



The Magical Real-ism of  
**Amy Sherald**

February 3 – April 22, 2011

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum  
The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History

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**Amy Sherald**

### **ABOUT THE EXHIBIT**

Described by exhibition curator, Spelman College professor of art Dr. Arturo Lindsay, as “grounded in a self-reflective view of her life experiences as a young, black, Southern woman through the lenses of a post-modern intellectual,” Amy Sherald’s introspective oil paintings exclude the idea of color as race by removing “color” (skin tones are depicted in grayscale) but still portraying distinct physical indicators of race. The paintings, according to Sherald, “originated as a creation of a fairytale, illustrating an alternate existence in response to a dominant narrative of black history.” As the artist’s concepts became more coherent, her use of fantastical imagery evolved into scenes of spectacle, making direct reference to “blackness” and racialization. The result is an arresting series of paintings that blur preconceived notions of how “blackness” is defined within the context of American racial dogma.

### **ABOUT THE ROBERT AND SALLIE BROWN GALLERY AND MUSEUM**

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery supports the Stone Center’s commitment to the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through formal exhibition of works of art, artifacts and material culture.

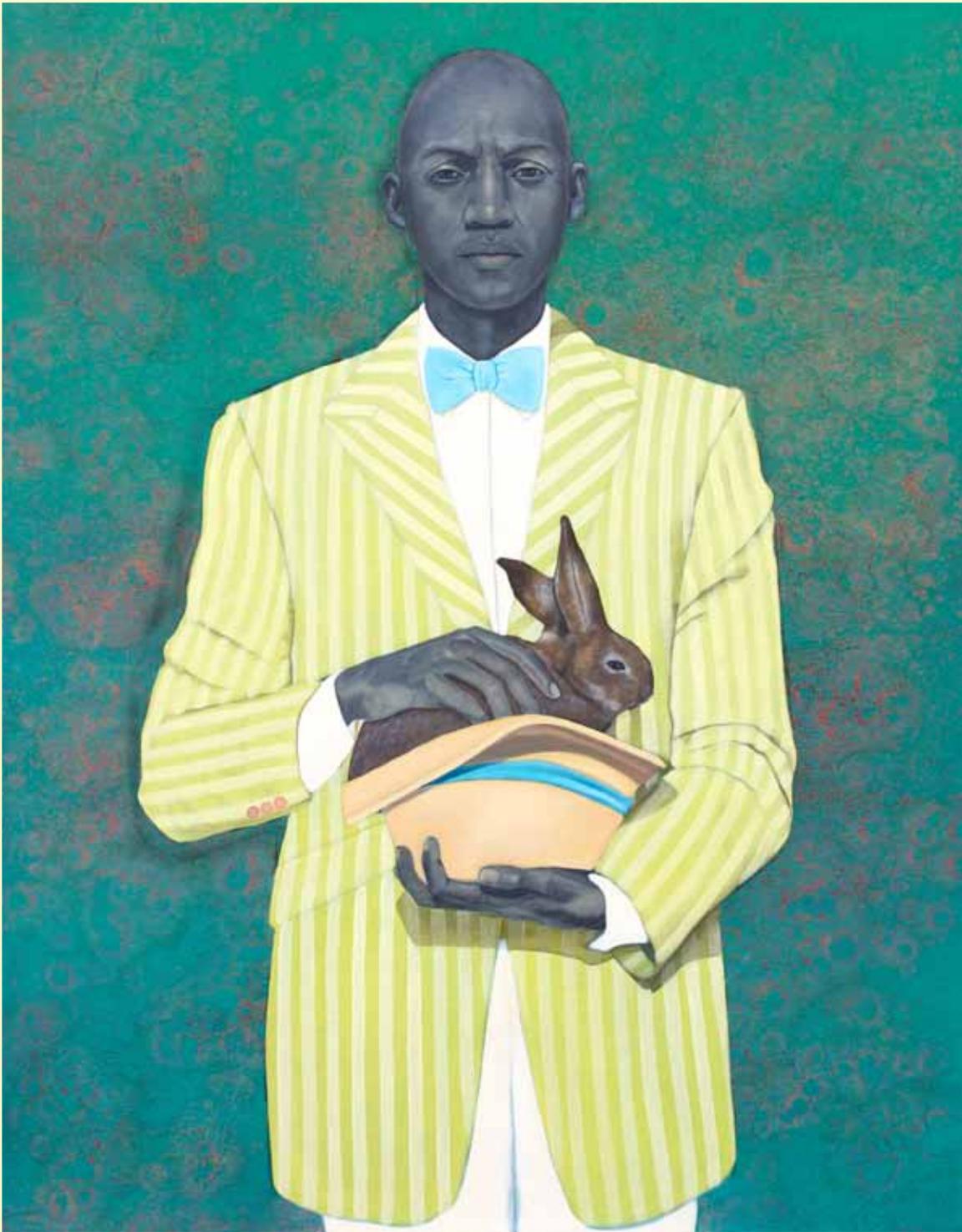
### **HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF THE CENTER**

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a center within the University’s Academic Affairs Division, we have a central role in supporting the University’s academic mission. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African-Americans and to encourage better understanding of the peoples of the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.

