

Watch Out, NYC: Rembert Has Arrived

By Melissa Bailey | APR 28, 2010 1:35 PM

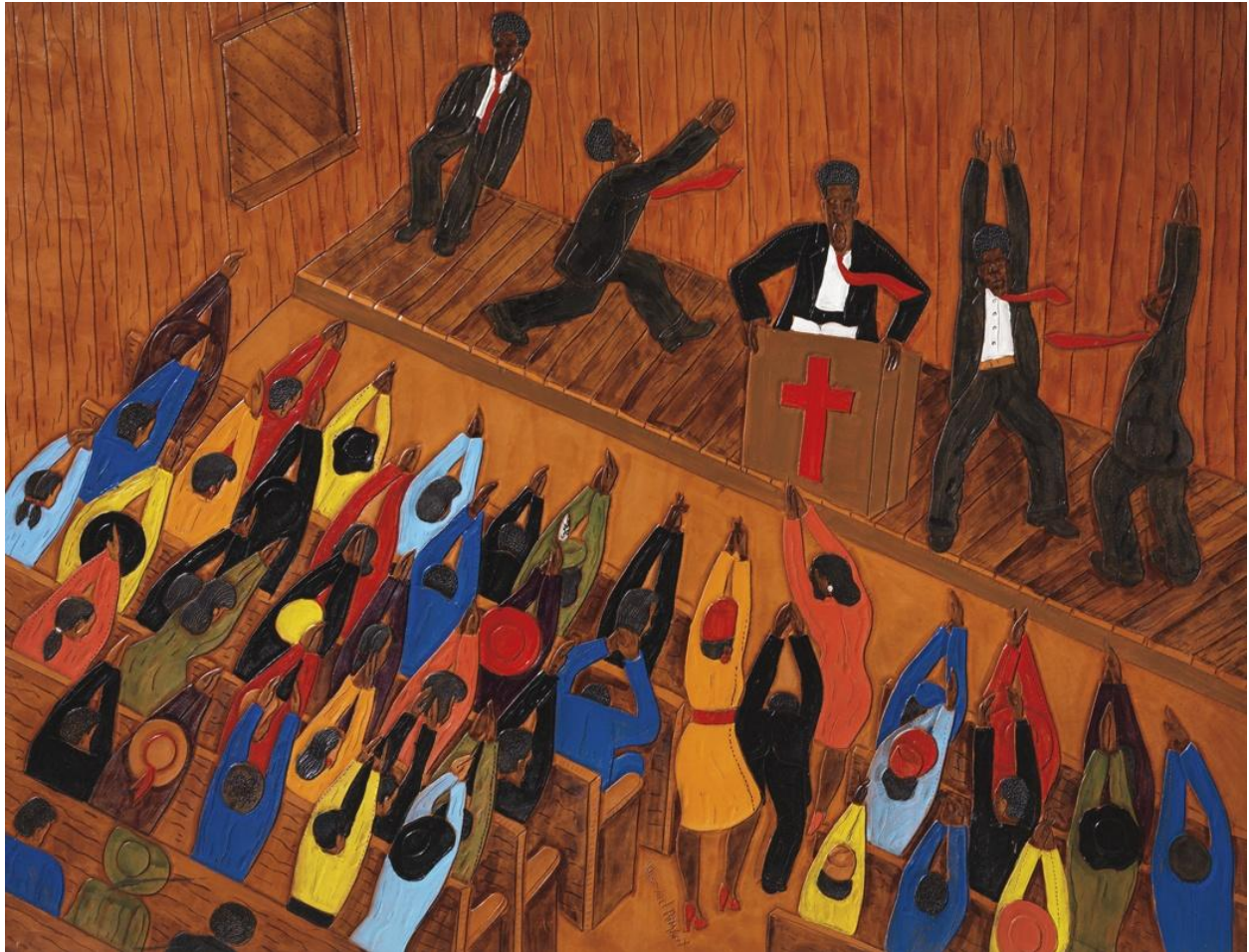


PHOTO COURTESY ADELSON GALLERIES, NEW YORK
Saved and Saintified, 2005

As Winfred Rembert displays his scenes of chain gangs and juke joints in his first major solo exhibition in a New York gallery, the Newhallville leather carver is on the verge of the biggest break of his unsung career.

