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Press Release

WRONGED

ISABELLE ARMAND, WINFRED REMBERT, YVONNE WELLS

22 February - 30 March 2024

Galerie Marguo, 4 rue des Minimes, 75003 Paris



Galerie Marguo is pleased to present **WRONGED**, a group exhibition organized with Olivier Renaud-Clément, on view from 22 February to 30 March 2024. Gathering the works of Isabelle Armand, Winfred Rembert, and Yvonne Wells, **WRONGED** reflects on the failings of the American judicial system and the legacy of racial oppression in the carceral and penal practices of today.

Articulated across an array of media comprising carved and tooled leather, hand-stitched quilts, and analog photography, the figurative works in this exhibition testify to individual and collective histories of wrongful incarceration in the American South. Through material and content, they insist on the bodily presence of their subjects, like retroactive writs of *habeas corpus* in the court of cultural memory. *Habeas corpus* (literally, “that you have the body”) is a constitutional right and legal recourse against unlawful and indefinite confinement. It demands that someone imprisoned be brought before a court for fair sentencing, or otherwise set free. It is easy, after all, to forget or ignore that which we can no longer see.

At the age of 51, **Winfred Rembert** began chronicling his harrowing experiences of oppression, persecution, and political struggle in the Jim Crow South. Painted on carved and tooled leather, reclaiming a craft he learned in prison, Rembert’s oeuvre materially evokes the ways that, in the words of PTSD expert Bessel van der Kolk, “the body keeps the score”. *White Gold* (2017), a highly patterned surface with alternating rows of colorfully dressed workers and bold white cotton balls, and *Chain Gang Picking Cotton* (2011), a tightly cropped landscape of winding black and white and green bands, play with the line between visibility and obscurity. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Chasing Me to My Grave*, Rembert wrote, “People...don’t recognize those stripes as people until they take a real good look. That was my goal—to put it down so you couldn’t understand it until you take a real up-close look. That tells you something about

*prison life.*¹ Born in Americus, Georgia in 1945, Rembert's upbringing was shaped by unfathomable hardships. Abandoned by his mother and raised by a great-aunt, he experienced the exploitative and inhumane practices of sharecropping firsthand, working alongside her on cotton plantations. As a young man, after being attacked during a peaceful Civil Rights demonstration in Georgia, he fled in a stolen car, illustrated in *The Getaway* (2015), only to be arrested and thrown into jail. After a year without charges, Rembert managed to escape, but was caught, put inside the trunk of a police car, and narrowly survived a lynching before being sent back to prison and sentenced to hard labor.

Over the course of the 20th century, modern prison life crept away from associations with hard labor, toward the more insidious, though equally brutalizing characterization of "hard time". As the scholar Jackie Wang notes, while temporal punishment may seem more humane, as it does not leave visible wounds, psychic pain and physical pain share the same neural circuitry.

Working across analog photography and film, **Isabelle Armand's** projects seek to make visible the oft-overlooked lives, cultures, geographies of the disenfranchised. The twenty-five monochromatic photographs, exhibited here for the first time, center on Levon Brooks and Kennedy Brewer, two men from Noxubee County, Mississippi, who in the early 90s were wrongfully convicted of murders they did not commit, based on pseudoscientific forensic evidence. The men collectively served more than 33 years of these sentences before the *Innocence Project* successfully took on their cases resulting in their exoneration in 2008. Excerpted from a larger body of around seventy images captured over a span of five years, Armand spent extended periods living alongside and photographing the men and their families against the rural Mississippi landscape to which their history is inextricably tied. Arranged in two indexical groups, Armand's intimate images demonstrate the resilience and optimism of the Brooks and Brewer families as they reclaim the narratives of their lives, while simultaneously confronting the viewer with the knowledge that these images might never have been taken had justice not (belatedly) prevailed. Alternating between intense chiaroscuro and icy greyscales, the photographs appear both timeless and imbued with the lost years of Levon and Kennedy's incarcerations.

