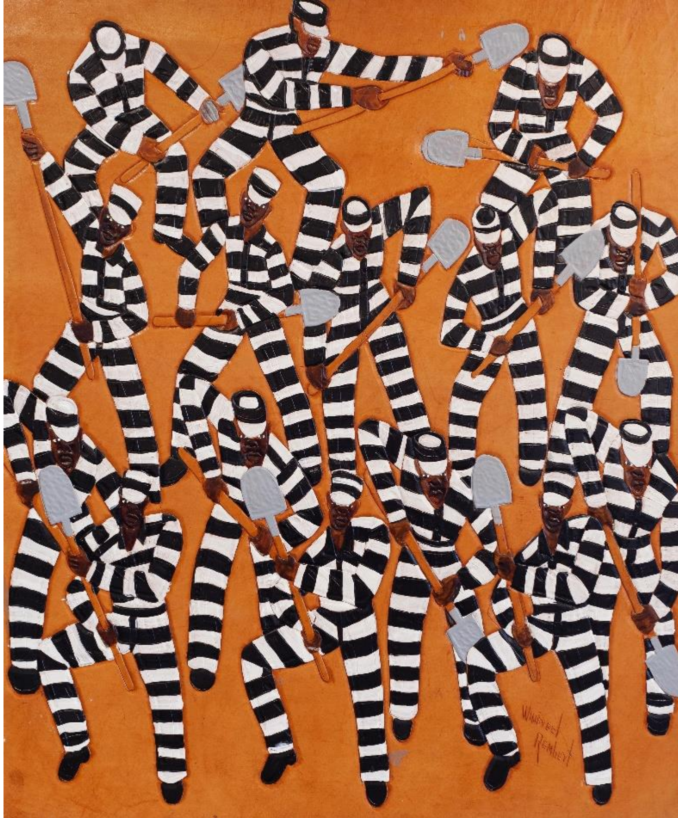
FORT GANSEVOORT

VICTORY

Ride Hell for Leather

By Shakeia Taylor – Fall 2021



In the Ditch, 2005, dye on cared and tooled leather.

Being Black in America means having to tell your own stories. Experiencing the brutality of white supremacy means having to live with the suppression of your history. If you let it. It is from this struggle that the tradition of storytelling through oral history, as well as art and music, bloomed in Black communities. For Winfred Rembert, that means sharing his own traumatic experiences for 25 years through the creation of his art. To testify, in any setting, is to bear witness. Ultimately, this is what Rembert was doing with his art. It captures the endurance of Black Americans... it is a testimony, his testimony.

I remember going to church with my family in a mostly rural part of North Carolina, less than an hour from Raleigh. We drove down winding roads with houses set back far from the road itself. We'd pass fields that seemed, to my younger self, to stretch for miles. Mostly tobacco fields were along this particular route. Then we'd pull into the dirt parking lot of a small Baptist church, First Timothy. In reality, it wasn't actually a church in the traditional architectural sense at all. It was a trailer home. The church of course had a building fund going to one day have a "real building."

Between Sunday School and the start of the actual ser- vice was praise and worship. Praise and worship is exactly what it sounds like, a time when members of the congregation would sing and testify. I can still hear the tambourine as the sole accompaniment to a song. The rhythmic foot tapping. The humming of the deaconesses. "What a mighty God we serve! What a mighty God we serve! Angels bow before him, heaven and Earth adore him, what a mighty God we serve!' After a few verses of the song, someone would stand up. A cue that they wanted to testify. The singing would drop to a low murmur and they'd start speaking. Testifying gave them an opportunity to share the stories of what things they'd experienced and overcome that week. Some told stories of accomplishment, but not all testimonies were good. Some testimonies were of loss and sacrifice. But what each storyteller had in common, was hope. As an adult, my relationship with going to church has grown distant, but I remember that the power of someone's testimony during praise and worship could bring even the most skeptical members of the audience to tears.