Rembert, who's 65, spends long hours every day in his Newhallville home carving stories of his rural Southern life into cured leather. Earlier this month, 14 years after he

began working in the art form, he opened his first solo exhibition before a star-studded crowd at New York City's Adelson Galleries. The show, titled *Memories of My Youth*, will hang there through May 28.

"It sure feels good, I tell you," said Rembert, "when you've lived the life like I have."

Rembert grew up in Cuthbert, Georgia. He worked in the cotton fields, got arrested during the civil rights era, survived a near-lynching, and served seven years on a chain gang. A self-taught artist, he learned to tool leather from a fellow prisoner. In 45 leather carvings on display in New York, he tells the story of his life in the segregated, rural South in the '40s and '50s.

In warm Georgian melodies, Rembert recounted some of those stories last week from his workroom on Newhall Street. He shared the method to his artistry, and the dream he hopes he can finally realize if he's successful in New York.



A heavy-set man, he leaned over the work table one recent morning wearing Crocs sandals, a wool cap, and a Obama T-shirt with giant block letters reading "YES." He sat in a simple room with one table, a dozen sheets of leather stacked up in one corner, and a street-side window half-boarded up with wood.

The steady tapping of his mallet emanated outside, over a porch patched with plyboard, down the cement steps to a dirt driveway, where his wife Patsy parks her school bus between shifts in Hamden.

Inside the modest, one-family home, Rembert pounds away at his leather carvings every day, morning to night, often until 2 or 3 a.m., he said.

"I just sit here. No one bothers me," he said. "Everybody be in bed, and I think they've gotten used to the noise."

He was back to work there Friday, a couple weeks after a star-studded opening at the Adelson Galleries, located inside a turn-of-the-century townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The gallery boasts of "fine American paintings," from artists like Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keefe, and Winslow Homer.



PHOTO COURTESY ADELSON GALLERIES, NEW YORK
On Mama's Cotton Sack. 2002

The April 7 opening was an invitation-only, black tie event. Rembert put on a tux and joined an elite crowd of art lovers. During the opening, he looked over and saw someone vaguely familiar. A friend nudged him: "That's Andy Williams." He did a double-take.

"It was Andy Williams, the crooner!" Rembert reported with glee as he recounted the story. He took out a photo to prove it.

The exhibition was put together with help from Peter Tillou, a Litchfield-based art collector who has

promoted Rembert's work and has financially supported him for the last six years. Rembert was featured with Georgia artist Hale Woodruff at a Yale University Art Gallery exhibit in 2000, but his work has remained largely off the radar of New York art circles—until this month.

The pieces in his New York City show are selling for \$12,000 to \$35,000 each, according to the gallery's website. At a recent count, eight had been snatched up.

The stories in his exhibition begin in Rembert's early childhood on the cotton fields. Abandoned at an early age by his parents, he was raised by his aunt, whom he called Mama. One piece shows him lying on Mama's cotton bag while rows of workers pick cotton bolls.

“Curved rows present a beautiful pattern,” he wrote in a text for the gallery. “But as soon as you start picking, you forget how good it looks and think how hard it is.”

In other pieces, he overlays hard labor with musical bars for cotton field favorites. The songs “were connected to living a better life, away from the fields, being free of all the turmoil of life that goes along with being black and living in the South,” he wrote.

When he worked in the cotton fields as a young boy, he had time to go to school only a couple of days a week, he said.

In school, he never learned to read or write.

One teacher assigned him to be the “wood boy,” filling the pot belly stove while other kids learned, he said.



PHOTO COURTESY ADELSON GALLERIES, NEW YORK
The Wood Boy, 2007

“At 10 years old, I didn’t even know my name if people showed it to me,” he said.

