

THE AMERICAN ARTIST RECLAIMING THE CENTENNIAL TRADITION OF QUILTING

NAOMI ACCARDI INTERVIEWS MICHAEL C. THORPE ON THE QUILTING INDUSTRY, THE LUMINARIES THAT INSPIRE HIS WORK, AND HOW SWITCHING ARTISTIC MEDIUMS HAS GOTTEN HIM TO WHERE HE IS TODAY.

Micheal C. Thorpe fits all the stereotypes of the contemporary, quirky, 20-something-year-old American artist. The eclectic style, his head of voluminous messy hair, a colorful personality, and the daring, tongue in cheek approach all point in the same direction ... except he's not so stereotypical at all. Despite being an exceptional multi-media artist depicting life as he sees it through a layered creative process, his media of choice is fairly unexpected. We are talking about the *quilt*, the centennial tradition imported by British and Dutch colonial women into the Southern States of America and perpetuated by middle-aged white women across the country to this day.

Moreover, not too long ago, Michael was a college athlete, playing basketball with exceptional results at Emerson University in Boston, MA, where he was studying photo-journalism. Photography got him a foot in the door of the art world but he abandoned the discipline shortly after as a result of a vivacious demeanor and recalcitrant character which naturally push him to distance himself from

the crowd. In fact, Michael's aesthetic is a direct result of experimentation and rejection of the common, hip processes favored by his peers. His Instagram offers a window into his prismatic lifestyle and with a smart eye, you can get a glimpse of his sarcastic, expressive personality just by reading his catchy internet alias (@iversonsdurag). The choice of this unique and brilliant screen-name was narrated to me with extreme nonchalance during our exhilarating, 2-hour long facetime conversation.



"My audience is completely ambivalent as I have a bunch of middle-aged white women following me now. I see them typing my @ name in their phones and they probably think what the hell does this mean?" he told me towards the end of our chat after exhausting all of my questions. I caught Michael in the midst of his move to New York City where he recently got studio space in the same building as Tyrrell Winston and Reginald Sylvester II, after his career unexpectedly hit the gas pedal on the back of his first solo show, just before the shelter in place regulations hit America.

An unexpected flash flood hit the city so Michael was chilling at home when he picked up the phone. To my elation, he was wearing a white t-shirt designed by his friend and fellow artist Sebastien Samson in collaboration with local streetwear brand FELT. A piece I also own released to raise money for the National Bail Out Fund as protestors across the nation started unjustly getting jailed while marching for Black Lives and demanding equal rights for all.