Within a few seconds of engaging with Winfred Rembert's work, one is reminded of the Black church. Not in the sense of a religious experience, but in the richness of the colors he used and the way he depicts what was once everyday life for Black Americans in the South. His works look as if you'd find them hanging in the fellowship hall of a country church like First Timothy, or in the church parsonage, or in the home of a praying grandmother. It feels as integral to the experience of Black religion as a Martin Luther King, Jr. church fan.

Rembert's story is one you won't soon forget. As an infant, his birth mother gave him away out of fear that her husband would find out about him. She gave him to a great-aunt, who was largely unloving to him throughout his life. He once traveled miles as a poor boy to see her, hoping to find acceptance, but instead he was rejected again. Raised on a plantation, Rembert picked cotton as a youth.

One of the most important details about Rembert is that he is the only known survivor of an attempted lynching who is willing to discuss what happened to him. As a teenager he went to a protest against racial segregation in Southwest Georgia and was chased by two white menwith shotguns. Spotting a car with the keys in it, Rembert hopped in and made his escape. Or so he thought. He was later arrested and jailed with no charges ever being filed. After more than a year of unlawful incarceration, Rembert intentionally stopped up his toilet, causing it to overflow. When a deputy sheriff came and pulled a gun on him, Rembert took the gun away and fled, but was later caught. This time, they put him in the trunk of a police car and drove him to the countryside. He was stripped of his clothing and drawn up into a tree with a noose around his ankles. The deputy sheriff who's gun he had taken nearly castrated him. But another man intervened, and Rembert was taken back to jail, where he spent the next seven years working on chain gangs.

While in prison, Rembert learned to carve and tool leather from an inmate who made intricate billfolds. He eventually adapted the techniques to create works of art "Leather takes a beating, and whatever you do with it, it will hold its shape," Rembert writes in his posthumously released memoir, Chasing Me to My Grave. “You can carve it up and it will hold your picture. My pictures
tell about cotton plantations, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, and my time as a prisoner. They celebrate the people I knew and loved and how they lived. These are my memories of Black life in the 1950s and 1960s, and how those of us who left the South took it with us and kept it." Through his art, he shared the stories of life. He testified to his own survival. Rembert's story is not just one of pain and

injustice, but one that also depicted Black joy and community. His painstaking leatherworking and vivid painting embraced the full and whole Black experience of the Jim Crow south.

Mikhaile Solomon, founder of Prizm Art Fair in Miami, explained the importance of storytelling in Black art:

"In most cases with artists from the diaspora, a lot of the work is narrative-driven. There are artists whose work specifically speaks to social justice issues. There's some famous ones like Carrie Mae Weems, Kerry James Marshall, Dr. David Driskell. Most of the Black artists I know, even when it is abstraction, there's some story behind it. Typically there's some narrative that drives the work and it's usually rooted in the Black cultural experience. I mean oftentimes when you're talking about elder artists, art is the medium through which they can be expressive about a number of things that bother them that have been suppressive to us culturally and economically and racially and all those things. Whole art movements were built around addressing civil rights issues, like AfriCobra and the Black Arts Movement in Chicago. So I would say a lot of the work that is produced by artists, particularly African-American artists, is largely driven by addressing the socio-economic and socio-racial politics that we are forced to live with because of white supremacy. Not by choice, but you know, just by virtue of the social construct that we live in."

Alongside artwork depicting chain gangs and cotton fields- and even his mother giving him away-some of Rembert's pieces show everyday life. In The Curvey II, 2014, Rembert paints a memory of skipping school to go swim in a place known as "The Curvey." He offers us a vivid look into what appears to be a pool hall or juke joint with Homer Clyde's Place, 2009 with Black people dancing, playing pool, and sitting along a bar. Doll's Head Baseball is a baseball game in which the par- ticipants play with a doll's head for the ball and brown paper bags for gloves. Mae Bell is a loving tribute to his wife's Patsy's mother, who loved fishing.
The inclusion of sport and recreation among the scenes and moments he represented puts him in good company among contemporaries who depicted African-American life, from Jacob Lawrence to Gordon Parks. But scenes that connected to the harshest parts of Rembert's own lived experience cost him more emotional and physical capital to make. "I didn't realize at first that it was my work that was making me sick, but Patsy noticed that I was getting sick every time I worked on certain pictures," he writes in *Chasing me to My Grave*. "She started getting worried about losing me. I said, That may happen, but look what I'm going to leave with you.' I told Patsy that I was going to do those pictures, sick or well. Sometimes I'd have to stop for a week or so, but then I'd start again. I wanted to do pictures of what I had experienced even if it killed me. I wanted people to know what I had been through."

