

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Art for This Moment (/collections/art-for-this-moment)

Pictorial Quilt

Michael C. Thorpe

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I am trying to gather the strength to find the appropriate words to say right now.

Harriet Powers is one of the strongest women I have ever learned about. She was born a slave and then, by sheer desire and determination and will, she became an artist. She decided that the most important thing was to tell her story. The [pictorial quilt](https://collections.mfa.org/objects/116166) (<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/116166>) shows the world how Harriet Powers saw it.



Harriet Powers, Pictorial quilt (detail), 1895-98. Cotton plain weave, pieced, appliquéd, embroidered, and quilted. Bequest of Maxim Karolik.



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Until very recently, all the literature on Harriet Powers's work was written by white people. That's how stories are told in this country. Knowing the history of her quilt, I understand the parallels to the country in which it was made. Powers's quilt was only ever owned by white people. They got to decide how and if this quilt would have ever been shown. Nothing has changed. White people in this country control perception. They control the media, the social networks, and the educational system. They get to tell the stories they want. As a Black person in this country, your story can feel already written. It is time to hear our stories, from us. George Floyd was murdered and the official autopsy report from Hennepin County said there was no evidence of traumatic asphyxia. Millions of people have watched the video. George Floyd died because he was a Black man in America and nothing else. Please listen to our stories. This is the time to educate yourselves and each other to understand what is going on.



Michael Thorpe, *Untitled*, 2020. Batik fabric. Courtesy of the artist.

Author

Michael C. Thorpe creates quilts of how he sees the world using techniques taught to him by his mother. A native of Newton, Massachusetts, an athlete, and a photographer by training, he graduated from Emerson College in 2016. Thorpe's quilts were recently on view in a solo exhibition, "An Art Show," at All Too Human in Boston, and he has been profiled in the *Boston Globe* and WBUR's *Artery*.

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