

FORT GANSEVOORT

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Artist and lynching survivor Winfred Rembert shares his life story in a posthumous memoir

Joel Lang – December 31, 2021



Winfred Rembert, *Cotton Rows*, 2009, Dye on carved and tooled leather, 23 x 24.75 inches.
Courtesy of Adelson Galleries.

Artist Winfred Rembert was open about the story of his youth in Jim Crow Georgia. He told it in dozens of interviews since his discovery by the art world 20 years ago. He told it in an award-winning 2011 documentary, *All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert*. But mainly, the longtime New Haven resident, who died last March at 75, told it in the paintings he taught himself to make on leather.

In them he laid down his memories of sun-scorched cotton fields, jumping juke joints, brutal chain gangs and horrific lynchings — one of them his own. His depictions of town life are alive with human activity, marking him as a folk artist. But his paintings of cotton fields can be highly patterned, almost quilt-like. And his chain gang paintings border on the abstract. One of the most prized, *All Me*, bunches dozens of convicts into a single organism.

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Rembert continues to tell his story, this time at length in a recently published book, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*. It could be Rembert's final masterpiece, introducing him to his biggest audience yet. It also introduces a lesser-known Rembert. Gone is the public raconteur who seemed to relish sharing his story. Replacing him is a more introspective Rembert, still struggling to explain to himself, as well as the world, the injuries inflicted on him in his youth, mainly by racism, but also by his own abandonment.

The book opens with a teenage Rembert fleeing police for a crime he does not remember committing to seek sanctuary with a mother he hardly knew. She had given him away when he was 3 months old to be raised by a great-aunt in rural Cuthbert, Georgia. He follows railroad tracks to reach her, and when he does, she challenges him: "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to turn and walk away to somewhere in the world where no one knew who I was. I felt like a nobody. I felt like nothing," Rembert writes. "She spoke to me grossly, like she didn't want to see me."

The voice is Rembert's own, but it is one he amended with an unlikely collaborator: Erin I. Kelly, a Tufts University philosophy professor whose focus is on ethics and criminal justice. Kelly says she first encountered Rembert's art in 2015 when she was looking for cover images for an academic book of hers, *The Limits of Blame: Rethinking Punishment and Responsibility*. While googling the painter Jacob Lawrence, "I thought, 'Hah! I haven't seen those Lawrence paintings before.' And then when I looked more closely, I saw it was Rembert," Kelly says.

The process opened Kelly's eyes. "One thing I learned that I didn't know from viewing the paintings and watching the documentary was the sense of fear and terror that people were living with in Cuthbert and I presume other areas of the South as well," she says.

Rembert writes, "With my paintings, I tried to make a bad situation look good. You can't make a chain gang look good in any way besides putting it in art."

Part of the book's power derives from the contrast between his colorful, orderly paintings (often reproduced on full pages) and the text, where the casual cruelty of Jim Crow racism becomes vivid. On the chain gang, prisoners could be confined for days in a cramped "sweat box" for punishment. Meanwhile in Cuthbert center, there was a "laughing barrel," where any Black person could be stopped and ordered to laugh at any white person's joke, the book details.

When Rembert, who had escaped from jail, was strung up by his heels by a lynch mob, he recalls in the book what was going through his mind as a deputy approached him with a hooked knife. "That kind of thing was designed to keep you humble," Rembert comes to realize. As an artist, the act of recollection and creation sometimes made him physically ill. Eventually he was diagnosed with PTSD.

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Rembert spent a total of nine years in jail, prison or on chain gangs. After his release in 1974, he married Patsy and moved north. Their first stop in Connecticut was in Bridgeport, where the son and grandson of the great-aunt he called “Mama” lived. He worked as a longshoreman, got injured on the job and, desperate, discovered there was money to be made in the drug trade.

Kelly doesn't know how Rembert's family (he and Patsy eventually had eight children of their own and sheltered many more) will react to his book. But she guarantees he approved every word himself. He saw the final proof just before he died.

The opening chapter about following railroad tracks to find his mother corresponds with their very first interview, Kelly says. In it, Rembert says he always wanted to paint himself walking on those railroad tracks, but couldn't. Over the course of their interviews, he managed to make the painting, though. Titled *Looking for My Mother*, it shows a boy climbing the tracks as if it were a ladder and is the image that closes the book. “It was a very joyful thing that he was able to do it,” Kelly says.

In the text, Rembert explains that he made the painting so viewers would see him moving forward. “It's just a long, lonesome railroad just as far as I can see, but I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm going to see my mother and if I can make it to her, I think I'll be alright.”