Rembert painted people and places that were important to him. The varying subjects of his work show that the pain and the joy are parts of the whole. From pool halls to juke joints to swim holes to baseball games to fishing, the vibrant colors used to illustrate sport evoke feelings of happier times. These works remind us that for many, joy and escape can be found in playing games.

Winfred Rembert chronicled his life story-one filled with painful memories- on leather. Nobody else was doing that at the time. The first work of art Rembert sold was a small leather picture that he'd traced. It made him $300. Then he created a second, bigger one. That one sold for $750. He was six years old. In 2010, one of his chain gang images sold for close to $80,000. But he never established a consistent

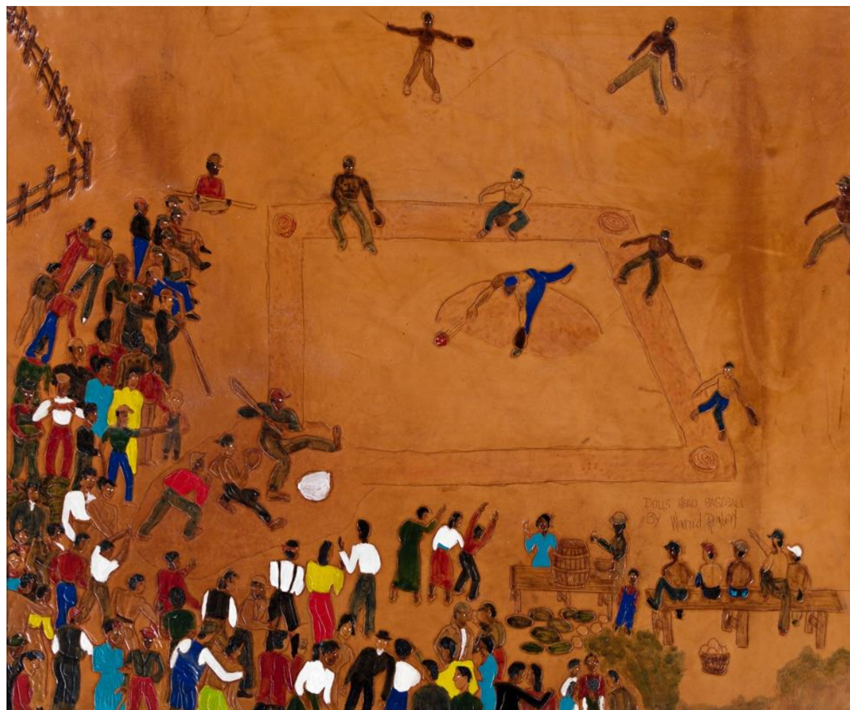
market for his work and was not embraced by institutional collectors. He passed away earlier this year with plans in the works to share more of his work and story with the world.

In an art world that has always valued traditional credentials and been skeptical of self-taught artists, it was easy for Rembert's work to stay under the radar for any combination of reasons. Was the subject matter too painful? Is the label of "outsider" or "folk" artist too difficult to overcome? Was it the stigma of the artist having been incarcerated? Was it the relatively advanced age he began? In his book, he wondered why white people might be interested in his story at all, whether or not people would believe him, and what the real people of his hometown, Cuthbert, Georgia, might think of him.

There is no other moment in the history of American art when Rembert's work would've been better received than now. Last year saw the largest uprising since the civil rights movement, and with so much focus on social justice and equality, attention has also turned to Black art and artists. Establishment institutions are suddenly paying close attention. As he faced the end of his life, Rembert wondered if he would be next. In September 2020, he wrote, "But my time in this world is up, so there is no better time. This may be the perfect time."

