



The Highs and Lo-Fi's of Adrian Armstrong

by [Leslie Moody Castro](#) | August 14, 2019



Adrian Armstrong, Sage, 2019. Ballpoint pen, acrylic, and oil pastel on wood, 38" x 38"

Highs and Lo-Fi's, the current solo show by Adrian Armstrong curated by Vladimir Mejia at **Co-Lab Projects** in Austin, directly addresses mental health issues often overlooked in African American culture. As his debut solo exhibition (and debut curatorial role for Mejia), the Austin-based Armstrong bravely uses his own struggle with these issues as an entry point for the work.





Installation view.

Eleven portraits line the walls of the gallery space. Outside the gallery, Armstrong has painted a large title mural of a blue hand on a bright red wall, which acts as the show's preface. The mural is a stark confrontational entry point, one of many sensory triggers that Armstrong uses to successfully challenge a small space. The portraits are hand drawn with ballpoint pen, then stylized and manipulated to distort the faces of the figures, and then cut out and pasted to plywood. The works pull you in. The contrast between the individual backgrounds of each panel, juxtaposed with the warm palette and thick blue marks of the pen, create a tension on the two-dimensional surfaces — a push-and-pull in the works that extends into the space. Armstrong and Mejia's layout of the work illustrate a strong understanding of spatial composition, and the arrangement of the works creates a successful choreography for the viewer; you step in then out to view the works fully.



Adrian Armstrong, Untitled 4 (TooMuch), 2019. Ballpoint pen, acrylic, spraypaint, and oil pastel on wood, 38" x 38"

The portraits themselves are images of people in pain. A green hand covers a face, in a gesture of frustration. In another, against a bright blue background, a torso is bent over, the face covered by two bright yellow hands in a gesture of grief.



Adrian, Armstrong, A Depressed Portrait (Yellow 1), 2019. Ballpoint pen, acrylic, and oil pastel on wood, 38" x 38"

The emotional rollercoaster caused by mental health issues and depression, specifically in the black community, are visibly present in the works; they offer a stark visual description of the anguish and loneliness that mental health issues exacerbate. Grief, emotional suffocation, solitude, and frustration are all represented in Armstrong's portraits. And, adding to the multi-sensory experience of the show (and perhaps the larger issue of how these issues consume the entire self), Armstrong has produced a site-specific EP. Visitors are encouraged to bring headphones for a full experience of looking, listening, and being present.



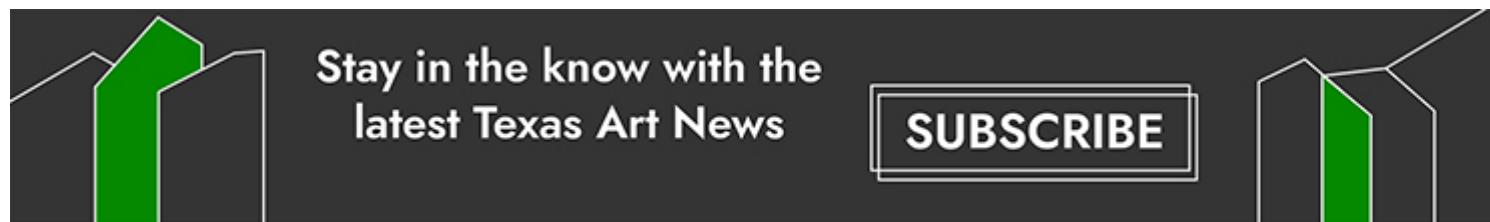
Adrian Armstrong, Nipsey Hussle, 2019. Ballpoint pen, acrylic, and oil pastel on wood, 38" x 38"

Each track on the EP features fragments of conversations with community members suffering from mental health issues: they recall the feeling of trying to suppress their suffering, to work past their worries while not vocalizing them, and the stigma created by mental health issues in their communities. These individual voices add an extra human element to the show, and so the drawn and collaged portraits feel like more than just art on a wall — they become personalized, individualized. You begin to more fully understand the impact of personal suffering kept quiet.

Highs and Lo-Fi's is Armstrong's personal call for visibility — one that reminds us of ubiquitous yet lonely struggles, and of and the lack of conversation around them, specifically in communities of color.

On view at [Co-Lab Projects](#), Austin, through August 31, 2019

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