

Corridor

IN THE STUDIO WITH MICHAEL C. THORPE

[MICHAEL C. THORPE](#) IS A VISUAL ARTIST
WORKING PRIMARILY IN QUILTING

In 2021, Michael took the leap of moving to New York City to pursue his dreams of making work. We visited his studio for an interview about navigating life, art and New York.

Photo: Phoenix Johnson
Stylist: Michael Grayer
Interviewer: John Kalnins



JK: If you could describe your personal style in three words what would they be?

MT: Colorful, wonky, big. Big wonky colors. There it is.

JK: I like that. So, how long have you been in New York? And do you think that your overall growth and development would have happened in a similar way if you weren't in New York?

MT: So I've been in New York since July 2020. I don't know, that's an interesting question because most of my success in my career has come from Boston, where I'm from, so I don't know if I would be as successful or less successful if I wasn't in New York. I don't know if it's changed a lot in terms of my career but I feel like I've grown as a person so much.



JK: And in what ways would you say you've grown?

MT: I mean, I moved out of my mom's house and just the way you learn about yourself when you're on your own is crazy. On top of that, being in the mecca of culture and being in such close proximity to everything you love and idolize from afar changes the way you see things. Being right in the middle of the melting pot is amazing and has really taught me a lot about myself and expedited a lot of things that may have taken a little bit longer if I was somewhere else.

JK: Yeah, I feel like living on your own for the first time in New York City forces you to grow up fast in a lot of ways. So, what would you say motivates you to create?

MT: What motivates me to create? Honestly, one of the big ones is the fact that I need to make money. A lot of the times when I have money I'm kind of chilling you know? But then of course there is this desire just to make something beautiful and the desire to create things that make people feel something that I'm constantly chasing. But to be real... yeah, the money factor is a big, big motivation. If I had all the money in the world, I don't know how much I would create. I mean I still would, for sure, but I don't know how much or how often I would do it. But there will always be that desire to create something beautiful that makes me or others feel free.

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JK: So, I know that you worked in the corporate world briefly before jumping into your solo art career. What's the difference in feeling? This is maybe a tough question but when you wake

up in the morning on a day where you're coming to the studio or a day you have a show versus when you were waking up before going into the office. What's the difference in the feeling there?



MT: It's literally day and night. Being on your own time doing something that fulfills you and not somebody else. I say it all the time, there's no better feeling than waking up without having to be somewhere and I do that every day. I hope everybody experiences working in something where the only person you're trying to satisfy is yourself. Also, I was not a fan of working for somebody that's not doing anything good for the world. Just being a part of that toxic capitalist system. It's funny when you get out of that world you realize how nonsensical it all is. Being there from nine to five, when a lot of times you could get all your work done in like four hours, but you have to be there because of XYZ and seeing that it's all the same thing over and over and over. That's not to say I don't work my ass off... I work. I work way longer than nine to five but it doesn't feel like work. So I would never go back ever. I will be broke and homeless before I go back.



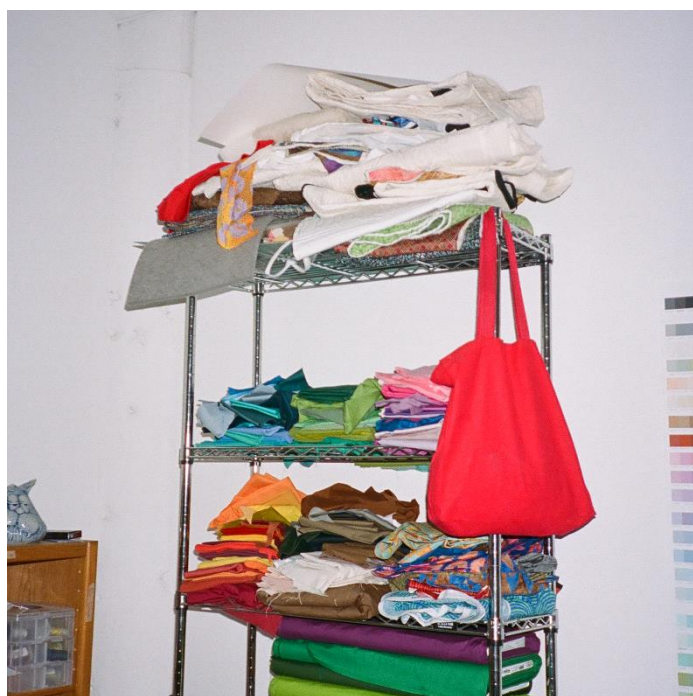
JK: How do you navigate the art world?

MT: I don't really know. I'm very fortunate to have built a team around me that helps me navigate it. I just try to be as genuine

and nice as possible and try to give myself the best fighting chance and then you just have to see where the cards lay you know? It's just all subjective. I could be the hottest one day and trash the next day. So what are you going to do? I would never want to just make stuff that people want. You know, it's like, I don't expect to be hot. Hot now, but I don't expect to be hot forever. Because when you're hot forever, you know you're not exploring, you're not pushing yourself. Navigating it just really is this monumental monster that's always going to be there. So I just get with people like my gallery, a small gallery that really champions me, and then rock with them and let the beast of the art world just be there. You know, you might as well try to be as happy as possible.