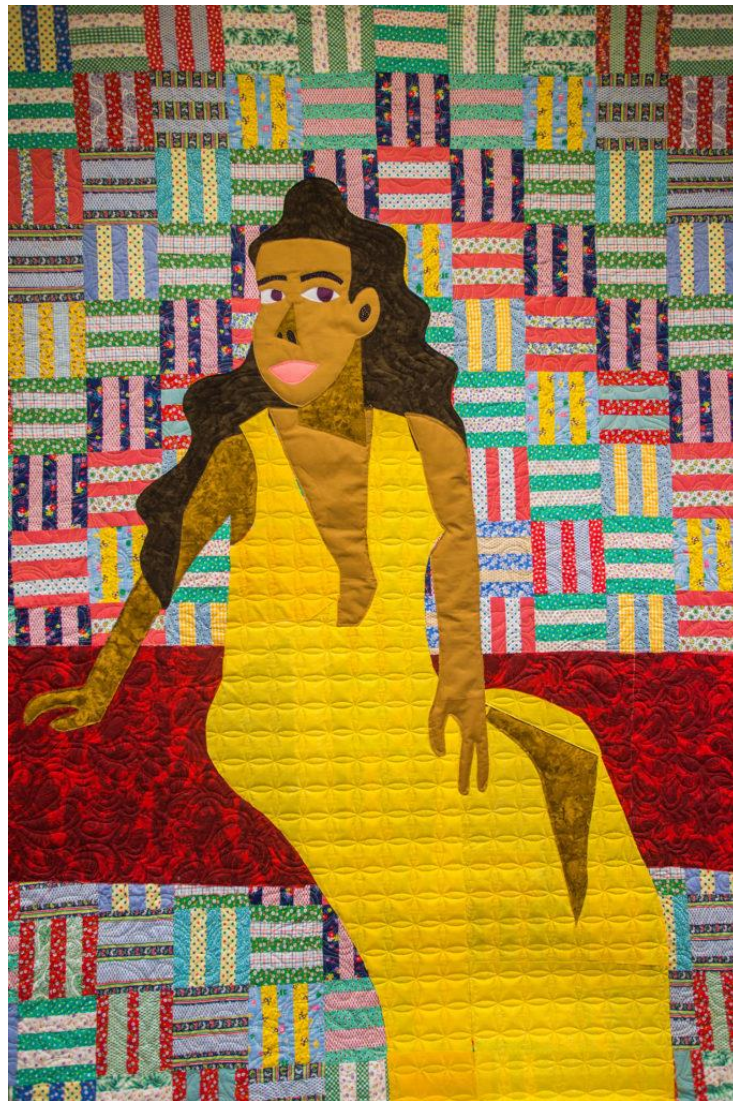
Thorpe was born in New York but raised in Florida and then relocated to Boston just in time for high school. “*You might call it secondary school,*” he pointed out referring to my European status then proceeding to clarify that being an artist was not something he realized at a young age, rather the opportunity fell onto his lap later on, after coming to terms with the fact that being a professional athlete wasn’t his ultimate goal. Photography might have been the first step towards finding his niche but soon he discovered that it was a competitive business that favors who you know over talent and he just didn’t want to have to deal with that. Of course, he still faces this reality within the art sector but he finds more freedom and range of movement as he explores different techniques of creative expression through quilting.

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“The day I chose to leave photography was so liberating. I had constricted myself into a box that I did not necessarily fit in,” he answered when asked about his emancipation from photography to art. After that, to this day, Michael feels concerned about being labeled as an expert on one exclusive practice. “*Some say I am a quilt artist but I am more of an artist that uses quilt,*” he asserted. Surely his media of choice doesn’t define who he is, though it does a pretty great job at representing his uncanny genius and reason to be.

Thorpe is one to learn by doing. Initially, his creative process was experimental. He bought tools and materials and started diving right into it, not knowing exactly what was going to be the end result. Then his mother bought a quilting machine, an object he described as a ‘big ass sewing machine’ that follows mechanical movements in the x and y axes. He was intrigued by the tool and decided to learn how to operate it. “*The quilting industry is pretty standardized and schematic. They*

give you a book with patterns and you have to follow those, so the offering is fairly minimal. But that's what people want." He taught me, mentioning that traditional quilters enjoy the mechanical, indistinct process resulting in a functional garment. Needless to say, once again, his subversive attitude kicked in and pushed him to reclaim the technique in his own, unorthodox manner. The quilt-focused coming of age, though, didn't manifest until later. Initially, Thorpe wanted to be a painter, and his main inspiration, he covertly admitted, was Jean Michel Basquiat. *"I have a piece right here,"* he smirked while grabbing and holding a small, black frame in front of the camera calling attention to the recognizable influences. The Basquiat-esque figurines were born out of the need to get acquainted with the forebears of modern Black art while experimenting to find his own personal style.



BLACK
MANS





While fabric and thread acted as the background to his art, Thorpe was still using pigment as the channel. Soon, he found the technique to be common and easily categorizable, plus it was hard for him to eloquently discuss the meaning of the work he was producing at the time, so abandoned paint all together at the same time his artwork had started popping off because of the familiarity with the revolutionary late artist. *"I simply couldn't start my career as an angsty artist because my practice was informed by him. I'd feel like a fraud as I actually live a very good life,"* he conceded, *"Not saying that people that people that do make work like that have many problems but the style just didn't resonate with me".*

For this reason, he started opening up to other artists that weren't as referenced in popular culture and ended up simplifying his own work. *"I call it 'How I See It'. I either depict things or describe them,"* he said in regards to narrating his style now. Studying the work of luminaries such as Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence and most recently David Hockey and Alex Katz proved him that you could make it as an artist even if you don't concentrate on abstractionism. Learning about Matisse opened his eyes to what he actually wanted to do, and although he finds these pieces boring in terms of composition, he felt like the work was finally authentic to him. This epiphany brought him back to his original practice as a photographer.

