

Exhibition essay by Adam Tessier

Michael C. Thorpe: *Meandering Thoughts*, April 15 to May 29, 2021

MICHAEL C. THORPE

AN APPRECIATION

I'm trying out adjectives tonight, as I look at these new works by Michael C. Thorpe, and right now I like joyful. It isn't the cleverest word, but they are: all color and shape, dynamic imagery, idiosyncratic technique. This unavoidable joy I feel taking in Thorpe's particular visual language. And also the joy of the mind, confronting his dreams and his wit side by side. Thorpe's quilts are intelligent, and aware, and deeply fun.

Thorpe's quilts are complex. It isn't surprising if we forget sometimes that quilts can be complicated things. We live with them, drawn to their associations of comfort, warmth, safety. In another context—the art establishment—the quilt is too often, and too easily, reduced to digestible narratives: rural Minimalism, unschooled makers, naive genius. For all their dimension and tactility, quilts can also be flattened and fit neatly into boxes.

But Thorpe joins a lineage of artists who have embraced the quilt in all its complexity—a complexity that comes from history. Like their makers, quilts are storytellers by design, bearing artful witness to countless events and relationships, forms of labor, displacements and struggles. The history of the quilt in America is a story of the transmission of knowledge over generations, and one reliant on the history of Black women's physical and intellectual work across time.

"As a Black person in this country, your story can feel already written," Thorpe has said. His new works command space, and their narrative power follows in part from the contrast they draw between swagger and intimacy. Many speak to dreams and ideals, with style, humor, and vulnerability. Others display a subversive tenderness: the portrait of the nuclear family, for example, which critiques conventions both of image- and family-making. Within that quilt, Thorpe has played a visual game: behind the smiling figures hangs an early portrait quilt of the artist's sister, cut off at the head. An art historical nod, a picture within a picture, it also reminds us of the artist's role in bringing people together, physically and otherwise.

Thorpe's quilts also display an intimacy toward his forebears. As an artist, Thorpe has claimed influences ranging from the painters Matisse and Henry Taylor to the conceptual artist David Hammons, to the generations of Black women quilters working in Gee's Bend, Alabama. He also sees his work following on that of Harriet Powers, the great 19th-century Black quilter whose two known surviving works stand as icons of American art.

Powers probably learned sewing and the quilter's craft while enslaved in Georgia (she achieved freedom following the Civil War); by the 1880s, she had developed a vision for her quilts as works of art in their own right, and displayed and sold them as such. Boldly, they resist a rectangular, bed-sized format and are clearly made to be hung on the wall, admired, studied, absorbed. Exploring subjects ranging from faith to meteorological science, her works are masterpieces of the narrative, pictorial tradition forged by African American quilters that Thorpe now inherits.

LAISUN KEANE
460C Harrison Ave
Boston MA 02118
T: 978 495 6697
E: info@laisunkeane.com
www.laisunkeane.com



LaiSun Keane

A final adjective I've been lingering on is poetic. I'm drawn to the back-and-forth in Thorpe's quilts between exuberance and concision, wonder and brevity—elements so often shared by poets. When language becomes his outward subject, the effect is all the more stark. "Words are vehicles that help accelerate imagination," Thorpe has said. In the days following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, on May 25, 2020, Thorpe was quilting. In *Untitled (Black Man)*, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, he presents the shapes of those two words, cut from brown fabric, atop a pieced and quilted background of patterned Batik, from which faces emerge. "What do you see when you read these words?" Thorpe asks. "Do you see a successful business owner, a man trying to do his best to succeed in the world, a friend, a loved one? Or do you feel a little scared?"

It's important to encounter Thorpe's quilts this year, 2021. Quilts are having a moment right now: recent and upcoming museum exhibitions (in Brooklyn, Oakland, Chicago, Toledo, and Boston) are building on years of efforts (usually artist-led) to center quilts and quilt artists in more productive, complex contexts. And with urgency, young voices are helping to shape those conversations—demanding equity and accountability in the ways institutions represent their works and their histories. Thankfully for all, Thorpe is one of those voices.

Adam Tessier

has worked at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston since 2006 and serves as the Barbara and Theodore Alford Director of Interpretation.

Gallery hours

Wednesday to Saturday 12:00 - 6:00 pm

Sunday 1:00 - 4:00 pm or by appointment

Email: info@laisunkeane.com