

# NØTRE

## Tactile Language: Quilter Michael C. Thorpe Elevates the Mundane

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Michael Thorpe is a visual artist based in New York whose primary medium is quilting. It took him awhile to find his calling. He studied Photojournalism at Emerson College in Boston, where he also pursued one of his first passions: basketball. Though seemingly unrelated to quilting, Thorpe credits both photography and basketball with shaping his present-day artistic output.

Quilting isn't a medium Thorpe picked at random. It's a practice that runs in the family. His mother, who he classifies as a master quilter, is the person who's taught him the ins and outs of the craft over the past couple of years. His aunt even owns a quilt shop.

In February, he had his first show, An Art Show, at All Too Human clothing boutique in downtown Boston featuring 17 of his quilts. It was because of this show he attests to being able to acquire gallery representation through Laisun Keane Gallery in New England. In July he made the move to New York, and things have only looked up from there. Thorpe recently opened an online exhibition hosted by ARTSY, Works on Paper, featuring a new selection of collage work, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston acquired a piece of his for their collection.

What initially drew me to Thorpe's work is how much it stands out amidst his contemporaries who've chosen more traditional paths like painting or sculpture. Seeing a Black artist step outside of the systematic, by-the-book nature of traditional quilting and create his own world is inspiring.

Last week, I had the chance to spend some time in Michael's studio discussing the similarities between being an artist and athlete, why he pivoted from photo to textiles, and how the quilting community has received his art.

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**Adeshola Makinde**

Michael Thorpe

**Your mom taught you how to quilt within the past few years. What caused you to want to explore the craft?**

I was a photojournalism major, and I had noticed that there was a very long line of photographers trying to break into the industry. And more importantly, it didn't get me out of bed in the morning. It wasn't that thing that made me want to create. I had all these hesitations and limitations for whatever reason. I finally started to explore being an artist and expanding that horizon and seeing what that looked like. And then my mom got a quilting machine and it changed everything, because then there was this touchstone, this lineage. My mom does it, my aunt has a quilt shop. It was this very family-oriented thing that started to arise. And it also filled a need that I didn't realize I had once I started

photography, was that I really like constructing stuff with my hands. I really need that tactile experience.



**How does photography inform the work you make?**

Photography is the foundation of it. I love photography—I studied under a photographer and I love looking at photographs—I just don't like the act of taking them. But all of my studies within photography taught me how to see the world. And so when I started making quilts, I really was just taking the photos that I took or photos that I've seen that I really like and transcribing them into this new language.



**What was your experience like playing basketball in college while studying art?**

I get really bored really easily if I am surrounded by people that do something and then also talk about it all the time. In basketball, everybody just wants to talk about basketball, and so I would always try to talk art. On the art side, everybody just wants to talk about art, and that's when I'm like, "Okay, let's talk about basketball." Fast forward, and a lot of the dudes that I played basketball with are now getting into more of the culture and the arts. It's a really cool thing to visit them and talk and see how much has changed. When I was playing back in 2014-16, that was right when there was just this blending of all the culture—music, fashion, basketball. Now it's ubiquitous—people talk about fashion, art, and basketball in the same breath. I think it really gave me a broad intellectual landscape to work with, because then you learn how to talk to people and bring stuff you want to talk about, and make it interesting and relevant to people who are like, "I don't care about this."

