The Obamas and the Inauguration of Black Painting's New Golden Age In America

by Antwaun Sargent

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Amy Sherald's *What's precious inside of him doesn't care to be known by the mind of those that diminish it's presence (All American)*, 2017. Image courtesy of the Artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

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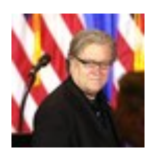
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W that Barack and Michelle Obama have chosen the portraitists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald to paint them, respectively, into the halls of American history, it confirmed what we already knew: We have entered a new golden age of black painting.

Specifically, we're witnessing the awakening of black figurative painting and portraiture, and as a figure Michelle Obama "is an archetype," Sherald, 44, told me last week on the phone from Baltimore, where she's based. "I want all types of people to look at my work and see themselves, just like I watch a Reese Witherspoon movie as a black woman and can empathize with her because we have had to internalize whiteness in that way to survive."

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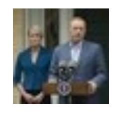

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At the National Museum of African American History and Culture, aka the Blacksonian, Sherald's 2013 oil painting *Grand Dame Queenie* hangs prominently. It depicts a black woman holding a white teacup and saucer. The figure, wearing black-and-white striped pants and a red blouse tied at the neck into a pussycat bow, with a bright yellow scarf and a calm stare directed at the viewer, is

realized in the artist's signature "grayscale" painting technique, with her black skin rendered in shades of gray.

Amy Sherald's *Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)*, 2013. Frances and Burton Reifler © Amy Sherald
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA

"I'm my own ideal," Sherald said when I asked why she grayed a black body as a point of departure. "There's a contemporary black narrative lacking because there's a narrative that I am living that I don't see when I walk into museums. I wanted to see these stories, so for me it was important to fill the narrative up with images that looked

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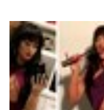

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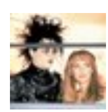


like the stories that I was living." She added, "Just because someone said painting is dead doesn't mean that it's a fact or the truth—painting is the soul food of art, in a way."

Her sentiment echoed what the celebrated African-American painter Kerry James Marshall told me last year. "I hew so closely and have committed to staying with the figure to demonstrate that there is a lot of room for exploration, that the field of representation, even in painting, is not completely exhausted yet." We spoke right before his traveling retrospective, *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry,* opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; that exhibition, beginning with Marshall's seminal 1981 self-portrait *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self,* flew in the face of that thing the white art world has been forever saying: painting is dead.

Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled (Studio)*, 2014. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. © Kerry James Marshall

The first time those words were uttered was probably around 1839, when the French history painter Paul Delaroche encountered a daguerrotype and reportedly made the declaration. And it's not hard to see what he meant: Why labor over a painting if you could simply take a picture? In nearly every decade since, every new advancement of expression in art has asked the same question of painting: Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists in the early 1900s, the conceptualists of the 60's, and others have all rejected traditional artmaking practices under the guise that that those modes had already expressed all they could about life.

Black artists in America first collectively challenged that misconception during the 60's and 70's. In reaction to both the Civil Rights and then Black Panther movements, African-American artists like Emma Amos and Faith Ringgold, among others across the country painted the black figure while loosely organized as the so-called Black Arts Movement, which sought to address the exclusion of black people from art and mainstream culture. The Chicago-based avant-garde artist collective AfriCOBRA, for instance, made positive images of black people in what the painter Jeff R. Donaldson called in the group's manifesto "coolade colors," and cofounder Jarrell Wadsworth rendered black power leader Angela Davis in her own slogans and words and the vibrant colors that spoke to the consciousness of black youth.

