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Robert Fishko, *Director*

WINFRED REMBERT

(1945-2021)

Untitled (The Dirty Spoon Café), 2011

dye on carved and tooled leather

10 9/16 x 15 5/8 inches

signed upper right "Winfred Rembert"



Provenance

The Artist

Private Collection, Connecticut

Merrill C. Berman Collection, Rye, New York

Reference

Rembert, Winfred and Erin I. Kelly. *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., New York, NY, 2021, p. 48, Illustrated and p. 281, Listed. [Related Work: *The Dirty Spoon Cafe*, 2002, 50 3/4 x 37 inches]

Note

In the Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, Winfred Rembert describes the lively nightclubs on Hamilton Avenue in Cuthbert, Georgia, where a thirteen-year-old Winfred found himself homeless after running away from the cotton fields in which he had labored since the age of five. His new friend "Duck" introduced the young Winfred to the owner of a poolroom, who offered him work and shelter. Rembert recalled:

"[Duck] took me to all the juke joints and introduced me to the people – all the Black people who were prospering in Cuthbert. They all had something to do with Hamilton Avenue...It was a place for Black people. Everything on Hamilton Avenue was Black...and I never knew Black folks could have businesses...The Dirty Spoon Cafe was the juke joint for adults. They wouldn't let kids in there. I guess they kept more rules and regulations than anybody

else. I would look in the window, though, to see all the people in their fancy dress. The best dressed person was a man called "Egg." He would wear three-piece suits with the vest over the sleeves...Egg was an excellent dancer. He was disabled, but he could dance. He used to swing those girls, and I was standing there in the window looking at him do it...The Dirty Spoon Cafe was the place you could see that kind of dancing.”ⁱ

Winfred Rembert was born in 1945 in Americus, Georgia, during the Jim Crow era of the American South. Influenced by the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement as a teenager, Rembert attended a peaceful protest in 1965 and was attacked by white antagonists. He fled the assailants by stealing a car, leading to his arrest for theft. Rembert spent two years incarcerated while awaiting charges before escaping from jail in 1967. He was caught, placed in the trunk of a police car and released to an angry white mob. Surviving the ensuing lynching, Rembert was thrown in jail and 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. The harrowing experience would later prove central to the narrative of his extraordinary art.

Rembert learned how to tool and craft leather from a fellow prisoner, a technique he would use to share his story with the world. Following his release from prison in 1974, Rembert married Patsy Gammage and the couple eventually settled in New Haven, Connecticut where they raised a family. 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 created an extraordinary body of autobiographical paintings chronicling Black life of the Jim Crow south through pictorial landscapes of cotton fields and Black neighborhoods, and rhythmic compositions featuring field workers, freedom marches, juke joints, and prison life.

Rembert continued to make art for nearly twenty-five years, before his death in 2021 at the age of seventy-five. His works can be found in the collections of numerous museums including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Legacy Museum, Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL; Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, Los Angeles, CA; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

ⁱ Rembert, Winfred and Erin I. Kelly. *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., New York, NY, 2021, pp. 45-46