A little over a year later, a new Rembert retrospective opened at Fort Gansevoort in New York's Meatpacking District. Gallerist Adam Shopkorn, who works in collaboration with his estate, reports sales to major collectors as well as heavy interest from the kind of in-stitutions-like the Met and the Whitney--that were slow to embrace Rembert during his life. Is this the moment of ascension the artist envisioned? "If not now, Shopkorn asks, "When?"

We’re in the afterlife of his story, and it's filled with possibility.



Doll's Head Basketball, circa 1990, dye on carved and tooled leather. Collection of Selig D. Sacks.

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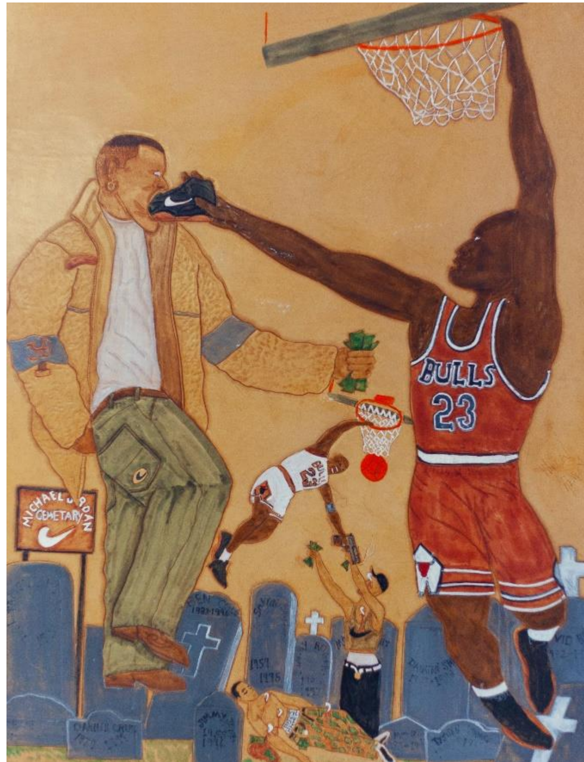
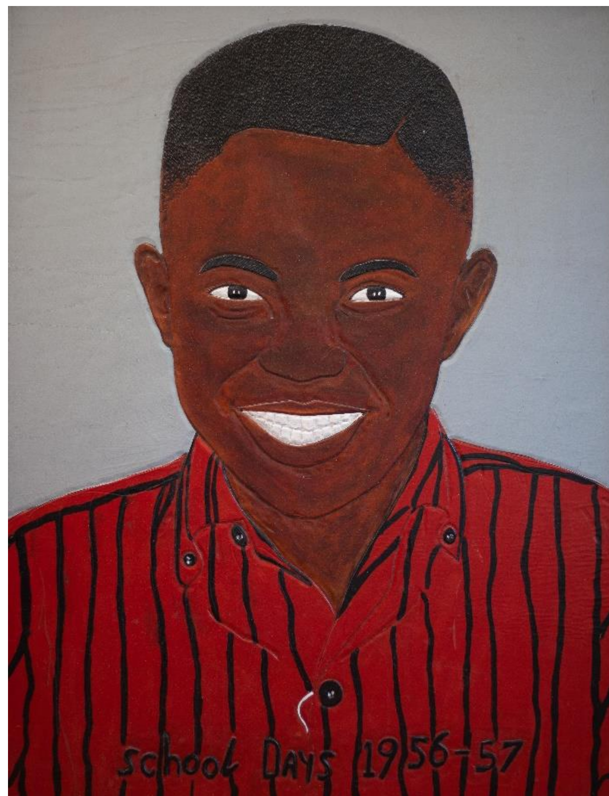
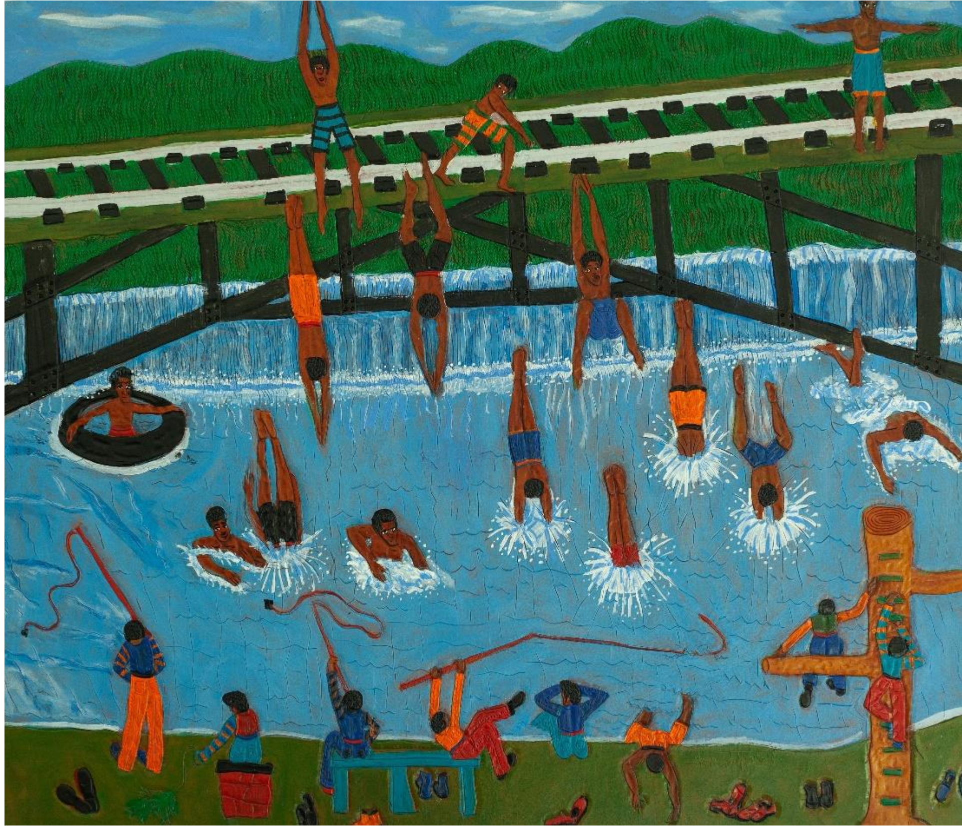


