

**SFMOMA PRESENTS WORLD PREMIERE OF
*AMY SHERALD: AMERICAN SUBLIME***

Sherald’s First Major Survey Exhibition Travels to the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery Following Its San Francisco Debut



November 16, 2024–March 9, 2025

Press Preview: November 13, 2024

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (September 16, 2024, updated September 18, 2024)—The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present *Amy Sherald: American Sublime*, the global debut of the artist’s first mid-career survey, from November 16, 2024 to March 9, 2025. The largest and most comprehensive presentation of Sherald’s work to date, *American Sublime* will bring together nearly 50 paintings made from 2007 to the present—from her poetic early portraits to the incisive, moving figure paintings for which she is best known. Iconic portraits of Michelle Obama and Breonna Taylor—arguably the most recognizable and impactful paintings made in the U.S. in the last 50 years—will be joined by early works never or rarely seen by the public. Also included will be new works created specifically for the exhibition, such as the artist’s first triptych, *Ecclesia (The Meeting of Inheritance and Horizons)*, on view for the first time. Another highlight of the exhibition will be *For Love, and for Country* (2022), a landmark painting recently acquired by SFMOMA for its permanent collection.

Organized by SFMOMA and curated by Sarah Roberts, SFMOMA’s former Andrew W. Mellon Curator and Head of Painting and Sculpture, *Amy Sherald: American Sublime* will premiere in San Francisco before traveling to the Whitney Museum of American Art from April 9 to August 3, 2025, and the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, from September 19, 2025 to February 22, 2026.

The exhibition will consider the important impact of Sherald’s work on contemporary art and on American culture, as she addresses the omission of Black figures from the history of figure painting. She has described her paintings as offering a resting place; an opportunity to see Black figures not in contention, not racialized or politicized, but simply being. The resulting body of work is a deeply resonant ode to everyday people and a convincing testament that, as Sherald believes, images can change the world.

“Amy Sherald is one of the most important portraitists working today, and we are honored to present her first mid-career survey at SFMOMA,” said Christopher Bedford, Helen and Charles Schwab Director of SFMOMA. “Amy’s vision deeply resonates with the museum’s goals to share and to champion a more expansive art history in our galleries. Her unique and exquisite renderings of her subjects encourage close looking, curiosity and awe. We greatly look forward to sharing this important exhibition with our community.”

“By creating images of Black men, women and children at ease, with few markers of place, time or context beyond the clothes they wear, Sherald has invented an entirely new form of figurative painting. Her approach goes beyond portraiture to enact new conditions for seeing, feeling and understanding shared humanity,” said Roberts. “In the spirit of great American artists like Edward Hopper, Alice Neel and Kerry James Marshall, Sherald’s works reframe our understanding of American culture. Her paintings invite viewers to recognize and move beyond preconceived ideas and engage in more expansive thinking about race, representation and the wide-open possibilities and complexities of every individual.”

American Sublime and its accompanying publication will consider for the first time Sherald’s work within the context of American realist and figurative painting. Gallery texts and catalogue essays will elucidate Sherald’s unique artistic process—inviting individuals she meets or sees on the street to be photographed, then transforming the photos into imaginative figure paintings that act as more than representative portraits. The exhibition will also illuminate how she selects garments and positions her subjects to further the objective of each work as well as her choice to render faces and skin in shades of gray—the centuries-old painting technique that dates to the early Renaissance—to highlight race as a construct. The exhibition is also the first to explore Sherald’s references to historical precedents in visual culture, ranging from the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich to iconic American photographs, to the films of Tim Burton.

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

American Sublime will include nearly 50 works from 2007 to 2024 organized in six thematic galleries. The opening gallery will include paintings that take up particularly American motifs

to challenge historical ideas of what it means to be “American.” A centerpiece of this gallery will be *For Love, and for Country*—a work recently acquired by SFMOMA which references Alfred Eisenstaedt’s photograph of a sailor kissing a woman in Times Square in 1945. Sherald’s 10-foot-tall work envisions the embrace happening between two men in a rebuttal of the rising discrimination and restrictive legislation against the LGBTQ+ community. Among other paintings in this gallery will be *If You Surrendered to the Air, You Could Ride It*, a work that alludes to *Lunch atop a Skyscraper*, Charles C. Ebbets’s famous photograph of steel workers taking a break on a construction site high above Manhattan. Sherald’s work points to the greatness of American industry, but also the Black workers whose contributions to these advancements have been largely erased from history.

Paintings in a gallery entitled **Precious Futures** will center the vulnerability and importance of Black children and youth. In works such as *The Boy with No Past*, Sherald imagines what it would be like to grow up as a young Black man in America without the country’s omnipresent legacy of racism and violence. Sherald’s iconic portrait of **Michelle Obama** will be featured in an adjacent gallery. Going beyond the public portrayal and media narratives of the former first lady, the painting offers a fuller picture, revealing her as a person with tremendous presence, style, warmth and gravitas. The centerpiece of the gallery entitled **The Girl Next Door** will be Sherald’s poignant portrait of Breonna Taylor, a young medical worker who was murdered by the police in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2020. Sherald’s portrait of Taylor as the universal girl next door, full of vitality and with an ongoing positive presence in the world, will be surrounded by other works depicting vibrant young women.

