

Art in America

Aya Brown's Essential Portraiture

By Jasmine Sanders June 23, 2021 2:44PM



Aya Brown: *HOSPITAL HOUSEKEEPER, COVID-19, 2020*, colored pencil on brown Kraft paper, 9 by 12 inches. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

In January 2020, artist Aya Brown was admitted to a hospital in New York City. With the help of her sister Aja, a teaching assistant, and that of a committed, if overworked, third-shift nurse, Brown made a full recovery. After her release, she found herself ruminating on the centrality of women in both formal and informal care economies, the racial and gender composition of those

tasked with the bulk of social reproduction. The pandemic would make these matters plain, the dual crises of work and care collapsing into one, while stoking entrenched American paranoia regarding cleanliness and contagion. Suddenly, laborers who had been devalued, deemed “menial” or “unskilled,” were exalted. The fate of the empire was thrust upon the weary shoulders of health and sanitation workers, food and mail couriers, and factory makers of Purell, Lysol, and toilet tissue. Taking Prismacolor pencils to Kraft paper, Brown began sketching these newly minted American heroes. She began with the third-shift nurse, then her sister, then Black and female staff in other critical industries. These images, drawn in Brown’s vibrant, toony style, comprise her “Essential Workers” series (2020–).

Furloughed from her job as an event organizer at the now defunct Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, Brown began with a simple aim: she wanted Black women, the focus of her life and creative endeavor, to understand themselves as essential. She had begun to draw as a girl, preferring her own creations to the images she encountered on TV or film, which rarely reflected her likeness. The Black lesbian artist, who currently resides in Brooklyn’s Flatbush neighborhood, left the BFA program at Cooper Union in 2017, traumatized by its strictures and oversights. She began hosting such parties as Papi Juice and Gush, roving nightlife havens for Black lesbians and queers. Nightclub posters, with all their showy prurience and promotional sheen, seem a dominant influence, as does the gender-fluid street style of her native Brooklyn.

In 2019 Brown collaborated with the brand MadeMe to print hoodies, tees, and underwear featuring her drawings, mostly scenes of intimacy between gay women: two lovers splayed on a mattress just big enough for two; women sporting strap-ons, both dildos and wearers splendidly aglisten. Brown has an eye for the ardently arranged particulars of feminine presentation, iconography that recalls the warm mythologizing of artists like Diamond Stingily and Lauren Halsey. Her figures come fastidiously accessorized, their adornments dazzling, illuminated as if caught by a camera’s flash or the club light’s glare. Such details provide much of the easy, ineludible charm of “Essential Workers.”

The first illustration, titled *Nurse 1*, was completed and posted to Brown’s Instagram in April of last year. The titular figure compiles the drab, familiar medical accoutrements of pandemic time—medical visor, face mask, latex gloves—alongside totems of her own choosing. Gold jewelry shines from her neck and wrists. A constellation of tattoos peeks out from under her scrubs, which sport a SpongeBob print. The allure of those door-knocker earrings, that updo, those Air Maxes is tempered by a furtive, tentative mood. Brown’s subjects stand in various states of heedful un-pose—one or both hands on hips, arms folded over their fronts or hidden behind their backs, hands stuffed into pockets. Several workers arrange the instruments of their labor directly in front of or across their bodies. In *Hospital Housekeeper*, the woman’s



Aya Brown: *Nurse 1, COVID-19, 2020*, colored pencil on brown Kraft paper, 9 by 12 inches.

hands grip the utility cart in front of her, which is loaded with a broom, Clorox, dusters, and other cleaning supplies. Captured in semi-profile, the housekeeper's body remains aligned with her cart, headed off to clean the next room, then the next, and the next. Only her head turns toward the viewer, her stare smoothly ambivalent.

Lashes superbly extended, the figure in *Nurse 1* returns the viewer's gaze from behind her face shield, which provides both viral and symbolic protection. What's on display is not candor, nor any grand "dignifying" imperative that such projects usually entail. The composition of the twelve-by-nine-inch images further conveys distance, each woman floating in the brown space of the paper. This is a visualization of the spatial requirements of Covid-19 as well as a maneuver against any invading overfamiliarity, the abnegation inherent in identifying oneself in the other. The portraits emphasize each worker's individuality, doing away with any cozy liberal notion of a cohesive "us."

Despite being preceded by #MeToo, which addressed women's workplace conditions and gender pay equity, it was the pandemic and the summer protests against police brutality that forced the plight of essential workers to the fore. Representations of them have proliferated, with murals popping up in Charlotte, Chicago, and New York, and platitudes "honoring" or "saluting" them have become de rigueur. Still, material improvements like increased wages or guaranteed health care (currently, one out of seven essential workers lack insurance coverage) have not yet come to pass. Their exploitation is spun into the romantic, nationalistic language of wartime, rife with heroic sacrifice and frontline service, the disease cast as invading enemy combatant. For all the idiosyncratic vibrancy and style of Brown's series, what I hope remains with viewers is the leeriness of the workers, the trepidation in their posture. May they serve as a reminder that the sacrifices have been unequal and unnecessary and challenge us all to deliver more than mere gratitude.

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