At age 13, Rembert “rebelled from the cotton field” and started hanging out in town instead.

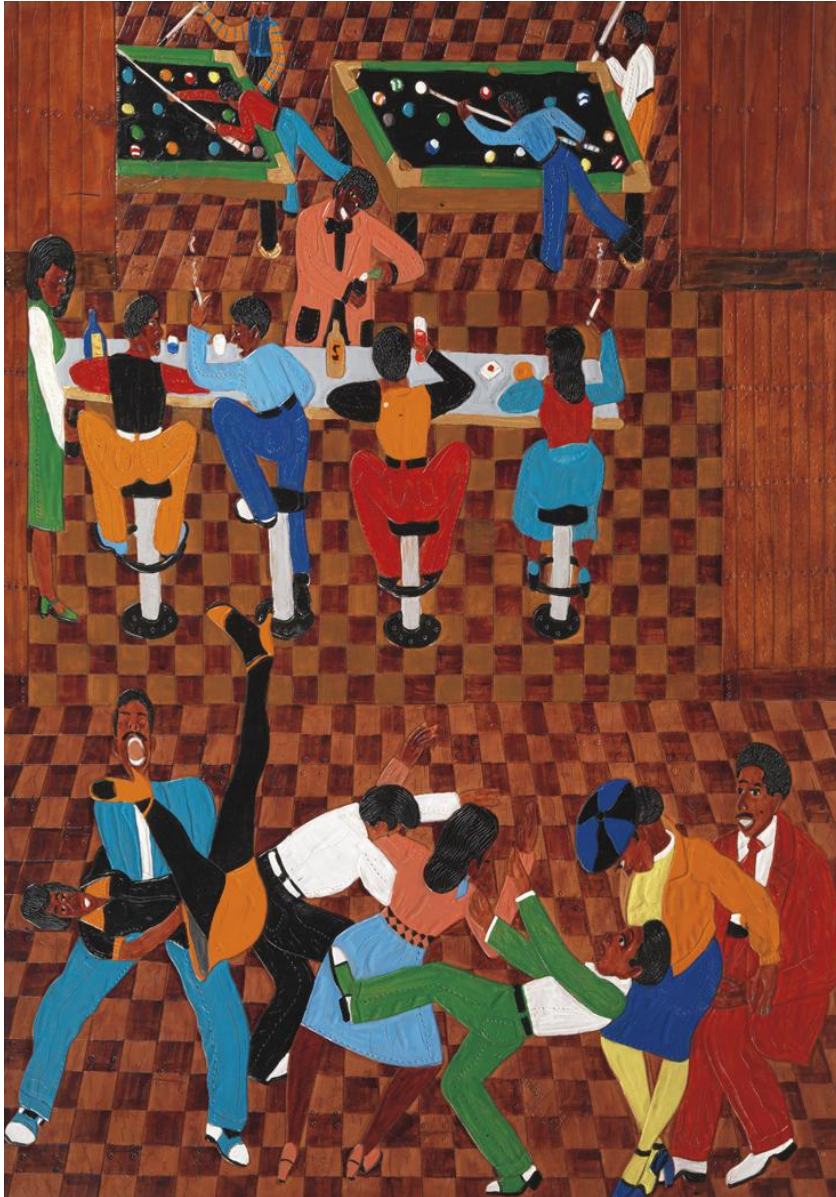


PHOTO COURTESY ADELSON GALLERIES, NEW YORK
Homer Clyde's Place

His most joyous work surrounds the juke joints and pool halls of his hometown. Rembert loved to dance—the slide, the slop, the twist, you name it.

“I would create my own dances,” he wrote. His favorite hangouts were Homer Clyde’s Place (pictured) and Bubba Duke and Feet’s Pool Hall, a teen dance joint run by two gambling brothers, he said.

