

VOGUE

RUNWAY

Aya Brown's Portraits of Essential Workers Give Thanks Through Art

BY BROOKE BOBB

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Aya Brown, *USPS WORKER, COVID-19*, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.

In early January, 24-year-old artist Aya Brown unfortunately had to make a trip to the hospital for an emergency treatment. The native Brooklynite was sitting in the ER with her sister Aja and began to notice that all of the nurses were women of color like them. The sisters began to chat with the nurse who was assigned to monitor Brown's condition. They talked and cracked jokes. Later, as Brown watched her nurse fall asleep for several seconds because she'd worked an all-nighter, she realized something: "I started thinking about how I saw these black women in the ER more than I saw the doctors," Brown said. The doctor eventually came by, but their exchange was brief and it became clear to her that her nurse was her primary caretaker. "It was in that exact moment that I felt as if I wanted to create something that could express who these women were to me and how safe they made me feel," Brown said.

After her hospital visit, Brown began to create colorful illustrations and sketches of women working in the ER. Once Covid-19 hit New York, she began to expand on that idea and create a wider range of artwork that included nurses and other essential workers, which she began to share on her Instagram page. As a follow up to her ER nurse portrait series, Brown began her sketches of a pediatric nurse. "As a kid I remember feeling so safe with this nurse," she said. "Her scrubs would always have some kind of cartoon printed on them. She was young, maybe still in school, and always had on some fly sneakers and she had tattoos."



Aya Brown, *NURSE 1, COVID-19*, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.