Detail of Kara Walker's *Brand X (Slave Market Painting)*, 2017. © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

The people painter Barkley L. Hendricks, who died in April, also rose to prominence in the late 60's, and mostly rejected the idea that it was the black artist's job to make affirming images of black folks in order to counteract Western visual culture's historic white supremacy. In

works like *Woody*, a 1973 oil of a dark-skinned black male captured in the middle of a dance pose wearing a yellow leotard against a similarly-colored backdrop, he painted black folks as he saw them—not as symbols of power or protest but as they really were, in life. (A tribute of 11 works organized by the curator Trevor Schoonmaker will be presented later this month during the New Orleans triennial Prospect.4.) Influenced by Old Masters, American realism, and the hood alike, Hendricks's art gained traction briefly before falling out of vogue like many of the black artists working in the 60's and 70's. Amy Sherald, for example, had not heard of Barkley L. Hendricks or Kerry James Marshall until after she'd completed her MFA in painting in 2004. "I didn't have any artists who painted the figure to look at when I was growing up," she said.

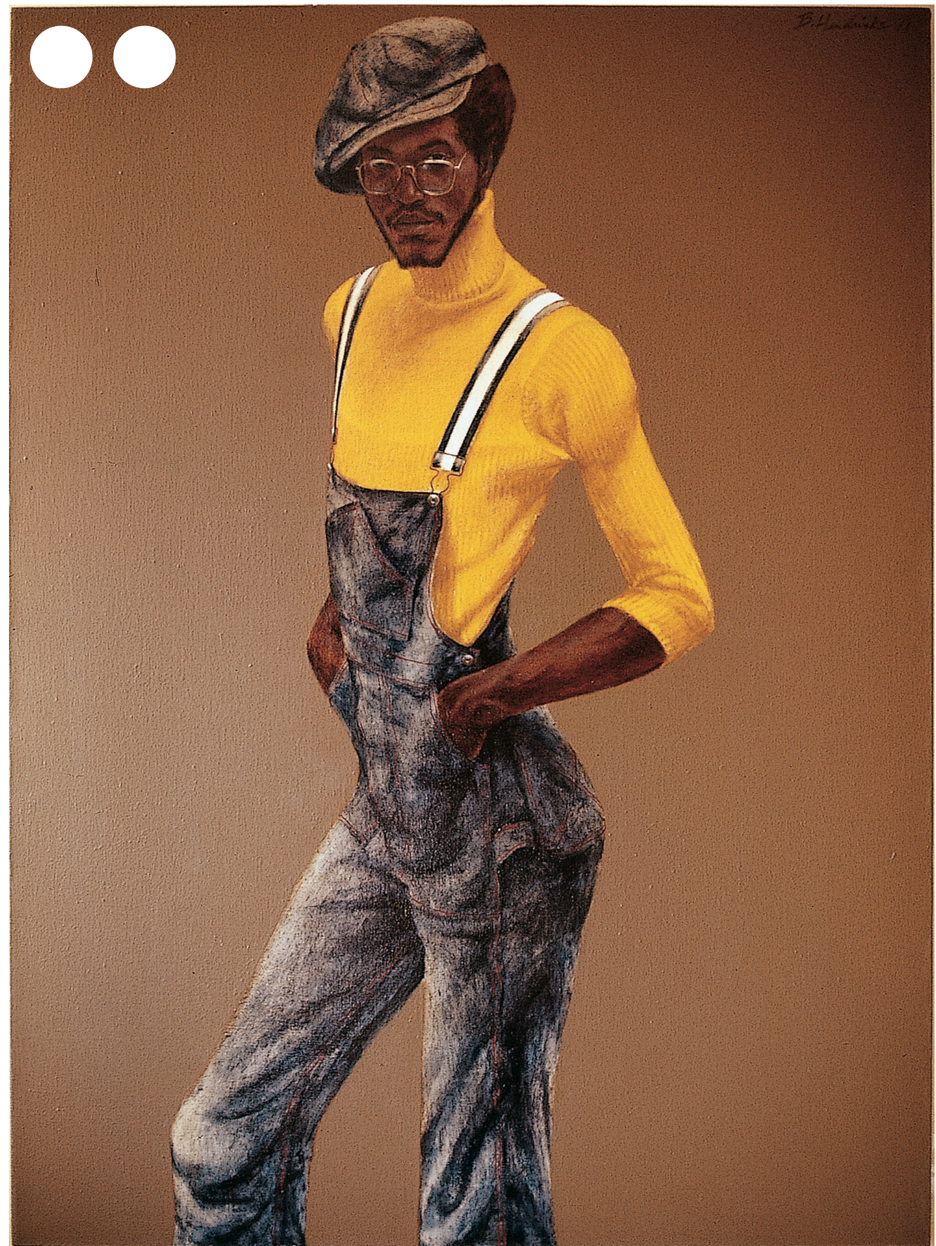
Today, however, it seems like everywhere you look there are painting exhibitions by black artists using the black figure as a way not only to correct the art historical record, but to show black folks as they see them. The generations of painters who have followed Hendricks and Marshall, including youngish artists like Jordan Casteel, Devan Shimoyama, Mario Moore, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who was just awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant, are grappling with the responsibility of representation—to use painting as a tool to broadly address identity, gender, and contemporary personal and social politics.

