

## Some advice for facing death, painting the First Lady, and other common crisis from Amy Sherald.

AS TOLD TO TIFFANY JOW

*In February, Baltimore-based artist Amy Sherald became a household name when she unveiled her portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama. Following the viral reveal, Sherald, now 45, joined the roster of artists represented by gallery heavyweight Hauser and Wirth and saw demand for her work surge; in May, she had her first major solo exhibition, at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. It was the culmination of the 15 years she'd spent scrapping to establish herself in the art world. Accordingly, Sherald seemed like an ideal candidate to discuss the topic of working under pressure. She was. But our conversation also revealed a strong, honest woman who isn't really concerned about the limelight at all. She's still the same Amy Sherald, fighting tooth and nail, giving everything she has to her craft.*

### Is it baffling to think about your success?

I didn't start painting to not leave behind a legacy. This is what I expected to happen, even though I didn't expect it to happen. I got out of grad school and decided to put one hundred percent into my career. I thought, either my heart will stop or something will give and I'll get a break.

### Yes, you've been remarkably candid about your health issues. You were diagnosed with congestive heart failure and cardiomyopathy, a form of heart disease, in 2004 and received a life-saving heart transplant in 2012.

Yeah. Then it was like, Fuck, now I have to make this work for real?! It seemed like the worst thing ever. But it really was the best thing that ever happened to me.

### Why's that?

I can live without being afraid of dying. I can run and know that my heart isn't going to stop, or that my implanted defibrillator isn't going to shock me. When that happens, you're like, [*piercing shriek that prompts this interviewer to jerk the receiver away from her ear*]. So I don't have to worry about that anymore.

### That's bad-ass. I expected you to say something about how it gave you a new perspective on life, or energy to cope with being in the spotlight.

I don't feel like I've had to cope. The week of the [Michelle Obama portrait] unveiling, seeing my name pop up on Google

Alerts was crazy: Every article was clickbait, and then I became clickbait. I had to stay off the internet, because it wasn't a healthy place to be. I didn't need to be reading about myself—I just got to move on with my life, which is what I did. Now I get recognized in public all the time, and it's not weird. People are really nice. Even midwestern republican white men who voted for Trump will come up to me and say, "Oh, we saw you on the CBS morning show and loved the painting!"

### You don't find anything difficult about being a star?

I haven't had to manage anything except how to say no. If you don't, the world will suck you dry and leave you to drop. It took me about seven months to realize I can't do it all. I'm kind of a people pleaser—I was a yes-person when I was younger, because I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. But you just have to say no and live with the fact that you probably disappointed people. They would do the same thing to you.

### You have to take care of yourself. I read you were hospitalized after completing Michelle's portrait, because you were so exhausted. How do you decompress?

I watch TV. I watch "This is Us," "Insecure," "The Sinner." People say they don't watch TV but I need to, because I have to escape. Working out is also essential, and just being home, being sterile, and having conversations with my girlfriends. Also, my boyfriend and I read to each other every night. Right now we're reading this really wonderful book called

*Stalking God* by Anjali Kumar, and *In Defense of Troublemakers* by Charlan Nemeth.

**What about staying present—especially in those really big moments, like the unveiling?**

I wake up every morning and breathe with my boyfriend. We put our foreheads together and we breathe for five minutes. We do that several times a day, over the phone if we have to. It used to be my dog that grounded me; now it's my boyfriend, and the dog does it in a different way. When the world is spinning, I know my place when I look at him. I can go back out and conquer the world.

**Many women, myself included, struggle with self-doubt. Do you?**

Every day. I shit self-doubt. I've doubted myself my whole life. It isn't paralyzing—I have a healthy amount of it. It keeps me humble, working hard, and focused. Eventually I realized no matter how much I doubt myself, I succeed. So I guess I'm O.K. The universe is always playing Jedi mind tricks on me.

**Do you perform any rituals before getting ready to work?**

I usually have to do something that calms me down before I start painting. As I've gotten older, music doesn't do it anymore, so I listen to podcasts—something that pulls me in. I really love Krista Tippett's "On Being." Her voice is so soothing.

**You paint people you meet on the street, or from photographs of strangers. Do you ever think your paintings won't do them justice?**

It's not really about them. I don't even look at the painting after I'm finished. I'm making a portrait of that person, but I'm not thinking about capturing them. I think about capturing an archetype, something that will sit in art history as part of a greater narrative of American Realism, of everyday people and their lives. It's not a painting of Bob and Sarah; it's a painting of a deeper experience for the viewer and they become bigger than that. When you look at an old photograph of a black family, you don't know who they are but they symbolize a greater part of a narrative or a time when they existed. I don't know who they are but they represent me to myself.

**Do you ever have a hard time being yourself?**

There is one situation I know for sure I feel out of place—even though I belong there—and that's in a room full of white men. I'm not in that situation very often, but when I am, I'm like, It's really interesting how I feel right now! It's kind of a weird self-esteem thing that happens. It doesn't have anything to do with them per se, it's just how I feel. It's probably because I grew up in Georgia and, for me, white men represent too much of what was happening, historically and in the city. Women come along with that, too.

I feel like it's easier for me, as a black woman, to relate to white women, because at least we have that in common. White men are so far from my experience that it's hard for me to trust their intentions. But I grew up in all-white schools and I have the skill of being able to be who I need to be in the moment. I am my whole self however I am. I walk into a room like a white man. Once you become aware of those emotions, you're able to overcome them and understand that you are never less-than. You are always more-than.

**What advice do you have for people aspiring to make a career out of their passion?**

I always tell people the most important thing you can do is learn your own sense of intuition. And then, if you're going to do something, you have to do it. Whatever you put your energy into is what's going to flourish. There has to be a sense of desperation, like your survival depends on doing this thing. Without that, things just don't open up. Every time you're at the point where you're about to fall over the cliff, something comes up and grabs you. It pushes you a little further on that path. But those moments don't happen if there's even the slightest bit of contentment there.