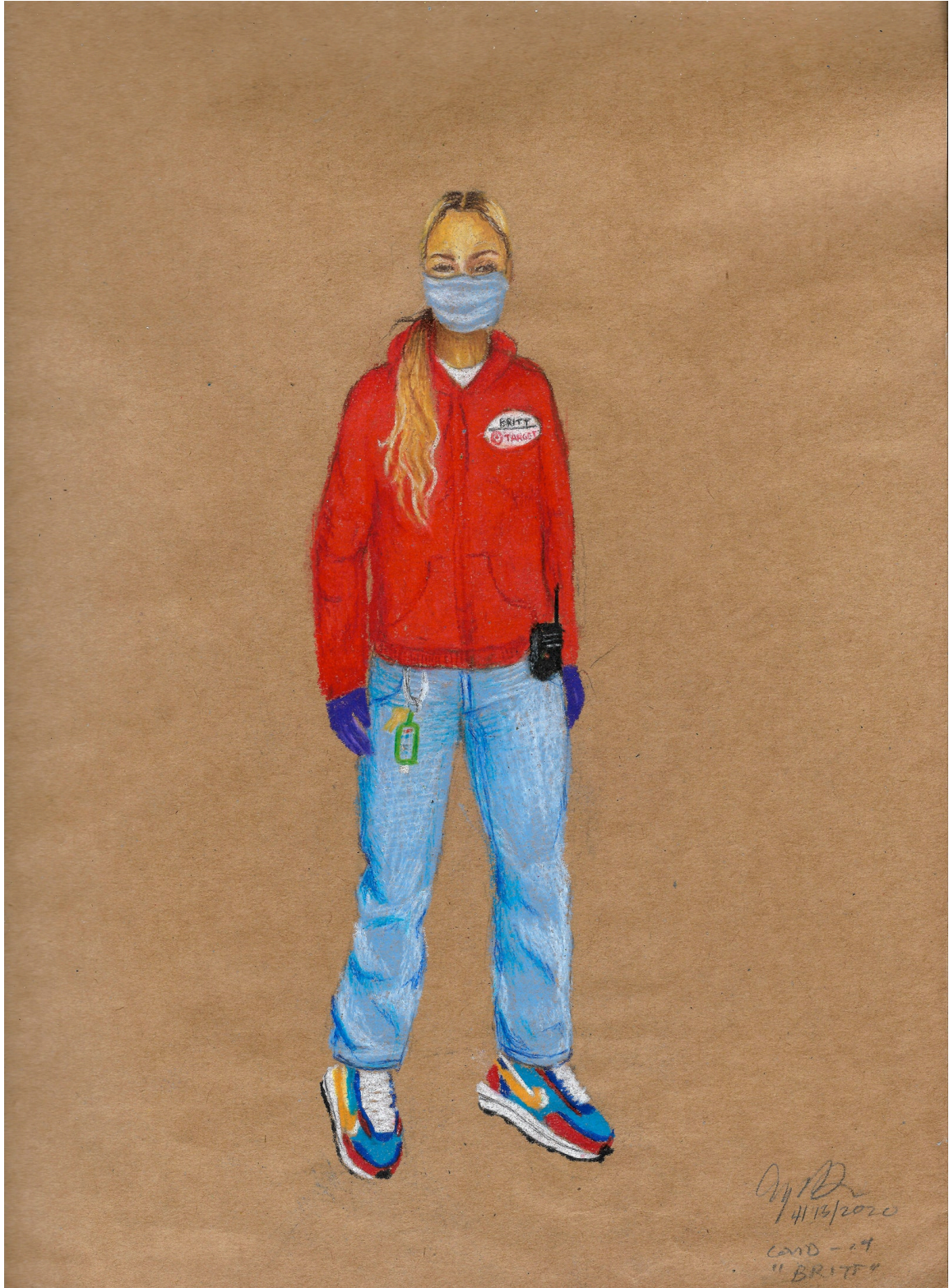


Aya Brown, *HOSPITAL HOUSEKEEPER, COVID-19*, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.



Aya Brown, *NURSE 2, COVID-19*, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.

