

# After a Late Start, an Artist's Big Break: Michelle Obama's Official Portrait

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Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

By Robin Pogrebin (<http://www.nytimes.com/by/robin-pogrebin>) Oct. 23, 2017

BALTIMORE — "I'm just going to pretend it's not a big deal," said the artist Amy Sherald, speaking in her spare studio in the neighborhood known as Station North. "I paint paintings of people. And I'm painting a painting of another person."

But it is a big deal, since the person Ms. Sherald happens to be painting is Michelle Obama. Earlier this month, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery announced (<http://newsdesk.si.edu/releases/national-portrait-gallery-announces-artists-commissioned-paint-portraits-barack-and-michell>) that it had commissioned Ms. Sherald, 44, for the official portrait of the former first lady, and tapped Kehinde Wiley, 40, for the likeness of former President Barack Obama — the first (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/obamas-choose-rising-stars-to-paint-their-official-portraits-1507905689>) time black artists have been selected to paint a presidential couple for the Gallery.

Mr. Wiley already has international renown — a painting of his sold for \$143,000 at auction and his work is in major institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"A clear unspoken granted magic," 2017,  
by Amy Sherald. Courtesy of the Artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

After a late start, Ms. Sherald is just taking off. The Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/>) has acquired one of her pieces, as has the Nasher Museum of Art (<http://nasher.duke.edu/>) at Duke University in Durham, N.C. Her work is currently featured in the Studio Museum in Harlem's influential "Fictions" exhibition (<https://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/fictions>) of emerging artists. And in May, she will open her first major solo show, at the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis (<http://camstl.org/exhibitions/front-room/amy-sherald/>).

The Obama commission is likely to catapult her into another league. "There is going to be a spotlight on her," said Paul Staiti, a professor at Mount Holyoke College who is an expert on portraiture. "She should fasten her seatbelt."

A tall, athletic woman in white-framed glasses who lives with her Pekingese-Jack Russell terrier, named August Wilson, Ms. Sherald said she is not allowed to speak about the commission until it is unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery early next year. Nor would Mrs. Obama comment.

Kim Sajet, the Portrait Gallery's director, would only divulge that Mrs. Obama and Ms. Sherald have already met about the portrait, that the paintings typically involve multiple sittings and that this year's subjects chose the artists from about 20 portfolios submitted by the curators. The first lady has to personally approve the finished work, as does the Portrait Gallery's advisory board.



“What’s precious inside of him does not care to be known by the mind in ways that diminish its presence (All American),” 2017, by Amy Sherald.  
Top and above, courtesy of the Artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

The Smithsonian plans to pay for both works with \$500,000 in private donations of which \$300,000 has been raised so far. This amount covers everything including each artist’s fees, which Ms. Sajat would not specify. Ms. Sherald’s

paintings typically sell for \$15,000 to \$25,000.

There is no prescribed format for an official portrait, Ms. Sajet said, except that it be a painting — not a work on paper — and that the artists “be respectful of both the person and the position they hold.”

Official portraits have ranged from “highly formal to much more relaxed,” Ms. Sajet added, citing as examples Ron Sherr’s ([http://npg.si.edu/object/npg\\_NPG.95.120](http://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.95.120)) 1994 portrait of George H. W. Bush standing in a suit and tie at the White House and Robert Anderson’s 2008 likeness of George W. Bush in an open-collared shirt on a couch at Camp David.

The selection of Ms. Sherald, who typically depicts African-Americans doing everyday things — two women in bathing suits, a man holding a child — has historical significance. “It’s as if she’s saying, ‘Let’s be clear: the President and I are African Americans and proudly so,’” Mr. Staiti said, “and these portraits are going to have an African-American vibe — they’re going to break out of that rather staid tradition. I think it’s important and I think it’s political,” he added, referring to Mrs. Obama’s choice.



“All things bright and beautiful,” 2016, by Amy Sherald.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

While Ms. Sherald could not discuss her interactions with Mrs. Obama, the way she generally works offers clear insights into her likely process with the former first lady. She invites her subjects to her studio here, where she photographs

them in an outfit she has selected for them. Or, she said, she may go to their homes to “shop from their closets” and photograph them there.

