



Aya Brown Is Honoring Essential Workers through Uplifting Drawings

• Daria Harper May 22, 2020 4:51pm



Aya Brown, *Nurse 1, COVID-19*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Portrait of Photo by Jheyda Mc Garrell. Courtesy of the artist.

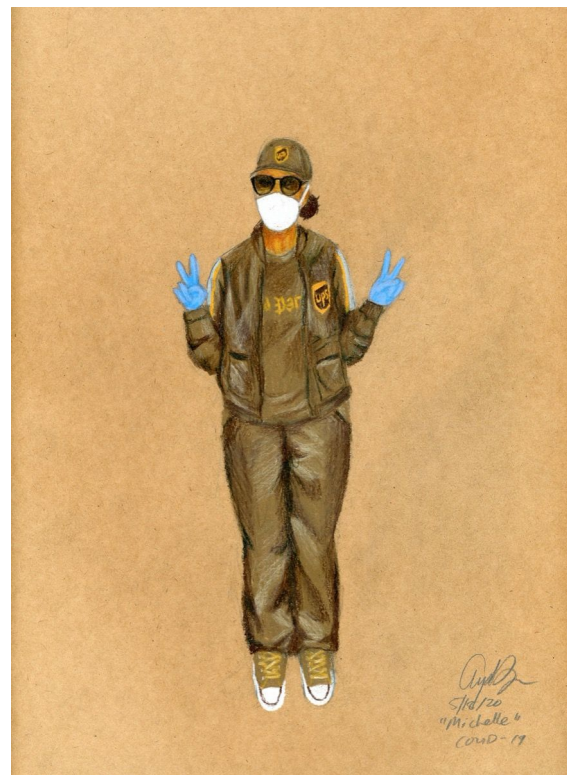
Like many of us, the young Brooklyn-based artist Aya Brown has been stuck at home for the past couple of months, with more free time on her hands. And while many aspects of her daily life were put on hold, she found a new way to connect with people: an ongoing series of drawings that honor essential workers. The brilliantly colored artworks, which she started posting to Instagram in early April, are inspired by loved ones and strangers alike—from a nurse in vivid pink scrubs, to an MTA employee in a neon vest, to a local grocery store clerk wearing UGGs and an apron. They're all rendered with exacting, loving detail, from their masked faces to their footwear and glimmers of gold jewelry.

Brown’s artistic practice is focused on documenting unseen people, with an emphasis on bringing visibility to queer Black and brown women. She’s always sought to channel love and care to her community through her work, and the “Essential Workers” series is no exception. The new drawings feature Black women who are facing the brutal realities of being an essential worker during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I really value these women,” Brown said in a recent interview. “I know how important they are to our community, to all communities. They work in all hospitals and they always have. That’s kind of where this all started.”



Aya Brown, “Lanae” Fedex Worker, COVID-19, 2020.
Courtesy of the artist.



Aya Brown, “Michelle” UPS Worker, COVID-19, 2020.
Courtesy of the artist.

On a recent trip to the hospital for reasons unrelated to COVID-19, Brown began reflecting on the amount of time and care that the nurses provided to patients. Her drawings are meant to express gratitude, she said, to the essential workers in various fields, whose efforts should not go unnoticed.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Brown began drawing as a child. “It’s something that I did to stimulate my mind,” she said. “I would much rather [draw] than watch TV or go outside.” She was born into an artistic family—several family members are musicians, and her maternal great-grandmother owned a kimono

factory in Japan that specialized in hand embroidery. Brown, who's now in her late twenties, studied fine art in college and has since pursued work at publications and art spaces. Last year, Brown created the cover for *Office* magazine and landed a collaboration with the fashion brand MadeMe. And earlier this year, she was included in a group show at the Harlem-based gallery Catinca Tabacaru.



Aya Brown, "Natalia Mednez" Head Chef at La Morada, COVID-19, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