There is no real recompense for the corruption of justice and racial persecution, but that the record should be set straight, and upheld for future generations. **Yvonne Wells**, a long-time educator in the Alabama Public School system, is known for her didactic 'story quilts' that uniquely meld geometric abstraction and bold figurations. Replete with biblical iconography, and historical imagery, her works highlight Alabama's fraught racial past and America's ongoing struggle for equality and justice. Quilting, long associated with women's work and the domestic sphere, and the artist's preferred pastel colorways, serve as a compelling foil to the sobering histories of violence enacted against, as well as the triumphs of African Americans in the pursuit for equal rights. In her epic 12-part work *Two Accusers, Nine Accused* (2014), Wells engages the infamous story of the Scottsboro Boys, one of the most notorious miscarriages of justice in American history. In 1931, nine black teenagers travelling near Scottsboro, Alabama were falsely accused of raping two white women. In the first of a long series of trials, an all-white male jury sentenced eight of the nine boys to death. Over the course of many years, numerous re-trials occurred including two Supreme Court cases. One verdict resulted in securing the right to legal counsel for all African Americans. The other set a precedent for future mandatory integration of jury panels throughout the United States. In 2013, the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles issued posthumous pardons to three of the wrongfully accused boys, prompting Wells to create her own artwork the following year. Arranged in a grid formation, a title panel flanked by saccharinely sinister likenesses of the two female accusers sit above nine, hagiographic portraits of the young men, their names and ages scrawled carefully across their necks. Above each of their heads, three birds fly in a line to signify the Christian holy trinity, symbolizing the artist's faith and eternal sanctity of human life.

On 18 March 2024, a conference expanding on the themes of *WRONGED* will take place at Sciences Po. The participants, including Dominique Simonnot, a former journalist and French Controller General of Places of Deprivation of Liberty, Vanessa Potkin, Director of Special Litigation of the *Innocence Project* and Jeremy Perelman, professor at the Sciences Po Law School in Paris, whose research and teaching

¹ Winfred Rembert, *Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist's Memoir of the Jim Crow South*, as told to Erin I. Kelly. Bloomsbury, 2022, p.152.

focus mainly on Human Rights, will discuss the exhibition and its ongoing implications in the contemporary landscape of criminal justice reform in France and the United States.

About the artists

Isabelle Armand is a documentary photographer and filmmaker established in NYC after relocating from her native Paris in the 80s. A long-time reporter whose work evolved from fashion to art magazines to documentary, Armand is the author of *Levon and Kennedy: Mississippi Innocence Project* (PowerHouse Books, 2018). Armand is currently completing a new book and documentary film in the same state. *Glendora* depicts the life of a low-wealth black village isolated in the Delta, where villagers stand firm in the face of adversity. Armand's thoughtful works can be found in international private collections and American museums.

Winfred Rembert's (b.1945, Georgia, US - d.2021, Connecticut, US) work is represented in the permanent collections of Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Flint Institute of the Arts, Flint, MI; Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, CT; Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA; Glenstone, Potomac, MD; Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY; Legacy Museum, Equal Justice Initiative, Montgomery, AL; Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, Los Angeles, CA; Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; Muskegon Museum of Art, Youngstown, OH; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Richard M. Ross Museum of Art, Wesleyan University, Delaware, OH; Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. Rembert's work was highlighted in a traveling solo museum exhibition at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL in 2013; the Flint Institute of the Arts, Flint, MI in 2013; the Citadelle Art Foundation, Canadian, TX in 2012; the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY in 2012; the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC in 2012. His work was exhibited at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT in 2000.

Yvonne Wells was born in 1939 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where she continues to live and work. Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions at Carnegie Visual Arts Center, Decatur, AL; the International Quilt Museum, Lincoln, NE; and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL. Her work has been featured in group exhibitions at Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; Carnegie Visual Arts Center, Decatur, AL; FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY; Gadsden Museum of Art, Gadsden, AL; International Quilt Museum, Lincoln, NE; Louisville Visual Art Association, Louisville, KY; Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL; and the Wiregrass Museum of Art, Dothan, AL. Wells has also exhibited her art internationally in Venice, France, Pietrasanta, Italy, and Tokyo, Japan. Her work is included in the permanent collections of Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts, Little Rock, AR; Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL; Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI; Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, MI; International Quilt Museum, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE; Kentuck Art Center, Northport, AL; Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, AL; Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Montgomery, AL; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C.; The Bunker, West Palm Beach, FL; Wiregrass Museum of Art, Dothan, AL; and Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN. Wells is the recipient of the 2019 Governor's Arts Award from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the 1998 Alabama Arts and Visual Craftsmen Award. In 2023, Fort Gansevoort presented Wells' first New York solo exhibition: *Play The Hand That's Dealt You*. The forthcoming monograph *The Story Quilts of Yvonne Wells* will be published by University of Alabama Press in September 2024.

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#Wronged #IsabelleArmand
#WinfredRembert #YvonneWells
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Winfred Rembert
White Gold, 2017
Acrylic paint on carved and tooled leather
67.8 x 86.4 cm (26 2/3 x 34 in)
Framed: 81.8 x 100.2 x 4.4 cm (32 1/4 x 39 1/2 x 1 3/4 in)