Ms. Sherald always shoots her subjects outdoors with natural light. “I like the way it highlights the textures of the skin,” she said.

The commission represents something of a departure for Ms. Sherald; she usually chooses subjects who arrest her attention on the street, in an airport. She literally approaches strangers.

“I would wonder how she’d feel about this leading to commissions of other prominent people,” Mr. Staiti said. “She’s interested in the exact opposite; she’s interested in ordinariness.”

Ms. Sherald said how much the selection means to her, how Mrs. Obama loomed large in her life, though they had not previously met. “We’ve been on a first-name basis for eight years,” she said jokingly. “Seeing her made my world better.”

“She’s an archetype that a lot of women can relate to — no matter shape, size, race or color,” Ms. Sherald added. “We see our best selves in her.”

Ms. Sherald has yet to start the Obama portrait, though it is due to be finished by year’s end. “I’m not going home for the holidays,” she said with a laugh.

Yet sitting among her paint tubes — their colors smeared on paper plates — with three canvases-in-progress leaning against the walls, Ms. Sherald seemed remarkably calm in the face of such a daunting deadline, perhaps because she has confronted far tougher challenges.





A view of Ms. Sherald's studio in Baltimore. Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Ms. Sherald is a survivor of congestive heart failure, diagnosed at age 30 just as she was earning her master's degree at the Maryland Institute College of Art and was training for a triathlon. She received a transplant at 39.

She interrupted her career again, taking a four-year break to care for two ailing relatives back in her hometown Columbus, Ga. She lost her father, a dentist, to Parkinson's in 2000; her brother to lung cancer in 2012.

But she does not think of herself as unlucky. In fact, she said she is keenly aware of those less fortunate around her — like children in her own community who are aging out of foster care. (One block from her studio, she said she “can see 10 addicts at any given time.”) Ms. Sherald, who has taught art in the Baltimore City Detention Center, hopes to give back financially as soon as she pays off her school loans and can more easily afford her extensive medication: 13 different pills a day.

“When I look at those people,” she said, “I see myself.”

Ms. Sherald isn't very far from the days when she waited tables and worked in a

studio without heat or air-conditioning.





Ms. Sherald paints only African-Americans. Her subjects “exist in a place of the past, the present and the future,” she said. “It’s like something I sense with my spirit more than my mind.” Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Her parents wanted her to go to medical school, but Ms. Sherald knew that she was an artist. “I don’t feel like I chose to do it,” she said. “I don’t know what else I’m good at.”

She began with bald self-portraits — she shaved her own head for a time — and then moved into more fantastical work that explored the idea of circus, and fantasy.

Ms. Sherald’s cultural influences range from the science fiction writer Octavia Butler (<http://octaviabutler.org/>) to the Surrealist painter Salvador Dalí and Tim Burton’s quirky movie, “Big Fish.” Names that come up in conversation include the poet David Whyte, the public radio host Krista Tippett (<https://onbeing.org/about/>) — and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Over the years, Ms. Sherald’s figurative painting has evolved into a stylized realism — a gray skin palette punctuated by colorful pieces of clothing on a flat plane. She makes only about 13 paintings a year. “It’s hard for me to find people to paint,” she said. “There has got to be something about them that only I can see.”



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Ms. Sherald only paints African-Americans. Having studied European art history, she is keenly aware of the scarcity of black faces. “There’s not enough images of us,” she said.

Last year she had her first solo show at Monique Meloche (<http://moniquemeloche.com/>)’s Chicago gallery and became the first woman to win the Portrait Gallery’s Outwin Boochever competition. Now there are waiting lists for her work.

“Everybody responds to her paintings,” Ms. Meloche said. “There is something that’s so alive in these characters; they’re very calm — but they’re still very confrontational.”

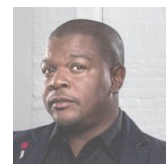
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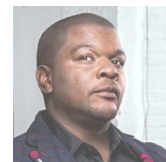
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