

Indispensable: Michael C. Thorpe's Longarm Sewing Machine

By Julia Travers

April 25, 2022 10:06pm



Michael C. Thorpe's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Textile artist Michael C. Thorpe first used a longarm sewing machine in 2018. That first one belonged to his mother, Susan Richards, an experienced quilter. After it became clear that one machine was not enough for the two ambitious and creatively divergent quilters (Thorpe describes it as a “traffic jam”), Thorpe acquired his own machine, which he now uses in his New York City studio.

Thorpe's quilts, which are often portraits or narrative scenes, build on his training as a photojournalist as well as his experiences as a biracial artist, basketball player, and member of a family that boasts several quilt makers. Unlike his mother's traditional and intricate works, Thorpe's quilts tend to be experimental and expressive, often with pencil marks visible and edges unsewn. To varying degrees of abstraction, he layers fabric shapes and draws with a meandering stitch to convey his subjects' personality and emotionality. He counts Romare Bearden, Henri Matisse, Jacob Lawrence, Jasper Johns, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and the celebrated African American women quilters of Gee's Bend, Alabama, among his influences. It's important to him that the movement of his hands be visible in his finished pieces, which is why he prefers to use the nondigital functions of his longarm machine.



Michael C. Thorpe, *Last Night (At Your Mom's House)*, 2021, fabric, thread, and quilting cotton. Photo by Philipp J. Hoffmann, courtesy of the artist.

Thorpe uses a Handi Quilter HQ24 Fusion mounted on an 8-foot by 4-foot working table, or frame, with 20 inches of throat space. He says, "It's the longest machine this company made, and that was super-important to me because I wanted to just freely work in space." He says the arm of this oversize sewing machine can move in all directions and compares it to a jigsaw. He uses it to piece together his quilts and also for over stitching, adding details and dimensionality with thread. He has tried the machine's built-in digital programs, which perform sewing based on input designs. But he says those ultra-controlled pieces were "too perfect. . . . There wasn't enough of me in the quilts." So he now steers all the stitching himself. "You can see my hand in the quilting, and, it's beautiful because, in every step, there's this level of spontaneity. . . . Sometimes the fabric will move, and it is what it is, you know? I'm not going to force it to do anything that it's not meant to do."

Thorpe's quilts can take several hours to several weeks to complete. Along with his Handi Quilter, he says, having his own studio and moving his sketches from paper works to iPad drawings, which he can easily project on a wall to the desired size, have been essential to the development of his practice.



Michael C. Thorpe. Photo by Philipp J. Hoffmann, courtesy of the artist.