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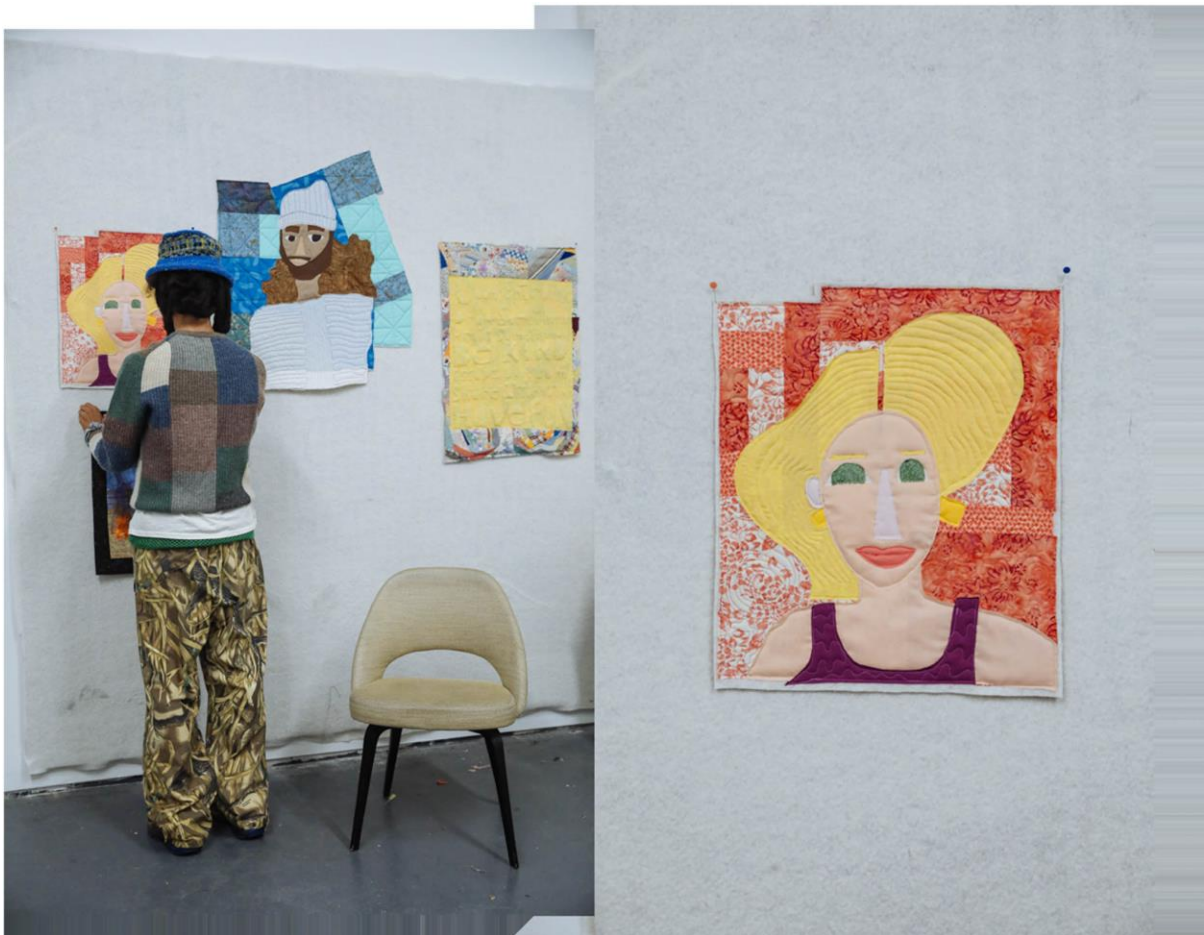
## How did your life as an athlete translate to your art practice?

I think it's just all about putting in that work, putting the effort in, which I didn't figure out until two or three years after college. We are so inundated with overnight successes that you don't get to see how much work these individuals have put into their craft. You really need to work on it all the time so that when that opportunity does arise, you're ready for it. I was just working, making quilts, but didn't really see how it was going to work out, how I was going to get to the position I am in today, until one day, a person came up to me and was like, "I want to do an interview with you." That person just so happened to be with NPR. And then I fast-track the show, and the show was quite successful, and then a dealer wanted to represent me. If I hadn't put in that work, that almost mindless work of just always constantly doing it, I'd have missed that shot.



**The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston recently acquired a piece of yours. What was that experience like?**

It was a really crazy experience. I love basketball as metaphors for life, because it works so well. When you start, you're like a rookie, and you might not get all the playing time. You might not get the shine. You're still developing. And then, a couple years in, you might start getting really good, get some attention, get on the all star team, then your championship. That's the normal journey in life—you take incremental steps. In the arts, it's a crapshoot, because there's really no rhyme or reason how careers work. You always think once your work is in an institution, you made it, right? When it happened, the person that ended up acquiring it and donating it to the museum, they just wanted to buy my work. It was surreal because I was like, "Damn, this put me on the map." And at the same time, it didn't. They haven't photographed it yet, so I haven't actually announced it to the world. It was weird, all in all, because what do you really make of it? Honestly, if I never brought it up, if I didn't tell anybody, nobody would know. A lot of institutions just get work and then they shove it in storage. I have it in my back pocket, but at the end of the day, it hasn't really changed my world. You keep moving forward, because it's just the beginning.