The vivid images pop out from the leather. Rembert achieves that 3-D look by careful strokes with 100 hand tools. He showed how he wets the cow hide, cuts into it with an ivory-tipped blade, then softens the edges with a series of tools—a bevel, a matting tool, and a “spoon.” He said he used to use a kitchen spoon—“it works

just as well.” When he’s done, he dyes the leather, then covers it in a protective sheen. The whole process takes about a month.

Rembert said he learned the art in prison, where he met a guy named TJ who knew how to make leather wallets.

“I used to watch him, all the time,” he said. “I just took his idea and expanded it.”

Some of his work tells of those seven years behind bars—“the worst of my life.”

His prison time first stemmed from a car theft: Rembert jumped in a car and fled from police after a sit-in got out of hand. After a year in prison, he escaped. He didn't plan on it, but a deputy sheriff beat him after he flooded the cell's toilet. When the man drew his gun, Rembert took the gun and locked the man in his cell, then fled.

Rembert was later caught and sentenced to 27 years for escape from jail, pointing a pistol, robbery of a pistol, and car theft. He worked on the chain gang in heat or cold, picking cotton and digging ditches.



PHOTO COURTESY ADELSON GALLERIES, NEW YORK
Chain Gang (All Me), 2004

“Doing time on the chain gang is nowhere you want to be,” he wrote in the text for a self-portrait (pictured) entitled Chain Gang (All Me). “The chain gang is designed to

mentally break you down ... I realized that I had to be more than just myself to survive, so this picture is all me—what I felt I had to be to survive.”

One good thing did happen on the chain gang: Rembert met his wife. They dated for four years until he got out of prison. He got out early, in June 1974, after serving seven years of his sentence. Soon after, they moved up north and began a family.



He and his wife Patsy (pictured) raised eight kids. He said like a traditional Southern family, they all had three meals a day together. After eating, Dad would tell stories.

One day, Patsy suggested he make the memories more permanent.

“I know! We can put them stories on the leather,” she told him, Winfred Rembert recalled.

“I said, ‘Get out of here, Patsy, no one wants that.’” he replied.

In 1996, he dedicated himself to the art form, and to chronicling all the experiences of his life down South.

Rembert said he his mind is still teeming with memories of people and places he wants to capture in his art.

“I’ll be a dead person before I put all this stuff down,” he said.

Next up, he’s working on a portrait of a juke joint character named Papa Screwball.

“Everybody going to love him!” he declared, his face lighting up. “He was just—aww, Bojangles would be jealous if he saw him dance.”

“Papa was 60,” Rembert recalled. “He was an old guy. But when he hit that floor—he could really dance!”

Also awaiting a portrait is a man named Buck Ross. “That man got shot over 100 times and he lived!”

Both men are dead now, Rembert said. “I’m trying to make them come back from the dead. I’m trying to make them live on.”



PHOTO COURTESY ADELSON GALLERIES, NEW YORK
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms, 2007

Rembert shares his stories around the country in visits to school groups. He said he's never been asked to show his work and life story in New Haven schools, but he would like to. He thinks it might help with some of the violence that young people are perpetrating on his neighborhood. He lives just a few blocks away from the home base for a new gang called R2 that police say has been responsible for a recent wave of shootings.

Rembert said the young kids would benefit by talking to a man who survived a lynching, who could tell them "the nonsense questions they ask you when they put a rope around your neck."

Patsy Rembert agreed.

"If they knew their history, and the price that's been paid for them, there wouldn't be so much killing among the young people now," she said. "If they knew their history and took pride in it, they wouldn't be hurting each other. They don't respect that."

After their landlord fell into foreclosure, the Remberts bought their house on Newhall Street home six years ago. Rembert said the area doesn't feel safe, and he worries for his wife and kids.

"I want to move from here so bad," he said. "That's my ultimate dream now. I would love to get my wife out of here. I would love to make enough money to do what I have to do."

Rembert is hoping the NYC show will help him turn a corner. He said he doesn't know if his dream will come true. "But I do know this: I'm in a great place now."