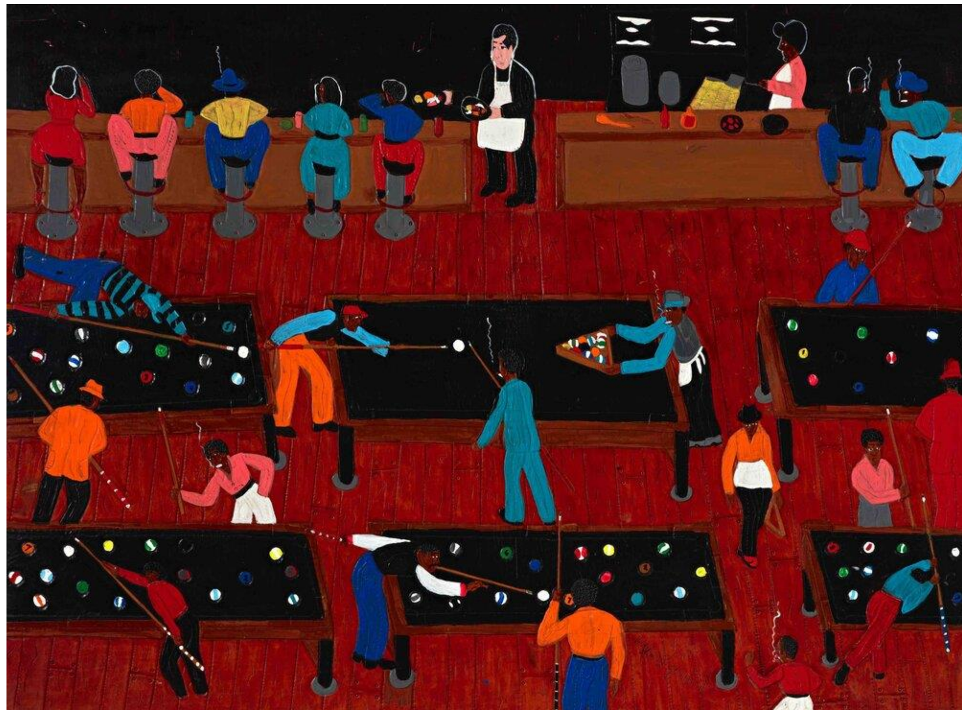
Michael Jordan Cemetery, 1998, dye on carved and tooled leather.



