

A Conversation with 2019 NAEA National Convention Keynote Speaker Amy Sherald



Photo Credit: Justin T. Gellerson.



Throng of people have seen Amy Sherald's portrait of former first lady Michelle Obama—the now iconic work in the National Portrait Gallery.

Few people, however, know much about Sherald herself—about her years of study and introspection, her struggle with health. Few know of her other works, also full of elegance and intensity, steeped in a deep examination of culture and race.

Raised in Columbus, Georgia, Sherald is based in Baltimore, where she received her MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2004. Earlier, she studied at Clark Atlanta University, earning a BA in painting and was a Spelman College artist-in-residence in Panama. In 2016, Sherald was the first woman to win the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition grand prize and has several works hanging in art institutions countrywide.

Sherald, a keynote speaker at the 2019 NAEA National Convention, spoke with NAEA's Janice Hughes about her art, the educators who helped her, and how she approaches her work.

Above: Former U.S. first lady Michelle Obama (L) and artist Amy Sherald (R) unveil Obama's portrait during a ceremony at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, on February 12, 2018. Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images.

Amy, you've said in the past that when you were a child, "Art class was my safe haven."

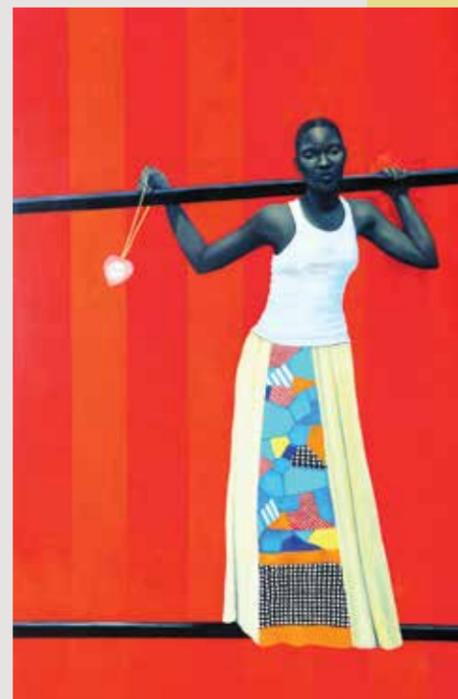
School was a bit traumatizing because I was so shy and self-conscious. On my first day of kindergarten, when my mom dropped me off, I was thinking, "Why did you do this to me?" I didn't know anyone, and I started later than the rest of the kids. Then, in the 1st grade, I remember that my 1st-grade teacher, Miss Millet, would allow us to stay inside or go outside for recess, and I would always choose to stay inside as then I could, as an introvert, have the classroom to myself and sit there and draw. It was empowering to be able to do that, at that age, and be able to go inside of myself and be who I was.

Was there a moment when you realized you wanted to study art?

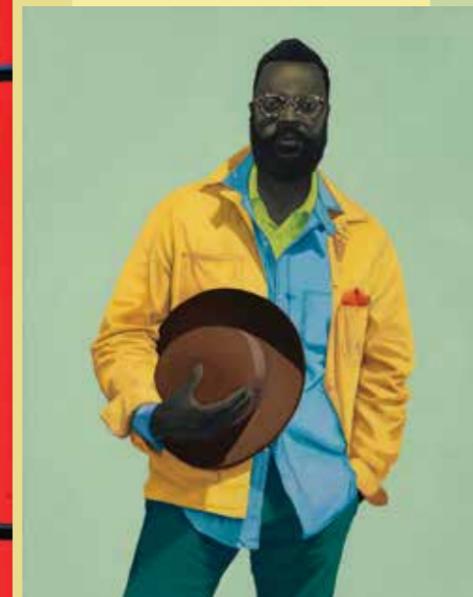
I was always very interested in drawing. I don't even think I knew in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades that there were artists, that people did that kind of stuff. What was so shocking when I first went to a museum, was to find out that art wasn't something in a book, in an encyclopedia, that people did [art] a long time ago, that it was real life. And then, when I saw an image of a person of color, it all came together in that moment—that this was something real, that somebody created this who was alive at the same time that I was alive.

Let's talk about your artmaking. What inspires your ideas?

It started with the journey of my moving back home and being able to reassess who I was and my identity within the context of the place where I grew up—which is very different once you've gone off and had an academic education and an education in the world through travelling. Bringing those ideas and experiences back home and being able to decode how you ended up being the way that you were.



Equilibrium, 2012. Oil on canvas, 100 x 67 inches.



Pythagore, 2016. Oil on canvas, 54 x 43 inches.



fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like, 2015. Oil on canvas, 54 x 43 inches.

