

BOSTON GLOBE: ART

He was an MVP basketball player. Now his star is rising as an art quilter

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated April 15, 2021, 11:59 a.m.



Michael C. Thorpe, 27, an art quilter and former basketball star at Emerson College and Newton North, now featured in a Dove soap commercial. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Michael C. Thorpe's wildest dreams are coming true.

It didn't take long. The former basketball star at Emerson College traded his ball for a long-arm quilting machine and became an art quilter. His career is soaring off the launchpad.

At 27, he has just two exhibitions on his resume: One last year at the All Too Human boutique on Clarendon Street led to the second, opening this week at LaiSun Keane, where his works are selling fast. His shift from basketball to textiles garnered attention: he's featured in a commercial for Dove soap celebrating Black athletes whose careers extend beyond sports.

The Museum of Fine Arts acquired one of Thorpe's quilts. It will be at the center of "Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories," opening in October. Being in a museum collection is a pinnacle for any artist.

"I had this moment where I was like, well, that was a good art career," Thorpe said in a Zoom conversation from his home in Brooklyn. He once worked as an intern at the MFA.

Some of his quilts are all text. The MFA's acquisition reads, simply, "Black Man." Some refer to pop culture. Others — portraits, interiors, and landscapes — have a buzzy warmth, radiating joy and affection.

"He is an amazing portrait artist. He clearly has an affinity for his subjects," said Jennifer Swope, associate curator in the MFA's Textile & Fashion Arts Department and organizer of "Fabric of a Nation." "He's making these line drawings with stitching, changing the color of the thread to create visual depth. And he's not afraid of color and pattern."



Michael C. Thorpe's "Family." PHILIPP J. HOFFMAN/COURTESY OF LAISUN KEANE

"Family," a quilt at LaiSun Keane, depicts the artist and his brother sitting with their parents. Thorpe, who is biracial, was raised by his mother, quilter Susan Richards. The family moved to Newton when he was in high school.

"This piece is a family portrait that has never been taken," reads Thorpe's description of the work. "This is all about that magical question what if. What if I grew up with my father and mother?"

Quilts cover furniture and hang on the walls of the family home in Newton. Thorpe made his first one at 10, but he promptly abandoned the medium for basketball. He was a 1,000-point career scorer at Emerson. But he always knew he wanted to be an artist, and he cast around for the right medium. If he had trouble depicting basketball, he knew it wasn't right.

In 2017, the year after Thorpe graduated, Richards brought a long-arm quilting machine home.

"I was like, I don't know what this thing is. I'm going to learn it," Thorpe said. "Once I made the first quilt, it was like — oh, this is over."

Making basketball quilts came naturally.

“So many of the things I was doing before felt like I was really just trying to make art,” he said. “With quilting, I can make it day in and day out, and then I can talk about it even longer.”



Michael C. Thorpe's "Hoop Dreams." PHILIPP J. HOFFMAN/COURTESY OF LAISUN KEANE

Thorpe's mother's quilts are fastidious and traditional. His are wonky, skewed, and full of story. He cites Matisse, Hockney, and Basquiat as influences. Trying to pull his vision together, he finds himself navigating what he calls the "Black artist aesthetic."

"Matisse and David Hockney, they just make what they see," Thorpe said. "They're not making this big narrative about something-something.

David Hockney wants to draw 16,000 pictures of his dog. That is what I want to get to."
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You can see Matisse's sunny imprint in "Living Room," a bustling interior depicting Thorpe's first apartment. In accompanying text, the quilter looks forward to buying a house. "Best believe when it happens it will be the most jiggy environment ever," he writes.

Still, he's moved to make art about society's failings. The MFA's quilt reflects that. So does "Negro Crows" at LaiSun Keane, depicting characters from the 1941 Disney animated feature "Dumbo," including one named Jim "Dandy" Crow. It captures what the artist calls his "love/hate relationship with Disney."

"I want to use what I can do, and say what I feel I need to say," Thorpe said.



Michael C. Thorpe's "Negro Crows." PHILIPP J. HOFFMAN/COURTESY OF LAISUN KEANE

The young artist is still finding his ground. He's imagining how, down the road, he might sell quilts to fund some larger multimedia project.

"I take quilting as my paintbrush and canvas and try to make everything and anything within those confines," Thorpe said. "But after I push all those limits, there are going to be other limits I want to explore."

"Dick 4 President," on view at LaiSun Keane, nods to another artist pushing at the edge. It portrays comedian Dick Gregory, who ran for president in 1968. Thorpe dreams of someday being the first quilter to make an official presidential portrait.

"I've always wanted to be in art history books," he said. "You make a portrait of a president, and you're in history history books."

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MICHAEL C. THORPE: *MEANDERING THOUGHTS*

At LaiSun Keane, 460 Harrison Ave., April 15- May 29. 978-495-6697, www.laisunkeane.com