JK: Do you ever experience creative blocks at all? And if that does happen, how do you overcome or navigate them?

MT: I don't like to call them creative blocks but more like moments where I don't feel motivated, the way I try to get through it is having all these fail-safes in place because all of my work is pretty much pre-planned. I try to be as prepared ahead of time as possible. I'm not an artist that steps up to a blank canvas and inspiration just pours out of them. I find it hard to believe that any artist is like that, but I've seen plenty of people do it. I am constantly drawing. Constantly drawing source material. Just draw, draw, draw. So whenever I do have that point of a creative or motivational block, I always have something to go back to and then it kind of becomes mindless. But then there's the issue of motivation too, just because it can get really repetitive. I've been fortunate to set up this system where I'm always trying to think three ideas ahead so that I won't ever get bored and I think that means always trying to be innovative, not in the moment necessarily, but more long-term innovation, where maybe in five years I'll do this but let me start thinking about it now. Yeah, It's just always drawing things so when you do hit those ruts, you can always lean on yourself. You've already done the work.



JK: Oh, that's interesting. When you say you're thinking of things maybe five years from now that you want to do. Do you look at your world in that way at all? Are you a guy that thinks



five years from now, “I want to be in this museum”, etc - or is it more, like, you're taking it day-by-day and taking things as they come?



MT: Yeah, I think it's a day-by-day thing. The thing that makes you have to look at the bigger picture is that the art world's very slow. So you might get a museum show but it could be three years out. So you have to maintain this for three years. You know, that's always an anxiety-inducing thing, but then I think, “Okay, well, these people have committed to me so something's gonna work out”. But, yeah, every day is new. I'm excited. I'm living life. On the one hand, it goes day by day but the way that our institution is set up makes you think longer-term because you want your work to be around forever. I always think of my shows in terms of - “If this is the last show ever. Am I gonna be happy about it?” Every time I enter a show, that's the thing that motivates me to push myself out of whatever I'm doing or to ‘get fun with it’.

JK: I mean, that's a good way to look at life overall, right? If this is the last day, I've got to make the most of it. Speaking

of making the most of every day, how was starting your solo art career in the middle of a global pandemic?

MT: Honestly, it's been great. The fact that I could make money doing this thing I love during the pandemic was crazy. I never had my own studio. So, it allowed me to get these routines and best practices down, and to understand how I work. I'm still learning but I've got it pretty down at this point. And understanding all that, when nobody was doing anything helps now when there's, literally like, four gallery openings tonight. Knowing that I don't have to go, or if I wanted to, I can get some work done and then go. I can totally see myself being a little less mature and not dedicating the actual time I need to create if I didn't start in such a strange time.

JK: Do you think if you had come out here, and there were parties and gallery openings on the regular, it would have been more difficult?

MT: Yeah, I could totally see me being a wild boy and getting into shenanigans instead of dedicating the time I need to know my process. So, it was great to figure that out coming here when nobody was doing anything. On top of that when I moved nobody was out on the streets so that made that actual moving process a lot easier.

JK: Have there been any moments for you where you've thought, "Wow, this is crazy... I'm a fully functioning professional artist"?

MT: I don't know if there's necessarily been one moment in particular. Well, it's funny to get back to our conversation earlier... It almost becomes in a weird way like a new nine-to-five. It doesn't feel corporate at all, of course, but a lot of times especially when I'm gearing up for a show or in the winter, things can get monotonous coming into the studio, working and going home and that's the interesting thing; that's how you know you're really in it. You're just doing the work. Making the work on a day-in, day-out basis. That's the jump, you know? Most artists always have something else they have to do to make money, and then making art is their release. So, when you're doing it every day, what becomes the new release?

JK: Yeah, that's a great answer. It wasn't some bullshit like, "Oh, my first gallery opening" or whatever. Everyone has things they love and everyone wants to make a career out of things they love, but I don't think everyone notices or realizes that even when you are doing things you love - you're still going to hit those monotonous periods in life.





MT: It's funny, you know, thinking about my boy, who is a touring musician, and is doing really well. Everybody has this idea of being a touring musician, partying all the time, and going wild after shows. And I remember after his last show I went to he was eating a salad and drinking water. And he said, "I gotta do this same thing tomorrow", and I thought, "Oh, he really lives this. He's got to be his best self every time he's on stage. He can't take a day off because he wants to party." That's when I realized that typically the whole idea of who and what an artist is so reduced to the time you see the work.

