Amy Sherald, *What's precious inside of him does not care to be known by the mind in ways that diminish its presence (All American)*, 2017, oil on canvas, 54 × 43".

Amy Sherald

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM ST. LOUIS

The subjects of Amy Sherald's meticulous, nearly life-size oil portraits confront the viewer with ambiguous expressions that are neither joyful nor melancholic. Their impassive gazes suggest interiorized contemplation and recognition of being seen. This intimate, seven-piece retrospective of her output from the past three years focused on works depicting one or two subjects standing against a flat monochromatic field, cutting bold totemic silhouettes out of bright voids. The outlier—also one of the more recent pieces, debuting in this show—situates a pair of women holding hands against the low horizon of a blue-skied rural landscape, punctuated by the trail of an airborne rocket in the distance.

Sherald has made roughly thirty paintings over the past ten years, which may account for this show's haiku-like size. After working for nearly two decades with steady if modest success, Sherald was recently thrust into the national spotlight after being selected by former first lady Michelle Obama to paint her official portrait for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC—making Sherald one of the first African American artists to be granted this honor (the other being Kehinde Wiley, who was concurrently selected to paint President Barack Obama's portrait). The opportunity made her work more recognizable to the American public than the work of most contemporary artists and garnered her representation by the international blue-chip gallery Hauser & Wirth (she previously showed with the Monique Meloche Gallery in Chicago). Given her often-repeated mission to redress issues of black representation within historically white institutions, Sherald's positioning in both the popular imagination and the art world is a boon. But the cost of this broad-ranging attention has been rather thin analyses of her actual work, which deserves deeper consideration in critically discursive terms.

For instance, much has been made of her tonal, grisaille-like handling of black skin—a deliberate choice that Sherald has traced back to W. E. B. Du Bois's inclusion of hundreds of black-and-white photographs of black American citizens in the 1900 Paris Exposition, which countered more spectacular representations of black bodies. While this expressionistic choice may surprise an audience used to illustrative realism, Sherald's approach is no more radical than, say, Kerry James Marshall's, in which dark, flat hues render the black body.

Which is to say that insisting on realism in Sherald's work seems misguided and perhaps at odds with her project of "a figural confrontation that disrupts the art world's racial status quo," as incisive art historian Huey Copeland has said of the work of Barkley L. Hendricks—perhaps Sherald's closest artistic kin. Like Hendricks, Sherald is more accurately engaged in what Fred Moten has identified as a black radical aesthetic, an aesthetic that troubles the "breaks" separating cultures and bypasses conventional notions of representational verisimilitude. The black skin of Sherald's figures does not resemble the varied hues we recognize on bodies because it represents a deliberate recasting, beyond typologies of race. And while her subjects are living people, they are costumed in

anachronistic outfits—more like something from Norman Rockwell's vision of 1950s America than what we see on the streets—that confuse her subjects' origins. And what of this "everydayness" so frequently ascribed to her work? Is a slender young black man in an American-flag-print button-down, cowboy hat, and golden mustang belt buckle anyone's image of "commonplace"? There is certainly a coded discussion of class in these pieces, but not necessarily of the aspirational bourgeois or elite glamour variety.

That none of these expected narratives quite fit is precisely this work's power; it complicates an American reality, it quotes and then revises historical and racial tropes, all with the solemnity of a calm stare.

—*Jessica Baran*