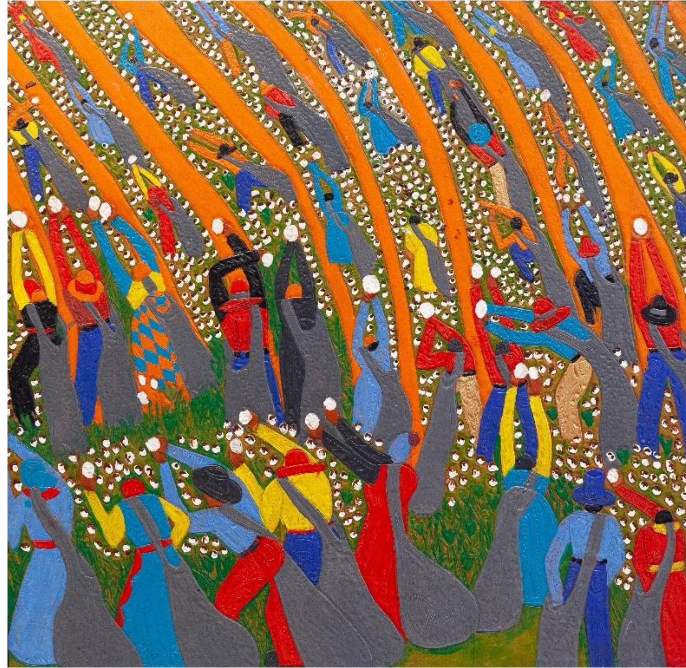
School Days 1956-57, date unknown, dye on carved and tooled leather.



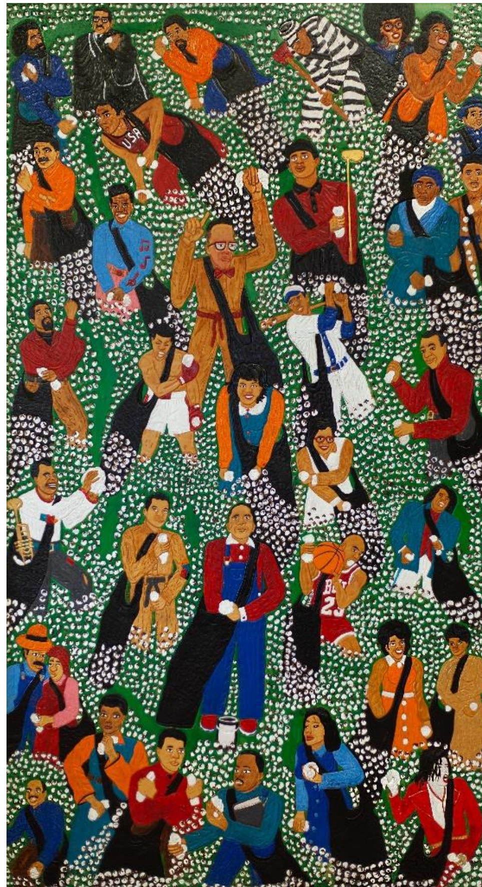
The Curvey, date unknown, dye on carved and tooled leather.



Title Unknown [Pool Hall], date unknown, dye on carved and tooled leather.



Sunshine II, 2012, dye on carved and tooled leather.



The Struggle, 2010, dye on carved and tooled leather.