The divide between one’s public and private personas, and the need to navigate between them, is a frequent theme in Sherald’s work and will be the focus of the gallery called **An Inside and an Outside**. With works such as *She had an inside and an outside now, and suddenly she knew how not to mix them*, the artist explores the tension between the deliberately private, intimate self and a public self that exists amongst external preconceptions and norms. The title of the work, taken from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, further emphasizes this narrative. The final gallery in the exhibition will feature paintings of people physically and spiritually confident in themselves as individuals. The anchor work in this section is *Listen, you a wonder. You a city of a woman. You got a geography of your own*, a title drawn from Lucille Clifton’s poem “what the mirror said.” Sherald’s painting, featuring a woman with a composed demeanor, wearing a striking black-and-white dress and broad-brimmed hat, will be complemented by adjacent works that similarly change the narrative of Black culture in the U.S. and redefine what it means to be—and to be seen as—American.

ABOUT AMY SHERALD

Born in Columbus, Georgia, and now based in the New York City area, Amy Sherald documents contemporary African American experience in the United States through arresting, intimate portraits. Sherald engages with the history of photography and portraiture, inviting viewers to participate in a more complex debate about accepted notions of race and representation, and to situate Black life in American art.

Sherald received her MFA in painting from Maryland Institute College of Art and her BA in painting from Clark-Atlanta University. In 2016, Sherald was the first woman and first African American to ever receive the grand prize in the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC; she also received the Anonymous Was A Woman award in 2017 and the Smithsonian Ingenuity Award, the Pollock Prize for Creativity, and the David C. Driskell Prize in 2018. In 2018, Sherald was selected by First Lady Michelle Obama to paint her portrait as an official commission for the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC.

Sherald's work is held in public collections such as the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Embassy of the United States, Dakar, Senegal; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, MA; Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, NC; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), San Francisco, CA; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC; Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

CATALOGUE

Amy Sherald: American Sublime is accompanied by an eponymous publication—the artist's first comprehensive monograph—representing the broad sweep of Sherald's painting practice as well as her key influences and inspirations. Contributors include exhibition curator Sarah Roberts, as well as Elizabeth Alexander, Dario Calmese and Rhea Combs. *Amy Sherald: American Sublime* is published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Yale University Press.

VENUES + DATES

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: November 16, 2024–March 9, 2025

Whitney Museum of American Art: April 9–August 3, 2025

National Portrait Gallery: September 19, 2025–February 22, 2026

ORGANIZATION

Amy Sherald: American Sublime is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and curated by Sarah Roberts, former Andrew W. Mellon Curator and Head of Painting and Sculpture at SFMOMA.

SUPPORT

Lead support for *Amy Sherald: American Sublime* is provided by the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund and Diana Nelson and John Atwater. Presenting support is provided by the Evelyn D. Haas Exhibition Fund. Major support is provided by the Ford Foundation, Sir Deryck and Lady Va Maughan, KHR McNeely Family Fund, Katie and Matt Paige, Stephanie and Mark Robinson, and Shelagh Rohlen, in memory of Tom Rohlen. Significant support is provided by Maria Manetti Shrem and Jan Shrem, Jessica Moment, Deborah and Kenneth Novack and Sonja

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ADMISSION + HOURS

Annual membership begins at \$130, with discounts offered for seniors, young adults and working artists. Members enjoy free admission and priority ticketing for special exhibitions with advanced reservations, as well as complimentary guest passes (varies by membership level). Adult general admission to SFMOMA is \$30; admission for seniors 65 years and over is \$25; and admission for full-time students is \$23. The special exhibition *Amy Sherald: American Sublime* has an additional \$10–12 surcharge for all visitors 19 years and over. Member presale tickets are available on sfmoma.org on October 1, 2024. General public tickets are available on October 8, 2024. General Admission and special exhibitions for all visitors 18 years and younger are free. For local Bay Area residents, SFMOMA’s First Thursdays offer free general admission from noon–8 p.m. On Free Family Days, general admission to the museum is free for up to four adults accompanying one child or teen (18 and younger). The \$10-12 surcharge for *Amy Sherald: American Sublime* still applies on First Thursdays and Free Family Days for visitors 19 years and over.

SFMOMA is open 10 a.m.–5 p.m. on Fridays through Tuesdays and noon–8 p.m. on Thursdays (closed Wednesdays). Current visitor information can be found at sfmoma.org/visit.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

151 Third Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

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Media Contacts

Clara Hatcher Baruth, chatcher@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4177
Rebecca Herman, rherman@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4174
Alex Gill, agill@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4170

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