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Amy Sherald (American, born Columbus, Georgia, 1973), *A Midsummer Afternoon Dream*, 2021, oil on canvas, private collection. © Amy Sherald.
Photo by Joseph Hyde, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Amy Sherald: American Sublime

A Self-Guide for Exploring the Exhibition



Amy Sherald (American, born Columbus, Georgia, 1973),
Saint Woman, 2015, oil on canvas, private collection,
courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery and Hauser & Wirth.
© Amy Sherald. Photo by Joseph Hyde, courtesy of the
artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Amy Sherald: American Sublime

A Self-Guide for Exploring the Exhibition

You are about to enter a world created by Amy Sherald, whose paintings ask us to look closely at people and at the stories we tell about them.

Sherald was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1973. She studied painting at Clark Atlanta University and Spelman College, where she encountered the work of Black artists and thinkers who expanded her understanding of American art.

Sherald is best known for portraits of Black Americans. She not only records what someone looks like but also carefully considers their clothing, pose, expression, and surroundings. Many of her paintings begin with a photograph. From there, Sherald creates something that is partly portrait, partly invention: a world that belongs to the person in the painting.

As you move through the exhibition, keep asking:

Who gets to be seen?

How do we decide what someone is like?

What can clothing, posture, color, or facial expression tell us?

What might remain unknowable?

A Few Ways to Look

Choose a painting that catches your attention. Stay with it longer than you normally would.

LOOK: What do you notice before you know anything about the painting?

LOOK AGAIN: What changes when you pay attention to the details?

WONDER: What question does the painting leave you with?

Listen + Watch

Look for QR codes throughout the exhibition. Scan them to hear about Sherald's work in her own words.

On the Skyway Level, look for the Art21 video *Everyday Icons*. It offers another view into Sherald's practice and process.

The Rabbit in the Hat (detail), 2009, oil on canvas, Green Family Art Foundation, courtesy of Adam Green Art Advisory. © Amy Sherald. Photo by Christina Hussey, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



Portraiture and Process

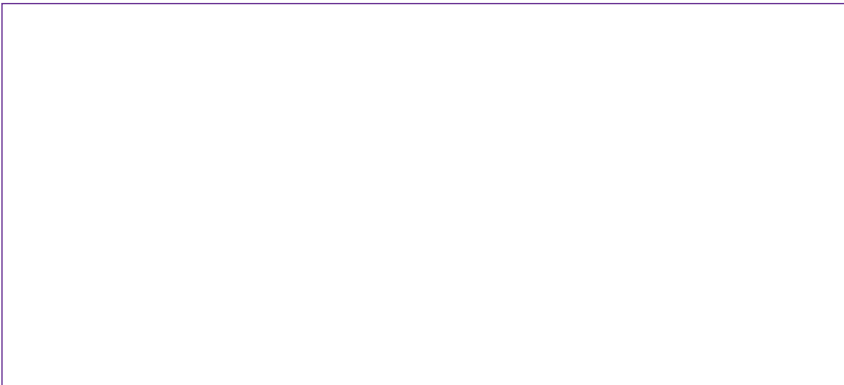


Ecclesia (The Meeting of Inheritance and Horizons), 2024, oil on linen, Jennifer Gilbert Collection. © Amy Sherald.
Photo by Kelvin Bulluck, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Amy Sherald's process begins with photography. She carefully considers the clothing, pose, and props of the person she is painting. She photographs them, then uses the photograph as a study for the painting.

Sherald has described her interest in family photographs and albums, which she studied as a child to learn about relatives she had never met.

Find *Ecclesia (The Meeting of Inheritance and Horizons)* on the Second Level. Look at the top of each tower and sketch the three weathervanes. What animals did Sherald choose to be on top of the towers? Why do you think she chose these animals? In what ways do they reflect, or not reflect, the people underneath?



The title gives us another clue.

“**Ecclesia**” is a word connected to an assembly or gathering—a place where people come together.

Sherald has said the figures are looking toward the future, but she does not provide the answer about what they see.

Look from one figure to another. Do they seem connected or alone? Based on their facial expressions, imagine what they are looking at. What might it mean to look toward a horizon that someone else cannot see?

Making the Ordinary Feel Extraordinary

Find the gallery dedicated to Amy Sherald's earlier works, such as the 2009 painting titled *The Rabbit in the Hat* seen on the opposite page. Sherald explores painting people's skin tones in shades of gray instead of naturalistic skin colors. She wants to move the viewer's attention away from categorizing a person by race and toward the complexity of the individual.

What impact does this have on how you view the portraits?

Interior and Exterior

Write a few words
you'd like to hear
about yourself.



Listen, you a wonder. You a city of a woman. You got a geography of your own (detail), 2016, oil on canvas, collection of Rashid Johnson and Sheree Hovsepian. © Amy Sherald. Photo by Joseph Hyde, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Find the painting *Listen, you a wonder*, in the next gallery. The title comes from Lucille Clifton's poem "what the mirror said." Consider the title of the artwork with the title of the poem. Who is the speaker in this poem? **If a mirror could speak to you, what words would you want it to say?**

In the next gallery, look for the portrait of Michelle Obama. What can we learn about her by studying her pose, her facial expression, the patterns in her dress, the background?

Sherald was invited to create the official portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama in 2017. Rather than creating a traditional formal portrait, Sherald

wanted to show something more complicated: Obama as both a public figure and a person with an interior life.



Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama (detail), 2018, oil on linen, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. © Amy Sherald. Photo by Joseph Hyde, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

What can a painting communicate that a photograph might not?

Write a few words or phrases that describe what the artwork is telling us about Michelle Obama.

Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance) (detail), 2014, oil on canvas, private collection. © Amy Sherald. Photo by Jon Etter, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



Next to the Obama portrait is *Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)*. With a nod to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), this painting incorporates the oversized teacup and dress aesthetic to symbolize stepping outside a conventional narrative.

Sherald gained national attention when this painting won the 2016 Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. She was the first woman and the first African American person to win the competition.

Consider the words "**unsuppressed**" and "**deliverance**" in the title. What do you think they mean in relation to this painting? What artistic choices (color, clothing, subject's body position) by Sherald show unsuppressed deliverance?

Painting America

Who gets to define what “American” looks like?

Take the elevator or stairs to the Skyway Level. Amy Sherald often borrows familiar images from American culture: sailors, cowboys, farmers, beauty queens, picket fences, fashion, leisure, work. Then she changes who we see inside those images. Her paintings ask us to reconsider the stories that have traditionally been told about America—and who has been left out of them.

Choose two portraits that you feel reflect this idea.

First portrait title: _____ Second portrait title: _____



She had an inside and an outside now, and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (detail), 2018, oil on canvas, Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection, Kansas City, Missouri. © Amy Sherald. Photo by Joseph Hyde, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

In the last gallery, find *She had an inside and an outside now, and suddenly she knew how not to mix them*. Sherald often explores the relationship between a person’s inner life and the self they present to the world. Clothing, posture, and body language can become ways of expressing identity.

The painting’s title comes from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a novel that explores the difference between private thoughts and public appearances.

What is the figure wearing?
What details stand out?

1. List two words that describe the clothing or accessories.
2. List two words that describe the person’s facial expression or body language.

Look Closely

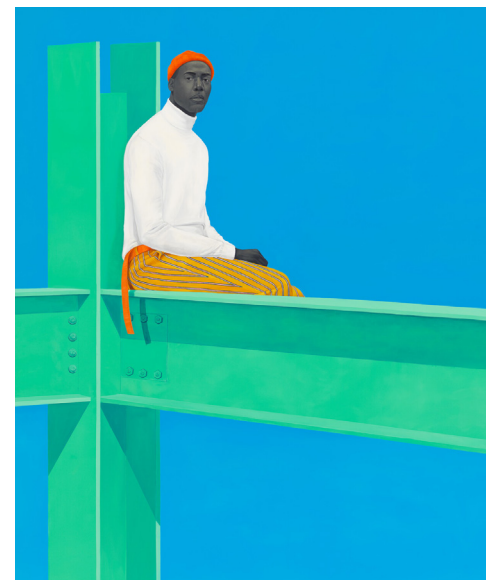
Compare your two lists. Which details seem connected to the figure’s outward appearance? Which suggest something about their inner life?

Now look for the painting *If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it*.

The setting in this painting refers to a famous photograph of workers sitting on a steel beam above New York City (look for the image in the wall label). The title of the painting comes from Toni Morrison’s 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* and suggests the possibility of letting go of fear in order to fly.

Why would Sherald put this person in a famous setting? What does the figure seem to be feeling: fear, freedom, confidence, or something else?

If You Surrendered to the Air, You Could Ride It (detail), 2019, oil on linen, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee, Sascha S. Bauer, Jack Cayre, Nancy Carrington Crown, Nancy Poses, Laura Rapp, and Elizabeth Redleaf. © Amy Sherald. Photo by Joseph Hyde, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



Amy Sherald (detail). Photo by Olivia Lifungula, courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.



Before You Leave

You've spent time looking at paintings by an artist who asks us to reconsider what a portrait can do. Before you leave, choose one painting in the exhibition that has stayed with you. What made you notice it? What questions are you leaving with?

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Keep Looking: The High's Collection



Papay Solomon (Liberian, born Guéckédou, Guinea, 1993), *Heavy (Weight), Portrait of Benjamin Gasinga Gaspard-Rwanda*, 2019, oil on Belgian linen, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, gift of Vicki and John Palmer in honor of Michael Rooks, 2021.184. © Papay Solomon.



Caleb Hahne Quintana (American, born Denver, Colorado, 1993), *Moments Where We Meet* (detail), 2021, oil, acrylic, flashe, and wax on canvas, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, gift of John Auerbach in memory of Dr. Jay M. Auerbach, 2024.207.

Your visit does not have to end when you leave *American Sublime*. As you exit the exhibition, you will be in galleries filled with contemporary art and design. Look for two portraits: Papay Solomon's *Heavy (Weight), Portrait of Benjamin Gasinga Gaspard-Rwanda* (2019) and Caleb Hahne Quintana's *Moments Where We Meet* (2021).

Spend a moment studying the figures' faces, clothing, colors, and scale. How do these portraits compare to Amy Sherald's work? What does each artist want you to notice first? What does each portrait reveal? What do they leave unknown?

One More Look

Amy Sherald's paintings invite us to look closely and think about the stories we tell about other people. As you continue through the museum, find another portrait that captures your attention.

Who is being seen in this artwork? What clues does the artist give you about that person, and what remains unknowable?