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I stood in line for a couple of hours to see the Obama portraits six months after they went on display at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. This was a few years ago. There were people in line nuzzling copies of the same paintings they were waiting in the 90-degree Beltway heat (which is 190 degrees with Beltway humidity) to stand before. The whole moment felt poised somewhere between a ritual and a happening.
Which meant, a lot of open speculation about the paintings.

The other day, as the Art Institute of Chicago prepared to open a summer exhibit "The Obama Portraits" on June 18, I asked artists Kehinde Wiley (who painted Barack) and Amy Sherald (who painted Michelle) some of the questions I heard that day in D.C. The following is a shorter version of two longer conversations, edited for clarity and length.

Q: Do you see yourself as a portrait painter?

Sherald: I don't. It's a way to codify what I do. Sometime I call myself that. But really, to me, I've made two portraits — Michelle Obama and Breonna Taylor. Most of my paintings of people speak to something larger about the American art canon. I don't feel I am painting this person, I'm painting a person who comes to represent a narrative. Still, Michelle is Michelle. I paint American people; she fits my practice. She doesn't walk around as FLOTUS, she walks around as Michelle of Chicago. But conventionally, yes, she's different. She is not an everyday person but it's how she presents herself.

Image: Former President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama stand before their portraits and their respective artists, Kehinde Wiley (at left) and Amy Sherald (right), at an unveiling event at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. in 2018. (SAUL LOEB / AFP/Getty Images)

Q: Did you discuss with the president what the painting would get across?

Wiley: A bit. The trouble was there was no template here, to be provoking and groundbreaking. A lot of faith was involved. We tried to concentrate on how we would work symbolically to emerge from the past into a 21st century moment suggesting what it means to embody power today. It wasn't to create a goofy portrait that's more to do with status and gets hung up in the anxiety that surrounds building some consensus.

Q: What has been most misunderstood about all of this?

Sherald: What got to me was how people seemed to erase my life prior to this painting. I read articles that said I didn't start painting until I was 42! I have been working my whole life, and that prepared me for this moment. There was a lot of sacrifice. It wasn't overnight. Still, there was a lot of pressure, of course. You're making a painting to represent the legacy of the first Black first lady. But it was amazing. I've been around long enough that I studied Kehinde in graduate school, so doing this, being at the unveiling with Kehinde, there was more to it than it appeared.

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Q: Do you think of the painting as propaganda?

Wiley: All portraits are a kind of propaganda. It's about making a statement. It's like a still life of a flower, which you know will wilt, yet there is beauty there now. So, sure. There might be temptation to remove a few gray hairs from the person being painted. But there is also something radically now about a portrait that doesn't soften and keeps the gray. I remember (Barack) joking — half-joking — I gave him all of those grays hairs.

Q: Can you explain the gray-toned skin in your work?

Sherald: It's evolved. I was thinking of daguerreotypes, those photographs of the 1800s, and how photography represented Black Americans after the invention of the camera. I wanted to create a discourse extricated from the historical narrative of Black identity. Now the conversation in my head speaks to interiority, how we are in our private lives versus who we are in public, to the world. I hear people say (the gray) is about "Oh, she's trying to take race out of the conversation," but I'm not — I'm adding a layer.

Q: Can you explain the chair?

Wiley: The chair came together from various examples of similar chairs then was coaxed together. But it's there because — OK, there's an aristocratic portraiture of nobility with a desire to see a subject fully in control, the subject fully standing, or on a horse, to suggest someone overwhelmingly self-assured. There is a secondary tradition not so grandiose in which the person is seated, which goes beyond the trappings of state power. So (Barack Obama) leans towards you. He's not separating himself. His collar is loosened. That's not taken lightly. I had a very clear idea about body language.