

# Wallpaper\*

## Aya Brown's portraits are love letters to Black female essential workers

Artist Aya Brown's portrait series featuring Black female essential workers is currently on display across nine bus stops in Brooklyn, in collaboration with Virgil Abloh's Public Domain project



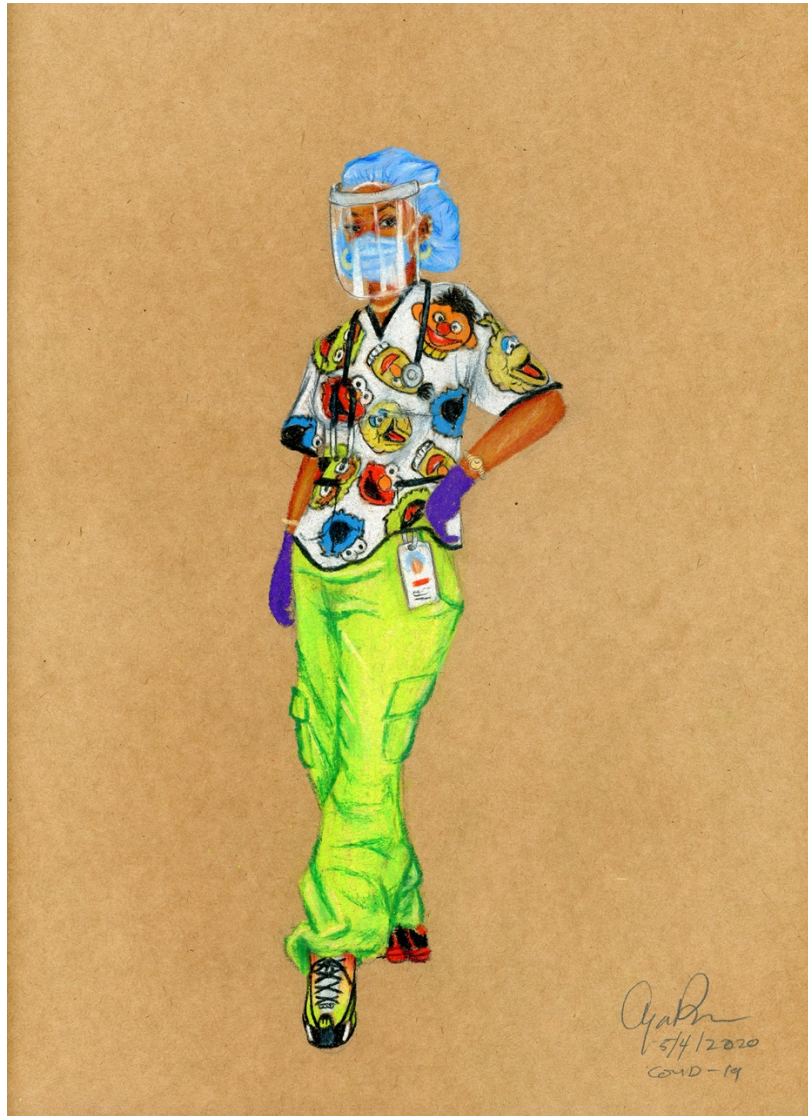
Aya Brown, "MIKEY" FIRE LIFE SAFETY ACCOUNT MANAGER, COVID-19, 2020. Mermaid Ave, between W 27th St & W 25th St, Brooklyn. Courtesy the artist.  
(Image credit: Nicholas Knight)

By Fiona Mahon October 28, 2022

Bus stops across Brooklyn will give space to art this month, displaying a series of portraits that champion local women. 'Black women you are essential, we love you, we see you' is artist Aya Brown's love letter honouring the Black and brown female essential workers who have kept New York City going during the pandemic.

Drawn on brown craft paper, using Prismacolor pencils, Brown's portraits render her

subjects - beauty store workers, nurses, caretakers - with undeniable poise and grace. Though many of the women are illustrated wearing their uniforms, small details reveal their unique personal style and finesse. Gold earrings, ripped jeans, flawless braids, a Sesame Street printed top.



Aya Brown, *NURSE 3, COVID-19*, 2020, Colour pencil on brown Kraft paper  
(Image credit: Photography: Nicholas Knight)

Her choice of canvas is intentional. ‘I use brown paper because the art school standard, or when you buy paper to put in your printer, when you sign a contract, when you look at your email - everything begins on white’ she says. ‘For me, when I’m drawing these Black women, I don’t want them to come from whiteness. Things do not need to start from white, this brown paper, this colour that looks like our skin, is totally valid.’

Brown began the series back in early 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic. Wanting

to go further than the 7pm clapping ritual, the Flatbush-based artist started to document these women who she felt were unseen and under-appreciated, yet who were risking their lives each day to keep life moving for all of us. She published the portraits to her Instagram, accompanied by the stories of the women featured.



Aya Brown, "KEYANNA" EMT, COVID-19, 2020. Color pencil on brown Kraft paper  
(Image credit: Photography: Nicholas Knight)



Aya Brown, "BRITTNEY" OB/GYN SONOGRAPHER, COVID-19, 2020. Ave D & Nostrand Ave, Brooklyn. *Courtesy the artist.*  
(Image credit: Nicholas Knight)

Brown's close friend Keyanna, an EMT who drives an ambulance truck, is depicted, as is Brittney, another friend who works as an OB/GYN Sonographer at a local hospital. Both women will travel past the portraits on their way to work.

'Brittney she lives around the corner from me and she drives past it everyday. Now all of her neighbours are saying 'Yo Brittney!' She's now getting that acknowledgement, she does incredible work for women and mothers.'

Locations were chosen to amplify the women and their roles within their communities. Keasha and Iesha work in public housing at the Kingsborough housing projects in Brooklyn's Crown Heights, where their portrait is now on display. 'I tried to put that portrait as close as possible to them so they could see it and so that people in their neighbourhood could see it. So they can see these women who maintain the area' she says.



Aya Brown, "KEASHA & IEESHA" KINGSBOROUGH NYCHA WORKERS, COVID-19, 2020. St. Marks Ave, between Buffalo Ave & Ralph Ave, Brooklyn. Courtesy the artist.  
(Image credit: Nicholas Knight)

Accessibility is important to Brown, who previously worked in a gallery, and has displayed works on the facade of the Brooklyn Public Library, on subway kiosks and even outside her own apartment. Showing across nine bus stops on the MTA transit network in Brooklyn, this exhibition has been produced in collaboration with Virgil Abloh's Public Domain project.

'I think public spaces are super powerful. Public space is everyone's space. The gallery space can be very exclusive' she says. 'These works are not supposed to be in a gallery, unless it's an institution that's accessible to my community. I chose the bus stops specifically because during my entire childhood I took the bus.'



Aya Brown, "BEAUTY SUPPLY WORKER" EMT, COVID-19, 2020. Color pencil on brown Kraft paper  
(Image credit: Photography: Nicholas Knight)

The essential workers series is ongoing, portraying women Brown knows personally, along with women she has met in daily life, and some she has not yet encountered. 'These are all genuine moments of just me being inspired.'

Some of the portraits have been drawn through sittings, others through photographs that have been sent to her. Commissions have also come from far and wide, with essential workers asking her to draw them.

'Black women have this sisterhood, this line that's unspoken. I'm showing these women that I love them – and it makes me happy that they get to see it.'

#### INFORMATION

Aya Brown's portraits will be on view on bus stops throughout Brooklyn until 14 March, 2021