## **Is that where you see your art primarily living?**

That's something that I'm constantly thinking about. In my mind, the dream is just making work and people buying the work. You'd never really have somebody telling you what to do. It's all organic and whatever you feel like making. But then it does get into these really weird conversations with yourself where you're thinking about, to achieve that, your work has to be priced at a certain point, and when it gets up in those price points, you are not including people that you would want to have the work. I can't even afford my work. The ultimate thing I learned about being an artist is it gives you the ability to really live. I don't wake up in a rush from an alarm and trying to get to the job at a certain time. I get to create my world, which is the most important. That being said, you do have to understand there's this level of income you have to make to sustain that lifestyle. And so I don't think I'm above ever doing commercial work. It's just all about the nature of the work. Is it good-intentioned? Is it, at the end of the day, also contributing to the legacy of the art practice? I'm just making stuff and hoping for the best, and I always try to remind myself that I'm one degree from being homeless. People could stop caring about this tomorrow. I think it's just about being humble and understanding that it's your livelihood. You have to do what you need to do to survive.

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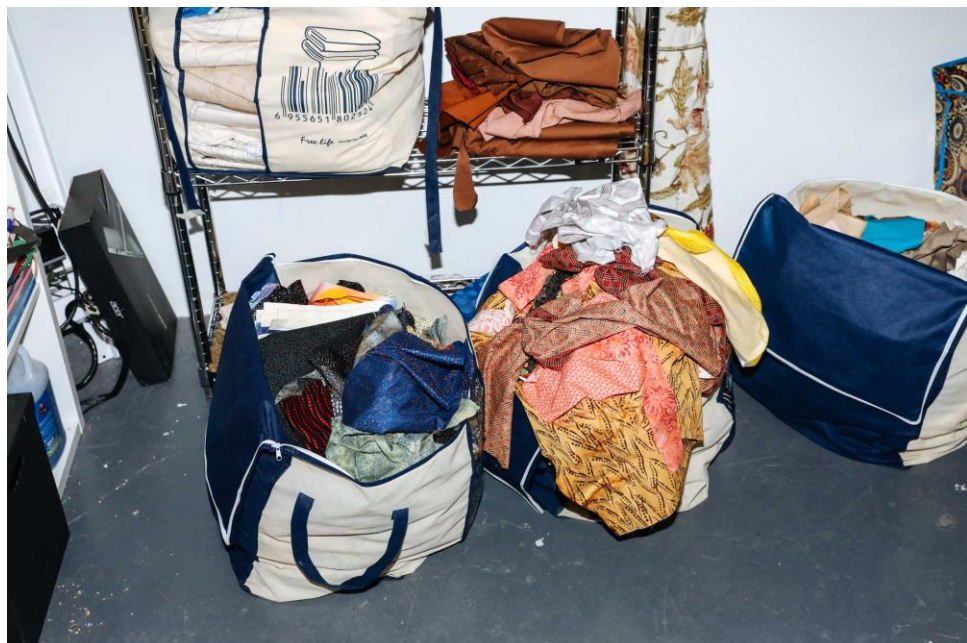


**I've heard you say you choose certain things in photographs to focus on when creating a portrait with a quilt. How do you decide what to highlight?**

I think we're so used to sensationalism—everybody wants a really nice car and a crazy crib and to live wild lifestyles, but recently, I've been thinking about the beauty of the mundane parts of life. And I've understood that the work itself will carry it, hopefully the work itself will carry the weight of it being magnificent. That's what I have been focusing on—turning the head of what we're used to and what we consume now.