So I looked at what it meant for me to grow up in Columbus, Georgia, being born in 1973 shortly after the civil rights movement, and the kind of residual effects of racism that still existed and how I absorbed those things. How I assimilated some of those ways of looking at myself in the world and repressed who I was, in a sense, to make other people feel comfortable. And, in my schooling experiences, not really knowing I was doing that and, realizing for me, that my identity had become a kind of performance, based on who I was around and what they needed to see.

I looked at how, even as a daughter of a Black dentist, what it meant in a city like Columbus, and how we were supposed to act. The etiquette classes and all of that—what it meant to perform that role, of being the educated Black girl and what my parents projected on me, from their experiences of growing up and "keeping up with the Joneses," and what it meant for them.

It's so complicated to think outside of your tribe that many people choose not to. It took me about a year after grad school to really start to discover texts—like W. E. B. Du Bois and others—and to try to marry that with my contemporary experience.

A lot of the stories I had been told were part of a dominant narrative and there was no escape from that unless I created my own narrative. There's not just one narrative—the escape from slavery, fight for freedom, fight for rights, and struggle. But there are a lot of spaces and experiences. Creating mirrors and resting places, from all of the media exposure to violence on young Black boys and Black girls and men and women, and needing an escape from that for myself, but also recognizing the power of imagery and how we experience ourselves one way and how we experience ourselves in the media, understanding the control that I have when it comes to representation of Blackness—not only for people who are Black but for people who aren't Black—to come to a resting space and look at a face that looks like theirs and that is looking back at them and giving them love.

Can you talk about the role of photography in your work—of being inspired by black-and-white portraits of the 19th and 20th centuries? You shoot photos of people in your studio, before you paint.

It's how I always worked, even when I was in college. The one piece that I think really speaks to the rest of the work is *Well Prepared and Maladjusted*. That's the one that I think really brought it all together for me. Prior to that, it was *Equilibrium* (above). It was that painting where I made the commitment to the grayscale tone. When I finally came across the black-and-white photography, I realized that I was setting these people up and recreating that same kind of quietness and dignity that I saw in these photographs that Black families were having taken of them. I just recognized my work inside of these photographs and started to go further.

Educators always look for a way to motivate students and inspire their innate creativity. Who motivated you?

My first art teacher, Geri Davis, who was my art teacher from kindergarten to 12th grade, in the same large school. In high school, I was doing landscapes and puppies, regular stuff, but my teacher really encouraged me to explore who I was through the work. To make imagery of myself—who I was, what my life was, and what my history was. And to think about my own identity and not the idealized version of somebody else's.

A lot of the stories I had been told were part of a dominant narrative and there was no escape from that unless I created my own narrative.

My art teacher brought me into my own work, and encouraged me to do that, and helped me understand my own relevance. As much as I was enchanted by art history, I was disconnected from it. It wasn't about me. So find ways to connect a child's mind to what you are teaching them, which is by making it relevant to their own experiences.

NAEA is taking a deep look to better understand issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion across our community and the field of art education. Can you talk about any experiences or challenges you've had to face?

I have been really fortunate where, as far as being a woman, I don't feel I've ever had any setbacks. I've always been Black first and my gender never came to the conversation. I don't know anybody, who is Black, Hispanic, or other, who has gone to any grad school from MICA [Maryland Institute College of Art] to Columbia University over the past 20 years who didn't have an issue with making the work that they made and trying to find somebody in the school who could talk with them about it, because it was their own experience. I know that a director of one program left it up to two young students to call in people who could relate to their work to talk with them. I think that is crazy. That shouldn't be the students' job, that should be the school's job.

You've been so resilient in pursuing your art—including having to deal with an extremely serious heart condition. Did anything in particular help you along the way?

The kick-starter was when one person told me in college—when I was a premed major—"If you don't use this talent, you'll lose it." That kind of freaked me out. At that point, I still did not know what it meant to be an artist, per se. And once I changed my major, I met Arturo Lindsay [professor emeritus and former chair of the Department of Art and Art History at Spelman College in Georgia], and I had to go see a show of his at the Nexus Contemporary Art Center in Atlanta. And I thought, "Holy shit, this is what real artists do."

I've always had an internal drive. I have no idea where it came from, and it has never let me quit. In addition, I had



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(Above) *Innocent You, Innocent Me*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 54 x 43 inches.

(Below) Detail from *Mother and Child*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 54 x 43 inches.