You see the art, you see whatever that is, and people think that's the coolest thing, which it is, but then they don't see the amount of work that goes into that and the often times monotonous process of perfecting your craft. Doing the same thing. I was reading about Jerry Seinfeld recently, it was interesting because he said he would rework the same joke for years. He would go to the comedy club and do the same routine every single time just make it a little different. Not different, but better. It was all about timing and the way he's



delivering it. He's thinking 'if this is going to be the greatest joke of all time, it's going to take time'. I really respect that and I try to approach my work in the same way.

JK: You said something that caught my attention and I'm curious. So you were saying artists who, maybe aren't in the same position as you, have these day jobs and they're so excited to go home and work on their art. You said something like "what is my release now?" So, is there something?

MT: I mean, it's really when people see my work. When they see it presented, wherever it may be. It's crazy because you get so wrapped up in the logistics and the nonsense of making art. You start to forget that something's dope when you see the same piece for so long. By the end of it, you're over it. But then when other people see it and they're like, "What the hell! This is crazy!". That's the new release. That's what I do it for. It's for other people. It's for me of course, but I've learned that I definitely feed off of the energy of other people and how my work makes other people feel. How can I make something interesting that's gonna provoke people in any which way?





It's always exciting in the beginning, but the novelty rubs off. We need to be reminded that we do dope shit. I remember back in the day, which is so hilarious to me now because I don't fuck with Instagram or social media anymore, but I remember back in the day when my biggest goal in life was to get 100 likes and now I'm not even thinking about it. I post something and it goes up every single time. It's always something new and exciting. My buddy said it best: It's about never settling. Be in it, all now, but the next day let's keep pushing. How do we make this thing that was banging again? How do we keep this thing going and keep people interested? That's a constant thing. I think it's interesting, because now, it's such a multifaceted career in the arts. I think it's really hard if you just solely rely on the work. People want to figure out who the artist is. They want to be interested in the artist. So they do cool stuff on the side, like hang out with a couple of cool brands, you know. They get affiliated with a couple of cool people and then people get fascinated. I think that's a thing that I am constantly thinking about, what's the next step? 'I want to do this cooler' or 'I want to do this better', but then it's also not getting lost in the monotony. It's just one of those things that you need to constantly keep climbing the ladder and to be excited because you don't want to lose that enthusiasm.



JK: So it's not just your work, per se. There's a lot of different elements to this, right?

MT: It's a lifestyle. The work is, of course, the biggest component of it but people wouldn't care about me if it was just a "cool dude". There's enough "just cool" people these days and I think we're starting to transition out of that phase of just being cool for cool's sake. The biggest component is the art because, again, that can become stale. The way I look at it, the people I'm attracted to, and the people that I think are really cool, They have the whole package. They don't just sit in the studio and only make their work. The people I like are just cool to be around, you know? You want to get a beer with those people and then you see that they also work with this brand, cool! I feel like that's like The New Age artist. I mean, Basquiat was walking for Comme Des Garçons for instance. The cool factor has always been a thing. When you have the right brands or people to validate you, then you become even more of 'a thing' every step of the way. You're building this aura around yourself.





You need to be careful because you can't just start doing things for validation. Art and life is this weird balance of being true to yourself and making cool stuff. Of course, appreciating the validation when you get it but not seeking it out. I don't really think about it day-to-day because I think I have my moral compass right, but it is a thing that I can totally see being a slippery slope. It's interesting finding that balance, because if you start doing a lot of things with brands in the art world you can just be considered a commercial artist. At the same time, if you're a cool artist doing cool things, then there's some respect in the art world. Nobody wants to see a stale artist who doesn't get jiggy. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. I look at it like, artists have to be the complete package. It goes back like to the age-old question "Are you interested in art or the artist?"

JK: Okay speaking of the art or the artist, who is your biggest style influence and then biggest influence in terms of your work and what you create?





MT: I really love the way old white men dress and the practicality of their stuff. They wake up and put on whatever they like and need for that day because it's functional. They're dressing with a purpose. You know, it's not like, I mean fashion. It's just so effortless. That's the whole thing about style. And what people really gravitate towards are those people that pull it off and make it look effortless no matter what it is. I think that's the biggest thing people try to achieve and that's the cool factor. Big Wonky Color. If I could add another word to that one, it would be effortless.

JK: Yeah, I think that effortless style is something that certain people spend a lifetime trying to achieve while it just comes to others so naturally. Okay, so that's your personal style, how about your work?

MT: Yeah I'd have to say David Hockney. I realized he just creates what he sees. He just tries to create something beautiful. He doesn't overthink it and that's a trope, especially that a lot of black artists get into where everything has to mean something. You know, like, I just got into Seinfeld and I was reading how the show is dubbed the show 'about nothing'. And I thought, "Oh, that's cool". And then Jerry and David were talking about how that's not how they pitched the show. The show is about how comedians, like Jerry Seinfeld, get their content for their stand-up and that was just by living life. I then thought that is so relatable because my work is just like my existence and sometimes it doesn't mean anything - sometimes I'm just making something beautiful.