert on the panel were the filmmaker, Vivian Ducat, her husband and producer, Ray Segal, and Sharyn Grossman, the club's chairwoman, who had organized the event. Rembert should by all rights "be an angry man," Grossman said, "but he is a happy human being." As if trying to fit America's complex and violent race relations into a comfortable frame, Grossman repeated her statement almost verbatim twice before the end of the panel.

Why did this notion make me uncomfortable? Because I wondered whether this primarily white audience would still like Rembert if he were angry. Would we shun him? Lock him up?



Winfred Rembert answering questions at the National Arts Club (photo by the author for Hyperallergic).

There was another, more immediate notion that made me sad. In the film, Rembert appears to be respected and well liked in his African-American community, but it is clear that his work does not get the same recognition there as it does from the predominantly white, art-loving community that has adopted him. "I would love to be recognized by my own people," Rembert said to the audience at the Arts Club.

After having written a book about three former prisoners of color, I have to admit that I find myself very sensitive to racial incongruities. Many of my concerns played out during the Q&A. It

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was evident that the predominantly white audience preferred to ask art-related questions rather than confront the artist's dire subject matter.

Referring to the repetitive dots of white paint in his cotton-field paintings, a woman in the audience asked Rembert whether he had ever seen "the aboriginal paintings with the white dots."

"No, ma'am, I have not," Rembert responded politely.

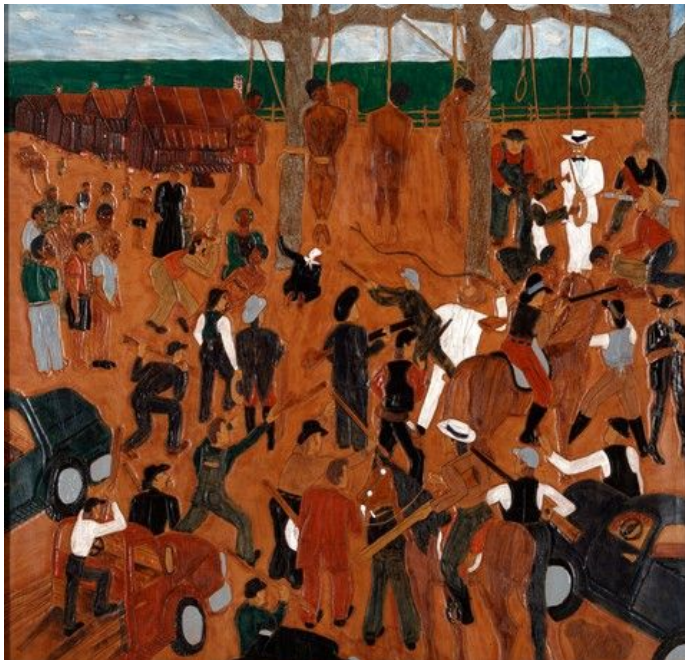
"Have you ever been to an art museum?" another white woman wanted to know.

"Ten years ago I didn't even know who [Horace] Pippins was," he responded. "I'm just now trying to see what other artists are doing."

Someone else asked whether his methods have changed over the years. Rembert explained that his paintings have become more colorful because until recently leather dyes — regular paint tends to crack on leather — were only available in very limited colors.

"The color white just came along in the past five years," he said.

Rembert literally works *through* his torturous memories from rural Georgia. Repetitive, relentless, perfectionist, and clean, his paintings have a ritualistic, obsessive-compulsive quality. (The artist, by the way, travels from his home in New Haven to his exhibitions in New York with a large piece of marble so he can punch, carve, and stamp dots into leather at night in his hotel room without waking his wife, Patsy.)



Winfred Rembert, "The Lynching" (1999), Panel 1 of 3, Dye on carved and tooled leather, Each panel: 35 x 33 in.

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Rembert suffered from alienation and torture at the hands of whites for almost as long as he can remember. As a child his mother was told, in front of him, by one of the white brothers who owned the convenience store in his hometown that her son would “never be a damn thing.” His “mama” advised him that “if white folks do you wrong, let them do it.” In the '60s, Rembert took part in civil rights demonstrations and was arrested and lynched. In the film he graphically describes how he was tied up and hung, and how one of the white cops carved into his genitals with a knife. It was when the blood ran down his legs that he remembered his mama’s advice. He survived the experience, only to be sent to prison.

The owners of the grocery store reappear in his paintings, and so does his lynching experience. Rembert noted that he couldn’t make more than a few of the lynching pictures because reliving the horrible experience made him sick to his stomach. It was during the seven years he served in prison that he learned to hand-tool leather into reliefs; his prison ID number is included on some of the license plates on the cars in his paintings.

A few years ago, Rembert was catapulted to fame by the noted art dealer Peter Tillou after the artist was featured in a two-person show at the Yale Art Gallery. At the Outsider Art Fair, Rembert was represented by Kinz + Tillou Fine Art, which is co-owned by Michelle Tillou, Peter’s niece.

The documentary, which was first released in 2011, makes sure to contrast Rembert’s suffering with his fortuitous discovery by the Yale Art Gallery. The film shows the artist remembering the lynching as well as his first experience with Yale: He didn’t have an invitation, and a guard tried to deny him access. This time, Rembert didn’t let the “white folks” do him wrong; he walked right in and showed the director one of his works, which led to that first show and his subsequent discovery by Peter Tillou.

All Me culminates with Rembert barbecuing a whole pig for his African-American neighborhood. “I would love to be recognized by my own people,” Rembert says in the film, the same comment he made at the Arts Club. He added at the panel that he wants to teach African Americans about suffering, perseverance, and heritage.

Until recently, Rembert’s motivation was not fueled by the constricting demands of the market. But with the increasing price of his paintings and the attention his adoptive community has given him, his motivation has shifted.

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Winfred Rembert, "Amazing Grace" (2008), dye on carved and tooled leather, 30 1/4 x 36 1/2 in (image via Adelson Galleries).

"What are you working on now?" asked a woman in the audience.

"I hate to say this," he responded, "but I'm working on more cotton fields. This seems to be what people want."

All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert was shown at the National Arts Club (15 Gramercy Park South, Gramercy, Manhattan) on February 6. Check the website for future screenings.