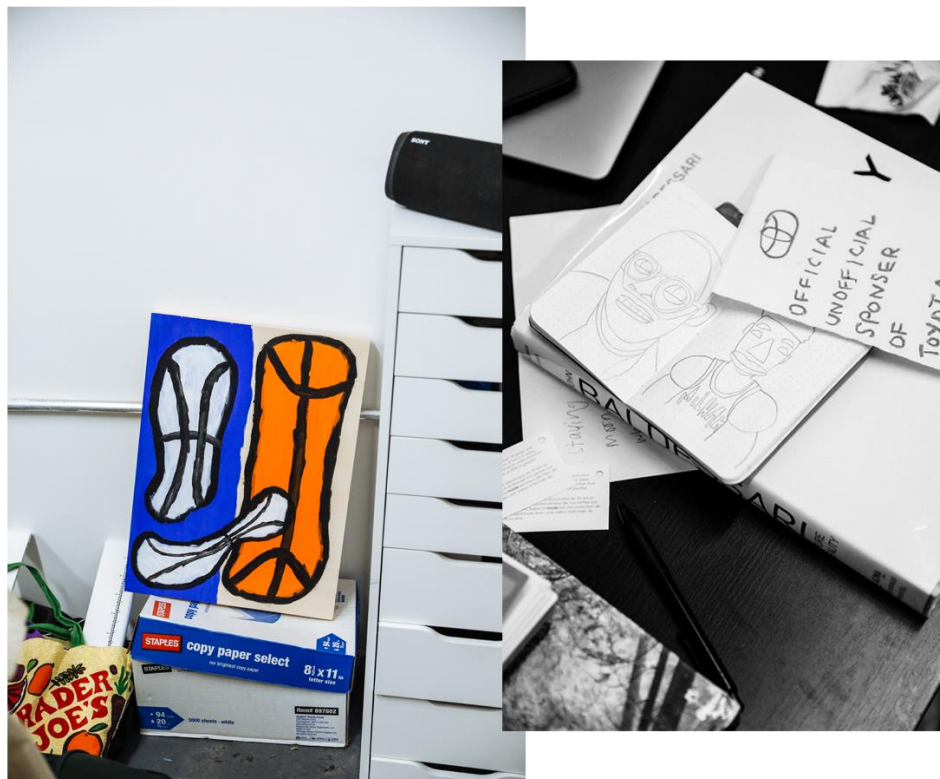
**How has the quilting community responded to your art?**

Before I really started figuring out what I wanted to do in quilting, I was involved in it. I used to work at a quilt store. I actually used to install and repair the very machine I work on. And then when I took the turn into being an artist, the people that I already made relationships with just continued to support me. And I think of it as like, you're a small-town kid that made it to the big leagues, and that community supports you wholeheartedly. They're super proud, because in many ways, quilts, textiles, craft arts, aren't respected in the hierarchy of the art world. I think because I'm making a little bit of noise, people are very happy to be like, "Oh, see, this is a respected art form that anybody can do, but that doesn't mean that it can't be done to the highest level." I realized in art, people just need that encouragement and that village to remind them that what they're doing is good. Meaningful. And I think that is a great reminder, because then you get away from the superficial nonsense of the art world.



**You said learning about Matisse opened your eyes to what you actually wanted to do. What about his art practice did that for you?**

I was always thinking about how as Black artists, we are always confronted with race. No matter what, race is always a part of the practice. And I've been recently thinking about how it's not because Black artists want to talk about race, it's because whenever you put a Black thing in art, people will talk about race. And it's similar to what's going on now, where "Black Lives Matter" becomes a political statement. You're like, "What? No, it doesn't. We're just saying, "Bro, this shit matters." And so when I started looking at Matisse's work, I, one, saw that he just depicted life. He just made stuff. And more importantly, I understood that he understood forms, and understood how you can make something look like a human form, but you don't need to add all the features. Especially when he was doing the paper cutouts. That was the most related thing to quilting. I understood that if he can push the medium of painting and have them respect paper cut-outs, I was like, "Yo, why can't I do that? Why can't I do that in the same vein?" The artists I really love and respect and admire, they just make work. They just make what they think is important and they put it out in the world and just hope for the best. And I think that is such a healthy way of approaching art. Because I think people are so bogged down with making sure they're in the right canon, making sure they're not stepping on any toes. I'm like, "Bro, just make art and hope for the best." That's all we can do, because most of the time, it's not going to be interpreted as you want it to be. So fuck it. Just make it anyway.



## **What do you want the art world to understand about the medium of quilting?**

I want the art world to understand that there is so much more, really good, really academic, really serious "art" than what we think of as art. Painting, sculpting, conceptual art, performance art—there's these arts that are considered the top-tier, the serious ones, the ones that get in museums, the ones that people write about. I think that crafts, where things are handmade, textiles, have always taken a backseat. Art is a never-ending statement. It can be anything. I think that's what I really want people to understand, is that just because it has this lineage doesn't mean it's not in the same vein as other art forms.

