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Robert Fishko, *Director*

WINFRED REMBERT

(1945-2021)

The Chain Gang in the Ditch, 2005

dye on carved and tooled leather

40 x 28 inches

signed lower right "Winfred Rembert"

Provenance

The Artist

(Michelle Tillou Fine Art, Brooklyn, NY)

Private Collection, Rye, New York

(acquired directly from the above)



Reference

Rembert, Winfred and Erin I. Kelly. *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, Foreword by Bryan Stevenson, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., New York, NY, 2021, p. 151, Illustrated and p. 282, Listed. (Related Work Shown: *In the Ditch*, 2009, 35 ½ x 28 inches)

Note

Winfred Rembert was born in 1945 in Americus, Georgia. Brought up by his great-aunt, "Mama," Rembert spent his childhood as a fieldworker 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 near-lynching, Rembert was thrown in jail for the next seven years of his life.

After transferring through three penitentiaries within the Georgia prison system, Rembert was moved to chain-gang labor in Morgan, Georgia. The conditions the prisoners faced were brutal and unrelenting from the heat of the Georgia summers to the freezing winters. It was hard labor that broke a person down mentally and physically. The inhumane cruelty of the guards humbled the prisoners who were subjected to psychological torture that, to Rembert, was worse than the physical torment.

Rembert learned how to tool and craft leather from a fellow prisoner, a technique he would use to share his harrowing 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's works are remarkably joyous, emerging from the strength of strong family and community bonds, cultural vibrancy, and the many colorful characters who lifted the spirits and those who had little choice but to labor in the region's cotton and peanut fields.

His works depicting the chain gangs, including *The Chain Gang in the Ditch*, are among Rembert's most powerful expressions. His textural tooling of the leather with brilliant and intuitive use of cadenced patterns and intense color conjures both human hardship and a sense of optimism for the future, identified by brave moments of good humor.

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.

In addition to his pictorial narratives in leather, Rembert recalled his life in an autobiography penned by Erin I. Kelly, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*. Published in 2021, Rembert was posthumously awarded the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in Biography.