

American Sublime's Final Weeks Draw Crowds as Amy Sherald Rejects Censorship

Following the cancellation of her upcoming National Portrait Gallery exhibition, Sherald's widely attended Whitney Museum show draws increased attention in its closing days.

By: Alexandra Thompson

WEST CHELSEA, NEW YORK – On a Monday afternoon, in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the one of business capital of the world, one might assume that art institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art would be filled with out-of-towners checking off another item on their travel bucket list, rather than native New Yorkers and residents of the city that never sleeps.

However, in the final days of Amy Sherald's *American Sublime* exhibition, the crowd tends to sway towards and swell in numbers with more locals and East Coast neighbors—especially now that the collection has become the latest flashpoint in the Trump administration's ongoing use of censorship for the pursuit of *American values and unity*.



Early this year, President Trump issued an executive order amending the National Endowments Reform Act, reshaping eligibility criteria for federal arts funding. The changes mandate that publicly funded programs must “promote patriotic unity and shared American values,” and bars support for works deemed “politically divisive, culturally subversive, or ideologically imbalanced.”

These terms remain undefined, leaving interpretation to federal agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

But in a clear pattern, projects that explore systemic racism, gender identity, or interrogate American history are increasingly being revised, postponed, or pulled from public programming.

Sherald's collection—grey-scale portraits of Black subjects set against vibrant, colorful backgrounds—was slated to move to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. next year. The show was already drawing chatter as a potential target for revision before even going on public display.

Her *American Sublime* collection carries a subversive undertone of political rebellion, self-realization, comfort, and representation within a technicolor American history that was not inclusive of Black Americans.

On the fifth floor of the contemporary museum overlooking the Hudson, the final room of the exhibit brings this vision into sharp focus. It encompasses a reexamination of the Americana dichotomy and cultural symbolism — without the constraints of both whiteness and heteronormativity. On adjacent walls of an echoing white passageway, Sherald's *Trans Forming Liberty* —which depicts the Statue of Liberty as a transgender woman — and *For Love and For Country*, based on the *Life Magazine* 1945 V-J Day in Times Square image, restages the kiss with the couple portrayed as a Black gay couple.

Sherald has since canceled the show at the Portrait Gallery, following conversations to remove or potentially alter the presentation of *Trans Forming Liberty*, reportedly due to its lack of compliance with the administration's new guidance on content in federally funded exhibitions.



"I think her pulling the show and the exhibit being in the final week here has really brought more people out to see her stuff," said Mr. B, an older white gentleman whose accent was a giveaway for his native Brooklynite badge of honor. He didn't want to share his full name but has worked at the Whitney as a gallery attendant since its 2000, when it was on the Upper East Side.

"Whenever the politicians are runnin' a muck, and there's something here that's, protesting against it or uh hard on the eyes and mind you know, the people will rush to see it." Mr. B affirmed.

Rocky Jones, 40, who was visiting from Washington D.C., took his daughter, Mia, 9, out of her day camp in Maryland for an extended weekend trip to the city after learning the exhibit at the Portrait Gallery was canceled.

"I was looking forward to her seeing an artist that represents and shows people who look like her with vibrancy and uniqueness, we still don't always get that in art or media or TV and sure not in the news,". Rocky said with a hint of a laugh watching his daughter look at one of Sherard's portraits of a young man on a lilac background.



“She’s a little young to know about all the deep weeds of the politics stuff but, she can know why where here in New York and why the exhibit isn’t coming to D.C.” Jones said.

The father-daughter duo is not the only one moved to action to visit the Whitney exhibit. Jessica Thompson, a 62-year-old flight attendant for Southwest Airlines, whose opinions are as strong and contrasting as her micro-salt and pepper afro, only had 18 hours in the city.

Based out of Houston, she coordinated an overnight with her co-workers after hearing the potential exclusion of one Sherald’s pieces lead to the D.C. cancellation.

“My daughter is really passionate about art history and politics, and to be honest, supporting anything that’s a big middle finger to Donald Trump,” says Thompson with a lingering forcefulness in her voice.

“We saw Sherald’s portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama in D.C. back in 2019, and her work is so rich and bold... and these, she says, pointing around the sardine-packed half-moon-shaped room lined with five electric pieces. “These make a statement.”

On the contrary, Mrs. Thompson’s two coworkers—who, like the New York dialect, could not disguise their Southern drawls and Texas roots—only came to bear witness to the ongoing issues.

“I’m not an art person, personally, but I want to see what all the fuss is about,” said Judy Talley, 59, fashioned with her blonde-gray bob and red cowboy boots hauled with her from Round Top, Texas. “You know, I saw on Fox JD Vance put on some pressure to have the exhibit removed,” she adds, her eyes stretching wide, whispering as if she’s sharing a state secret.

Their presence, like so many others trickling into the Whitney in its final days, reveals a paradox at the center of American culture: attempts to filter art rarely extinguish it. Instead, they ignite interest, drawing more eyes, more questions, and more momentum than the artwork might have received otherwise.

However, this moment is not unique. It echoes across decades of American art history, where suppression has rarely erased the message—and often magnified its reach.

Barbara Kruger has long understood how power reacts to discomfort. A conceptual artist known for merging bold text with black-and-white imagery, Kruger has spent decades interrogating systems of power — gender, capitalism, surveillance. Her iconic slogans, like

“Your body is a battleground,” have been defaced, boycotted, and dismissed since the 1980s. Still, they’ve endured.

What began on gallery walls now circulates through protest posters and Instagram slideshows, reclaimed by new generations. The more her work was resisted, the deeper it lodged in public memory—a visual language of dissent that refuses to disappear.

Dorothea Lange’s impact followed a similar path. A documentary photographer, known for her Dust Bowl documentation, Lange used her camera to record the everyday life and social conditions in America.

In 1941, she was hired by Roosevelt’s Farm Security Administration (FSA) to photograph the forced relocation of Japanese Americans to internment camps. But her images captured a reality that did not favor the National narrative. The government locked them in the archives for decades. When they were finally made public, they became a vital record of the twentieth century.

Now, Amy Sherald’s decision to withdraw her exhibit places her squarely within a longstanding tradition of artists responding to political pressure.

Her choice was not simply about one painting—it was a rejection of institutional compromises that risk diluting her principles and collections’ meaning.

That choice has captured attention.

“There’s always been a kind of political inertia with galleries, museums, and private institutions,” said Devon Vander Voort, an art advisor and professor who specializes in cultural narratives and curatorial ethics. “But the fascinating thing is that when an artist or institution does push back—when they resist that pressure—you often see an influx of patrons, just out of curiosity. It becomes this moment of: *who do they think they are to say no?*”

According to Vander Voort, even the most cautious collectors are drawn to work that embodies protest — not just for its aesthetic value, but for its historical weight.

“Being able to not only support the artist, but to engage with and even own a piece of political history — especially in such a weird and dangerous time—is appealing,” she said.

“And that’s true across the political spectrum.”