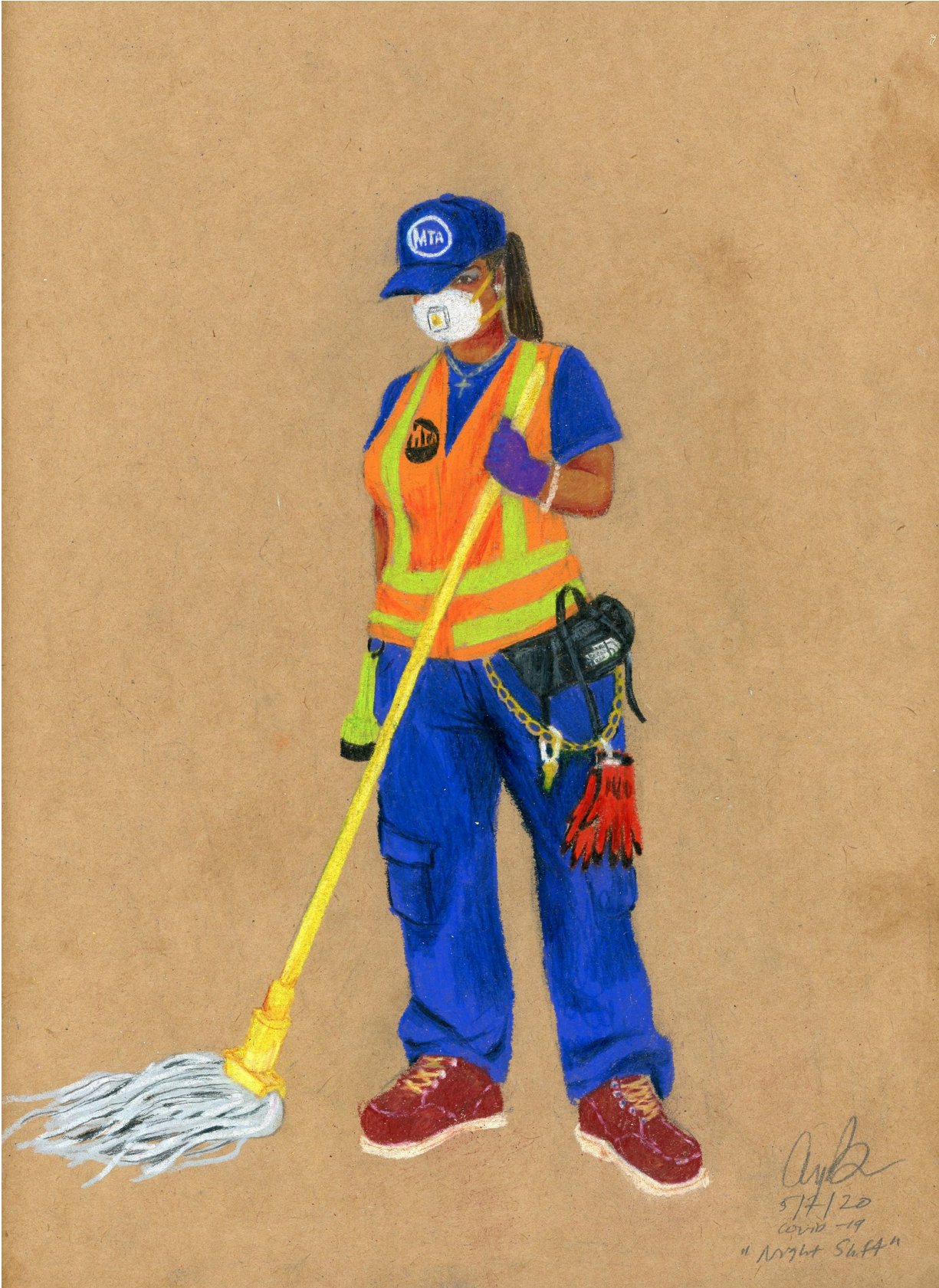
Brown began to think more and more about other types of essential workers. She thought of her very close friend Britt, who works at Target (and whom she calls her “lesbian mom”), as well as her friend Keyanna, an EMT in New York. Brown has made sketches of her sister, too, who works as a paraprofessional. Recently, Brown sketched her maternal grandmother, a 79-year-old nurse, who currently resides in Omori, Japan. And last week, after a session with her therapist whom she says is “essential as fuck,” Brown created a massive conceptual panting in the honor of all these essential—sometimes forgotten—figures. For this piece, Brown used a bedsheets as a canvas, which she hung outside of her window. “I live in Flatbush and there are a lot of caretakers and nurses who live in my neighborhood,” Brown notes. “I wanted them to see it, maybe walking home after a long day or waiting for the bus. I wanted to let them know that we see them and we thank them.”



Aya Brown, "BRITT" TARGET, COVID-19, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.



Aya Brown, "KEYANNA" EMT, COVID-19, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.



Aya Brown, *MTA NIGHT SHIFT, COVID-19*, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.



Aya Brown, *C TOWN, COVID-19*, 2020, Brown Kraft paper, color pencil. Courtesy of the artist.

Indeed, "being seen" is the thrust of Brown's essential workers project. To that end, Brown is now releasing a limited-edition t-shirt in collaboration with creative space and community outreach center Girls Only and the food, art, and community collective Ghetto Gastro. All proceeds from the sales of this shirt will go to Rethink Food NYC, a non-profit using excess food to distribute meals and nutritional essentials to those in need, and La Morada, a local Bronx restaurant. The front of the shirt features the first nurse, or "Nurse 1," that Brown illustrated. The back showcases an original font created by tattoo artist and Girls Only member Cake that reads, "We See You, We Thank You." Written below is a quote from the poet Toni Morrison: "This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal." The special shirt goes on sale today for \$77 and is available on the Ghetto Gastro website.



Photo: Aja Brown



Photo: Aja Brown

“My grandmother and my mother have always expressed how important it is to care for others and to simply notice the people around you,” Brown said. “I’ve thought about how these images should exist in the world and I’ve come to the realization that I just want them to be shared.” Her hope is a simple one: “I want them to bring joy to those who are directly referenced in my work. I want to be able to support my community, to support those in need, and to support those who inspire me.”