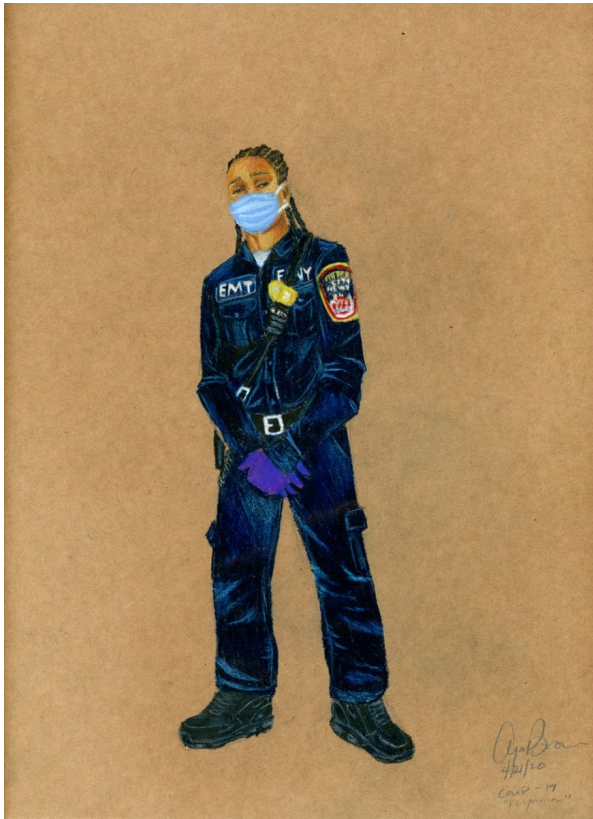


Aya Brown, "Wendy" Childcare Worker, COVID-19, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

From the start of the pandemic, Brown saw the economic and social impact of the crisis in her community. She was furloughed from her job just as the severity of the pandemic began to reveal itself. Since posting the first drawing on Instagram on April 3rd, the "Essential Workers" series has been received with acclaim and enthusiasm, from within the art world and far beyond it, evidenced by countless likes. She's now posted more than a dozen of the 9-by-12-inch drawings, each one seemingly gaining more attention than the last.

While the works resonate on a universal level, they also specifically highlight the difficulties that many people in Brown's Flatbush neighborhood are experiencing. In the captions accompanying her posts, Brown tells the story of her friend who works as a store director at Target; of her sister, who hand-delivered laptops to her students for their new online learning; and of her 79-year-old grandmother, who

is working at a small clinic in her town in Japan. Brown's support for these women encourages us all to express gratitude, especially during a time of such devastation.



Aya Brown, "Keyanna" EMT, COVID-19, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Aya Brown, USPS Worker, COVID-19, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Brown pays special attention to the appearance of these women, adorning them in gold bracelets and earrings, some with long nails and bright sneakers. "A lot of my homegirls went to nursing school, and I know how fly they are," Brown said. This isn't just for the sake of aesthetics, but also to honor the individual personalities of each of these women.

She's also very intentional with the materials she uses. Brown began questioning the traditional materials used for drawing and painting in high school and continued pushing against these notions during her time as an undergrad at Cooper Union. For the past couple of years, she's primarily been drawing on brown craft paper. "My favorite part about the paper is that the color changes over time," she said, noting that it reminds her of the way that skin changes color.



Aya Brown, *MTA Bus Driver, COVID-19*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Aya Brown, *C Town, COVID-19*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

She noted that while she is grateful for the attention that her drawings have received, she wants her work to “reach everyone who it’s for.” That means finding ways to bring her work out of the digital sphere, so that it can be seen in real life. “Social media has been reaching a lot of people and that’s been bringing me so much joy,” Brown said, “but I know there are aunties out there who are not on social media. I want it to be accessible.”

Recently, she turned a bedsheet into a large-scale banner of a nurse in Elmo-printed scrubs and vibrant Nikes, and hung it outside her apartment. The top of the painting reads “Thank You” in black, spray-painted cursive; she waterproofed the piece to ensure that it holds up for as long as possible.

Brown also recently teamed up with Girls Only and Ghetto Gastro to create a limited T-shirt featuring one of her drawings. She noted that the founders of each of these organizations, who are close friends, are also passionate about giving back to their communities: Girls Only provides artistic experiences through tattooing and community outreach, and Ghetto Gastro is a multidisciplinary collective that combines food, art, and design to create culture-shifting experiences and content.



Photo by Devlin Claro Resetar / Aniza Iniguez. Courtesy of Aya Brown.



Photo by Aya Brown. Courtesy of Aya Brown.

The T-shirt, released yesterday, features a nurse, the first drawing from the “Essential Workers” series. The back of the shirt includes the message “We See You, We Thank You,” with a quote by Toni Morrison. Proceeds from sales of the shirt—which is selling for \$77—will go to Rethink Food NYC and La Morada, which together have provided meals to 700 people per day in the Bronx during the COVID-19 crisis.

As for the future, Brown’s focus remains on her Brooklyn community. She recently received an invitation from a close family friend who owns a deli to create a large-scale mural on the side of his store. She said that the local business is a neighborhood staple. “This work is for who it’s for,” Brown said. And if these drawings never hang on the walls of a gallery, she’s okay with that.