### **THIS EXHIBIT IS SUPPORTED BY THE GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS OF**

The Friends of the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum  
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*Front cover: They Call me Redbone but I'd Rather be Strawberry Shortcake | 43" x 54" | oil on canvas | 2009*  
*Back cover: We Ain't No Cotton Picking Negroes | oil on canvas | 2010*



*The Rabbit in the Hat* | 43" x 54" | oil on canvas | 2009

## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

By Dr. Arturo Lindsay

*"I wanted my images to have power, to be magic"*<sup>1</sup>

- Ana Mendieta (1948-1985)

In spite of her death at an early age, Ana Mendieta realized her dream as her images developed a magical power that still resonates in the art world today, earning her a place as one of the most important artists at the close of the twentieth century. Although stylistically different, Amy Sherald is currently dreaming the same dream as Mendieta. While Mendieta's reality was "magically" manifested in performance art, earthworks and installations during the infancy of those movements in the 1970s, three decades later Sherald is creating magically real paintings that challenges us to rethink our notions of "reality."

Born into a well-established middle class family in Columbus, Georgia in 1973, Sherald began questioning "reality" at an early age. As a child she was cautioned that as the daughter of a prominent black dentist in a small Southern town she was expected to act "appropriately." In the presence of whites, there was an even greater expectation. Sherald was expected to mind her manners, be well dressed and speak in a manner befitting her family's social status. So, if she had to "act" appropriately among blacks and "perform" at an even higher level for whites, then who was Amy Sherald – really? That question became the catalyst that drove her early work as she began exploring issues of identity in a series of self-portraits. In this body of work Sherald depicted a slightly altered bald headed version of herself inhabiting a rather Surrealist landscape. This introspective exploration of her identity grew into a broader examination of blackness using other individuals as models. In her artist statement Sherald wrote, "I use portraiture as a visual alternative to textual explanations of the human condition as it relates to my ideas, my fantasies of 'blackness.'"<sup>2</sup>

Sherald's art practice is akin to that of a highly skilled artisan. Her passion for the painting process borders on perfectionism grounded in the ancient Greek aesthetic tradition of mimesis. Sherald takes pleasure in demonstrating her skills as a realist painter. That said, she uses realist painting to question reality in painting. Her work however, is not surreal a la Salvador Dalí's melted clocks or René Magritte's conceptual challenges in mindscapes. Sherald's work rests more comfortably in the literary landscape of Gabriel García Márquez' magically real village of Macondo.<sup>3</sup>

The content of Amy Sherald's work is grounded in a self-reflective view of her life experiences as a young, black, Southern woman through the lenses of a post-modern intellectual. Essentially, she deconstructs issues of race and color in her paintings in such a unique way that Jacques Derrida would have been intrigued. In her most recent body of work, Sherald conducts an epidermal investigation that challenges our notions of race by replacing the natural skin color of her subjects with a monochromatic gray scale – a mixture of black and Naples Yellow – while maintaining other phenotypical markers of race. She writes, "My work began as an exploration to exclude the idea of color as race from my paintings. By removing 'color' but still portraying 'racialized' bodies as objects to be viewed through portraiture, I challenge the nomenclature of both terms and their usefulness as identifiable markers."<sup>4</sup>

In *They Call Me Redbone But I'd Rather Be Strawberry Shortcake*, a 2009 oil on canvas painting, Sherald introduces the term redbone (cover). Redbone refers to a mixed raced person of African, European and Native American descent whose skin coloration although light,

has a warm reddish undertone. It is a term loaded with socio-historical implications with competing explanations for its origins. However, all agree that it has had both positive and negative implications.

Sherald's titles are, at times, as provocative as her paintings. In *Redbone*, we hear the defiant voice of a little girl self-defining. Could this be little Amy's voice that we are hearing? As a child Sherald was either admired or despised for being "redbone" or "high yella" – another term used for a light-skinned person of African descent. As the Wolof expression asserts "Know who you are before they tell you." Sherald, through the voice of the young girl, names herself.