Detail view of Jeff Sonhouse's *Repeat Offender*, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery.
Adam Reich

"I paint the black male figure because it's mine," explained the artist Jeff Sonhouse, 49. "That's who I am." In his painting *Witness Protection Program*, an oil depicting a geometrically-camouflaged black male figure, and other works in his current solo show at Tilton Gallery in New York, there's a sense of what he calls "friction," because the black figure is obscured rather than really visible to the viewer. "I'm not motivated by a sense of being seen," he said. "I really don't give a damn if I'm included or have been omitted in some sense." This echoed a conversation I had with Hendricks before his death. "What moves me," Sonhouse went on, "is making damn good work."

Other artists like Henry Taylor, in *The Times They Aint A Changing, Fast Enough*, his carefully worked canvas depicting the shooting of Philando Castile at the 2017

Whitney Biennial, and Kara Walker, in her furious return in her recent show at New York's Sikkema Jenkins Gallery, share a willingness to use the canvas to examine the difficult parts of American history, then and as it is happening now. "I don't really feel the need to write a statement about a painting show," Walker wrote in her statement about her painting show, which examines, in sumi ink, blade, and oil stick on paper and linen, the abject horrors that have led to the erasure and maligning of blackness in this country. "How many ways can a person say racism is the bread and butter of our American mythology?"



Barkley L. Hendricks' *Jules*, 1971. ©Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

None of this is to say that abstraction has nothing to do with this moment in black painting—artists like Jennifer Packer, Tschabalala Self, Derrick Adams, and the 77-year-old icon Jack Whitten are just using it in exciting ways that elevate and complicate the identity of the black figure and its place in the world shown in the painting. (Even Mark Bradford, a painter of pure abstraction who represented the U.S. at the 2017 Venice Biennale, references the social

condition of the black body.) "When I think of the figure, I think of immortality or an otherness that is just out of this world, representing an endless possibility," the British-Ghanian artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye told me of the fictive black people in her recent New Museum exhibition. Yiadom-Boakye's figures, seen in works like *Mercy Over Matter*, an oil of a black man comprised of many bursts of orange, green, blue, and black, exist in what Amy Sherald described to me as a "luminal space."

Kehinde Wiley's *Portrait of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jacob Morland of Capplethwaite*, 2017. © Kehinde Wiley, courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

When Kehinde Wiley first encountered Kerry James Marshall's *De Style*, a painted scene of a barbershop, at LACMA in the 90's, it changed his mind about what stories can be told about black lives in painting. "It made me feel as though the walls of the institution were accessible and permeable, rather than alienating," he told me in a recent interview for the magazine *Hello Mr*. With portraits like 2008's *Morpheus*, of a black man reclining in a sea of flowers, wearing a baseball cap, tank top, blue jeans, sneakers, and a gold chain around his neck, Wiley has made the canvas—and the gallery and museum walls where they're hung—a place to encounter ordinary black folks. "When I got to New York, I was thrust into the Harlem of pre-9/11 America, where people were parading around 125th Street," he recalled. "I wanted to wrap my practice around that."

Like Sherald, who explained that "when I choose my models, it's something that I can only see in that person, in their face and their eyes, that's so captivating about them," Wiley and others are using real and imagined black figures to paint into existence what was previously left unpainted. Take the black figures that Wiley and Amy will be painting into the National Portrait Gallery in D.C.—the Obamas, too, were once unimaginable.

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