



His Mom Taught Him To Quilt. Black Artists Guided His Style

04:31 ↻ </>

February 28, 2020

By [Amelia Mason](#)



A portrait of the artist's sister, Latoya Anderson by quilt artist Michael Thorpe. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

This article is more than 1 year old.

On a Sunday morning in February, [Michael C. Thorpe](#) crouches in his mother's living room with a mallet, hammering together the corners of a massive wooden frame. A YouTube video of Thelonious Monk plays quietly

on the television while the family's tiny Yorkshire Terrier, Gracie, scampers around.

Once the frame is assembled, Thorpe pauses, unsure if it is perfectly square. He summons his mother, Susan Richards, from upstairs. She flips over the metal speed square Thorpe is using to measure the corners (“Oh! That’s how it goes!”) and makes her appraisal. “It’s a little bit off, so you need to take your mallet and just [tap] it a little bit, so this is absolutely flush.”



A portrait of Cecilia Gehred by quilt artist Michael Thorpe. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

The frame is designed to hold a large quilt that currently hangs in the dining room, a portrait of Thorpe’s girlfriend in front of a row of apartment buildings drawn in lacy lines of thread. Eventually it will hang with a number of Thorpe’s other creations in the Boston clothing boutique All Too Human as part of an exhibition titled simply, “An Art Show.”

There aren't too many young artists who find their calling in quilts. But that's exactly the case for the 26-year-old Thorpe, a Newton artist who makes large-scale portraits using quilting techniques he learned from his mom.



Quilt artist Michael Thorpe and his mother Susan Richards talk about thread colors for one of his quilts. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

The narrow apartment shared by mother and son is a museum to their shared obsession. One of Richards' quilts hangs in the living room, a kaleidoscopic whirl of earth-toned triangles sewn with meticulous care. In the dining room, Thorpe's brash creations adorn the walls. Pictures of these quilts regularly rack up hundreds of likes on the artist's [Instagram](#) account, and it's easy to see why. His portraits are as much like paintings as quilts, soft cubist collages in sunny colors.

Mother and son espouse different attitudes to quilting. She is the perfectionist, the guardian of tradition. He is the experimenter, the big-picture thinker, the one who doesn't bother to sew up the edges of his quilts.



Self-portrait, by quilt artist Michael Thorpe. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

“I’m a trial-by-error guy anyway, so,” Thorpe says, shrugging, as he screws corner braces onto the frame. “I know you are,” Richards replies. But she can’t resist a little dig. “You’re more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants guy.”

Richards may not subscribe to Thorpe’s quilting philosophy, but her support has enabled him to make vast strides in the year-and-a-half he’s been learning to quilt. The giant automated sewing machine Thorpe uses to finish his pieces was a gift from his mother. It takes up most of the dining room and allows him to work at a breakneck pace — he estimates he’s made about 75 pieces since he started quilting. (Richards keeps her own long arm sewing machine in a bedroom upstairs.)

“I looked around and there was not a lot of brothers like me in the quilting world,” Thorpe, a photographer by training, says of his switch to quilting. Thorpe is biracial — his mother is white and his father is black — and he

says he turned to quilting partly as a way to distinguish himself from his peers. “Not even to mention ... my friends, like my contemporaries, nobody was doing it,” he says. “And that was what, like, just set me apart.”



Michael Thorpe in his studio with one of his self-portraits. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

Searching for an aesthetic, he looked to other black artists, and discovered Jean-Michel Basquiat. You can see the artist’s influence in Thorpe’s early quilts, which are abstract and appealingly cartoonish. But he didn’t know how to talk about them, to explain his process or motivation.

“It was a *struggle* for me to make those pieces,” Thorpe says. “I realized I’m a very practical artist. Everything has to make sense. And those works were like, what am I doing?”

Get local arts and culture news, artist resources and ways to stay creative at home sent to your inbox each week. [Sign up now.](#)

Once he switched to portraits, something clicked. His quilts grew bigger and more inventive. He found inspiration in Romare Beardon’s experimental collages and Jacob Lawrence’s abstracted depictions of black life.

Thorpe says his own work can’t help but be shaped by his own biracial identity — in part because so many of the family and friends depicted in his portraits are black.

“It’s something I subconsciously think about all the time,” he says. “I think about when you walk into museums and you see the vast disparity of white people in paintings, or in works, compared to black people.”



Michael Thorpe works on a self-portrait in his studio. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

Standing in his dining room studio, Thorpe flips through a book about the quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, a community of African American women quilters in Alabama. The patterns are bright and asymmetrical, an

improvisational style that flew in the face of convention but earned accolades in the contemporary art world. Thorpe says discovering this work helped contextualize his own. Though he owes much to his mother and New England's predominantly white quilting community, Gee's Bend gave him an African-American lineage to connect with.

“They broke every rule, not knowing it,” he says. “But they just [were] doing their own thing, being like, ‘We're going to make these quilts.’ And they became these amazing works of art. And I think I'm just the next iteration of that.”



Michael Thorpe, his mother Susan Richards and their dog Gracie, stand next to a quilt portrait Michael's partner Cecilia Gehred. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

Thorpe recently finished a self-portrait. His image is filled in with different colored threads, like pencil lines, in a style of his own invention. It sits

against a lopsided geometric pattern, a riot of red and black and orange. The design is based on the quilts of Gee's Bend, and it was made by his mother.

Michael C. Thorpe's exhibition "An Art Show" is on display at the clothing boutique [All Too Human](#) in Boston.

This segment aired on February 28, 2020.



Amelia Mason  Arts And Culture Reporter

Amelia Mason is an arts and culture reporter and critic for WBUR.

[More...](#)