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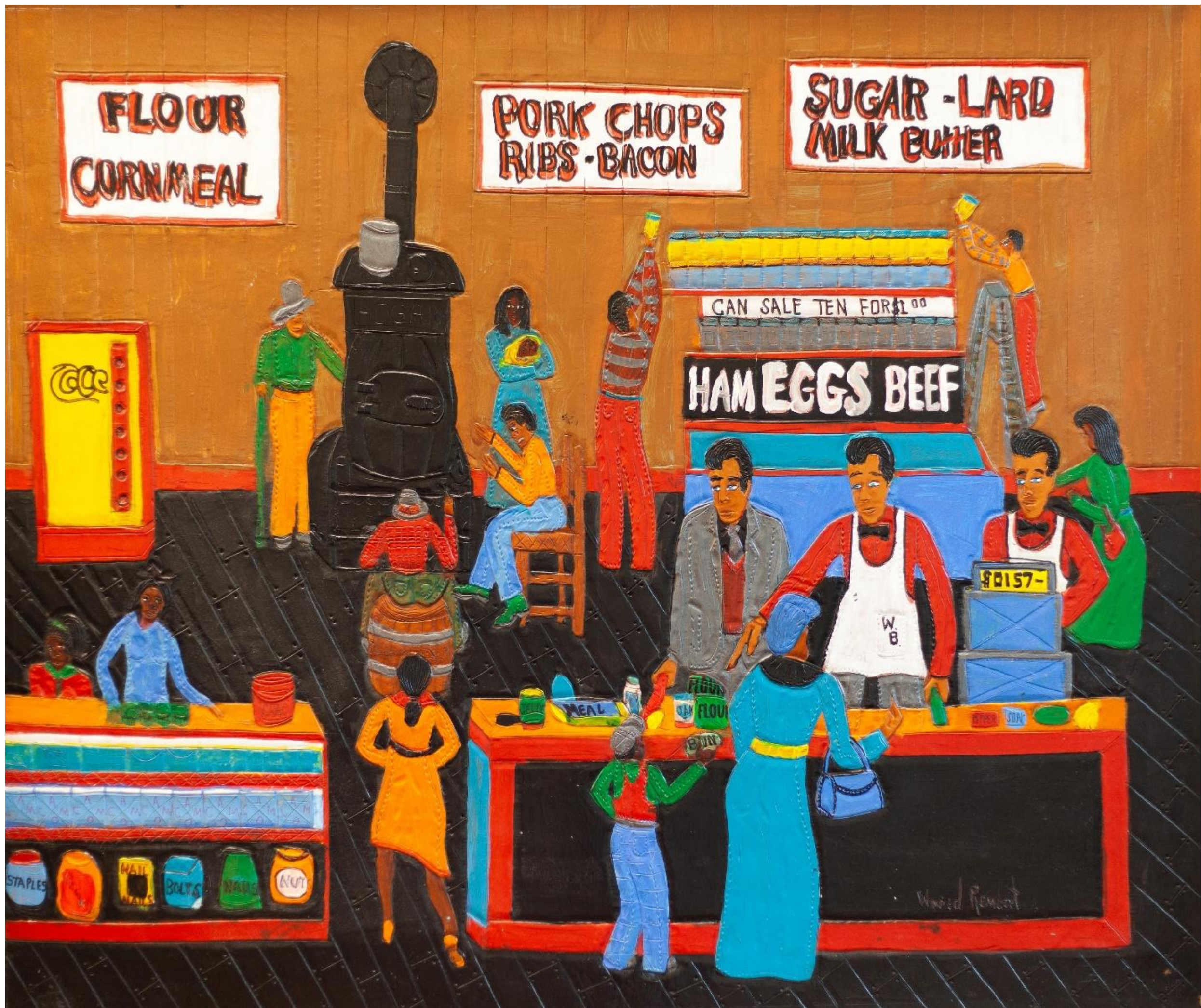

Wilson Brothers, date unknown, dye on carved and tooled leather.
All works courtesy of Fort Gansevoort, New York, 2021 Winfred Rembert / ARSNY