In her 2010 *High Yella Masterpiece (We Ain't No Cotton Picking Negroes)*, Sherald's portrayal of two young men of different racial mixtures is a departure from her previous work wherein only one person inhabits the canvas (back cover). Although a departure, she doesn't stray far from her basic painting style consisting of a palette of high-keyed contrast of hues with a brightly colored textured background and the figure, mostly in a frontal position, exchanging gazes with the viewer. In works such as *The Fairest of the Not So Fair*, 2009 (above) and *Maybe If I Wore a Mask*, 2009 (page 5) the eyes are not visible thereby reversing the traditional roles of viewing art by making the viewer the subject of the painting's gaze. Her iconography, however, is the elixir, the special potion that transforms her work from ordinary paintings to the magically real. Sherald juxtaposes very familiar objects in unfamiliar groupings or settings.

The *High Yella* departure is possibly the beginning of a new series wherein new personas with contradicting magically real stories will inhabit Sherald's canvases offering us a legacy as rich and as complex as Gabriel García Márquez' writings, Mendieta's installations and Dalí and Magritte's paintings.



*The Fairest of the Not So Fair*  
67" x 72" | oil on canvas | 2008

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1. Petra Barreras del Rio, "Ana Mendieta: A Historical Overview," in *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), p.29
  2. Unpublished Artist Statement provided by the artist
  3. For a full understanding of the village of Macondo, please read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez.
  4. Unpublished "Corridor Artist Statement" provided by the artist.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

By Amy Sherald

*“If it’s true that culture is a set of social and political boundaries that are marked and contested in performance, then we might ask what happens to culture when the performances people give are determined, in part, by the interpretive framework of others.”<sup>21</sup>*

**- Michael Bowman,**  
*Performing Southern History*

My work began as an exploration to exclude the idea of color as race from my paintings by removing “color” but still portraying racialised bodies as objects to be viewed



*Maybe if I Wore a Mask*  
51" x 71" | oil on canvas | 2009

through portraiture. These paintings originated as a creation of a fairytale, illustrating an alternate existence in response to a dominant narra-

tive of black history. As my ideas became more legible the use of fantasy evolved into scenes of spectacle (e.g. circuses), to make direct reference to blackness and racialisation. I stage specific scenes of social ascent, and racial descent that chart the psychology and performance of identity with a particular attention to notions of social exclusion and assimilation. All of these things configure a practiced position or role played within specific space or context. These kinds of performances blend and bleed the borders of how blackness is defined within the phenomenon of race as it relates to a specific experience of blackness in America, which has been performed in front of an audience that pretends not to exist. I am using historicism and race not to be provocative but to find some meaning within the ideas of self-actualization and the evolution of identity as a reaction to external directives.

The scope of my experiences involving race materialized from my upbringing in the south. While attending private schools and being one of maybe two or three black children, I was raised to be conscious of how I acted, spoke, and dressed. This performing aspect of my identity was cultivated from the beginning of my schooling. I learned that this was the key to my social acceptance and assimilation. Drawing from these experiences, I am engaging from a personal perspective with the desire to extrapolate meaning on how identity is both constructed and performed within political, social, economic and cultural spheres.

Each painting starts with a chance en-

counter of an individual that embodies certain resonating characteristics. I am constantly searching for models and creating costumes for each character. Although the figure is painted in gray it is photographed in color, and the skin color is then translated into gray on canvas by using black and Naples yellow. I place the figure within an atmospheric background that represents a liminal space as opposed to one that would provide a context of place or time. Creating the impetus for the viewer to truly come face to face with the painted figure as if they are on stage underneath a spotlight. The

liminality of the background also represents the amorphous personal space of my own existence within the context of black identity and my search for ways to clarify and ground it.

Identity interests me not only within the backdrop of my experiences in the south, but also from a global perspective. This has led to my examination of social implications of increased interconnectedness among the world's populations. Currently, I am working on ideas for multi-figure portraiture of similar or contradicting characters and stories between subjects.

## BIOGRAPHY

Amy Sherald was born in Columbus, Ga. in 1973. She attended Clark-Atlanta University where she earned a Bachelor's of the Arts in painting in 1997. While attending Clark-Atlanta she became an apprentice to Dr. Arturo Lindsay who was her painting instructor at Spelman College. She was a participant of the Spelman College International Artist-in-Residence program in Portobelo, Panama in 1997. Sherald also assisted in the installing and curating of shows in the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo (Museum of Contemporary Art Panama) and the 1999 South American Biennale in Lima, Peru. This was the impetus for her to explore her own voice in the art world. In past years her work has been autobiographical but has changed in response to her move to Baltimore, MD and has taken on a social context with a satirical twist. Sherald attended the Maryland Institute College of Art where she earned her M.F.A. in painting in 2004. After graduating she secured a prestigious private study residency with well-known Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum whom she lived and studied with in Larvik, Norway. She also attained an artist residency assistantship at the Tong Xion Art Center in Beijing, China in 2008.

Sherald was most recently chosen as Jurors Pick of the New American Paintings Edition 88. She is currently living and working out of Baltimore, Maryland.





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