"I don't look at somebody and draw them. I actually could but people like to move. So I end up taking a picture of the person and working with that," he explained about the reconciliation. As he started to investigate himself and connecting with all of his facets, Michael found that his artwork improved. *"It's just all coming back,"* he told me analyzing how photography has become instrumental to his own pictorial process as he builds a catalog of his truest craft.

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The uniqueness of his art grants Michael access to any circles he wishes to step into as forgotten practices such as what he has repurposed are perceived as cool, interesting, and worthy of attention. At the beginning of the year, his story captivated NPR (National Public Radio) but with no work displayed virtually anywhere, at the wake of his first interview going live, Thorpe had to string

together a show *“Because you know, I couldn’t tell people check me out on Instagram!”* he joked. The exhibition was hosted by a local Boston boutique and he compared its success to a Thursday drop at Supreme.

The place was packed and he sold some pieces which helped him through being let go from his day job as a designer at Converse exactly a week later. But every cloud has a silver lining when you are as talented and positive as Michael. Museums and galleries started hitting him up and wanting to see his work, eventually recharging his energy and helping him building confidence to commit to being a full-time artist. For the law of attraction, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston eventually acquired a piece from his collection. How many young artists can say that? *“Now when I talk to my art friends I tell them, yeah you might make more money than me but ... do you have a piece in a museum?! Didn’t think so!”* he laughed. Despite the sarcasm, Michael remains humble. Holding space at such an institution is still an alien concept for him as he personally doesn’t know anybody who can say the same. The past six months have been intense. He’s navigating through newly found recognition as he experiments and masters his technique, not free of mistakes. Initially, he used to stretch and staple his quilt onto wooden frames the way you would with canvas, but the new gallery he’s working with advised him against it as it would not be long-lasting.



“They fucking roasted me,” he said of their visit to his studio. Michael is aware of his radical persona but at the same time, he’s conscious of the fact that he must follow a few rules if he desires longevity. For this reason, he’s slowly adapting to putting the textiles behind glass and studying the best way to preserve a type of work that cannot be cleaned if damaged. As a former athlete, basketball resurfaced in his life through his work after taking into consideration how jerseys are usually displayed on walls, unframed, as an act of worship for a person you idolize but wouldn’t stop if seen on the street.

Given the personal entanglement with the sport, he finds it hard to use it as a subject matter. In addition, as a self-proclaimed contrarian, Michael is naturally compelled to distance himself from the discipline as it becomes art’s most favorite topic. *“The jersey pieces are dated, I made them two years ago. They have hidden meaning but back then I was still experimenting with aesthetics. Those are pure hedonism”*. Now he prefers to provide his audience with concepts rather than frivolous art.

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Self inquiry and introspection inform all of Michael’s work, so even if the Jersey pieces have a superficial connotation, they are charged with meaning regardless. The interrogation halos around the figure of the Black Athlete and the celebrity status leading to the instrumentalization of the person’s talent and physical attributes. The industry’s habit to create a public-facing persona when dealing with professional sports and the weird concept of stripping the athlete off their natural personality for publicity reasons is also a premise.

Thorpe is extra aware of the speedy evolution and momentum his practice has received and he must seize the moment. The steady uphill learning curve that has pulled him forward over the course of the past few months is what triggered his move to New York City. Here he intends of taking the time to focus on perfecting his creative flow and settle into a healthier pace as we prepare his second show, after the unforeseen spike in praise.