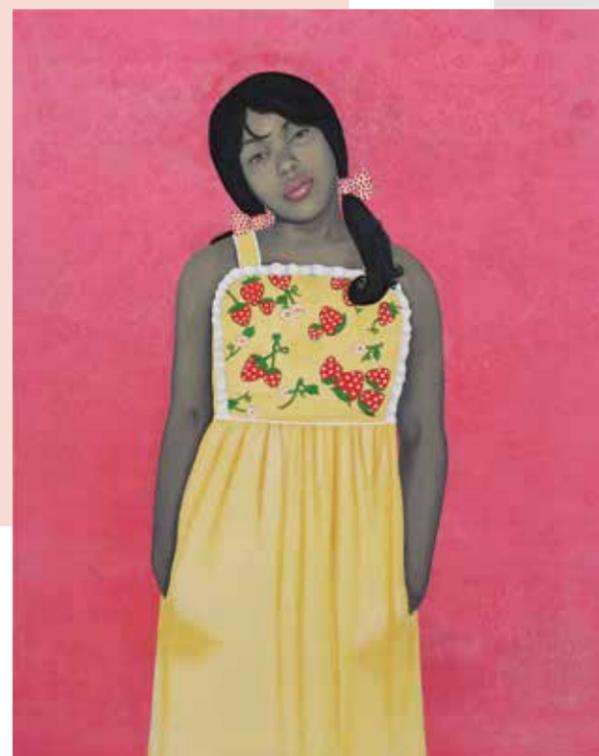
the perfect amount of pressure coming from the opposite direction: I had a mother who did not want me to do it. I said, "You think that I can't do it? I am going to show you that I can." Beyond that, it was just making sure I had people around me who understood what I was doing, who didn't devalue my worth because I was 36 years old and still a waitress, who still believed in me on the days I said I just wanted to quit.

Several of your works hang in museums and you sit on the Board of Trustees of the Baltimore Museum of Art. How can we support museums in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion?

Sometimes I feel a little bit frustrated. A museum may want to do it [equity, diversity, and inclusion], but they want to do it in a nice and clean, kind of tidy way. I just think the way to connect to the community and schools is to connect with the educators—beginning with the art teachers who teach in these communities instead of calling someone to be on the Board to be the voice for people who are two miles away.

I think that's the frustrating part.... It seems like fear-based behavior of wanting to call in, but not wanting to go too deep, because there is a fear of what may come with it. It's like moving into neighborhoods where there are impoverished people, having "the conversation" to be politically correct about what's going on in the community around it, but then putting locks on all the doors.

We have been denying space to Black artists for a long time...



You want to be part of the community, but technically you don't want the community to have access to your organization that's in their neighborhood. Do you know what I mean?

For me, I think that a great way to go about it is this: Let's partner with the educators and see how we can work their curriculum into the exhibitions that we are having at the museum. Then it becomes a natural relationship.

Has there been a question that has been the most challenging for you—as you travel and speak publicly more often?

A lot of people ask to talk to me about the challenges [of being a woman]. We've all had our challenges, but I don't know how to speak to that experience because I have never been challenged as a woman. But I know I *have* been as a Black artist... I know where I "fit in." We know where "we belong..." We know there are six galleries that represent Black artists, for example.

Black artists were often overlooked until maybe over the past ten years. We're experiencing a kind of renaissance now. Everyone is trying to jump on the bandwagon and trying to diversify their museums. Why? It's about correcting something that has been an historical problem because Black artists weren't even being shown in the museums until the 1940s. The first museum show a Black artist was given was in the 1940s. Before that, a show was in the basement of a YMCA or similar places.



(Left) *They Call Me Redbone, But I'd Rather Be Strawberry Shortcake*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 54 x 43 inches. Collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

(Right) *Try on Dreams Until I Find the One That Fits Me. They All Fit Me*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 54 x 43 inches.

All images of art courtesy of artist and Hauser & Wirth Gallery. Photo Credit: Joseph Hyde.

It shouldn't be because it's on trend, it should be because we have been denying space to Black artists for a long time because the work was seen as "primitive" or whatever other vocabulary was used to describe the kind of work that was being made. Because there was not really access to some kinds of materials, the genius came through collage and other kinds of artmaking, versus oil painting. It's a privilege for me to be an oil painter. There are artists like Henry Tanner and others who worked in oil, but very few.

Any moments of surprise for you?

One surprise for me was, for example, last year when I had a successful year, had been selling work, had a waiting list, but was poor. At that time, I didn't know how I was going to make my next rent payment, and all of a sudden, out of the blue, an anonymous person offered to pay my rent for three months. I still don't know who it was.

Let's talk about *Try on Dreams Until I Find the One That Fits Me. They All Fit Me* (above). We're sending a poster of it to every NAEA member—for classrooms nationwide—to start conversations.

I think the title says it all. It's about figuring out who you are and not letting the world dictate what it is that your dreams can be and what you think you can accomplish. Jeffery, the model, was a young boy who I met in a sandwich shop. He was just a really sweet cutie pie. I saw his face and fell in love with him. He's gay, and so it also was about just making sure that everybody is represented in the narrative—and they are able to find ways of seeing themselves until they figure out who they are. ■