

B I L L I O N A I R E



THE AMBITION ISSUE

THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

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A Lightbulb Moment

This multi-generational Texan family business started off illuminating luxury goods. Today it lights the world's iconic landmarks and the homes of billionaires.

by Tara Loader Wilkinson



Left: Portrait of Alexandra, Gilbert, Roselyn, and Suzanne Mathews with David Salle's Black Eyed Susan with Envy (2002), 2023. Photo by Yvonne Tnt, BFA. Courtesy of Lucifer Lighting. Right: Installation view Jammie Holmes paintings on view at Lucifer Lighting, Tribeca, New York. NYC flagship showroom, in collaboration with Marianne Boesky Gallery. Photo by Garrett Carroll. Courtesy of Lucifer Lighting.

Gilbert Mathews had a solid career as a lawyer in the 1970s, when he had a lightbulb moment. He realised that the Hermès handbags and Gucci scarves on display in his family's high-end department store, Frost Bros. in San Antonio, Texas, could not be seen properly.

"All these beautiful luxury goods were lit with bad fluorescent lighting, draining the colours," he explains. "It didn't do them justice."

The realisation led to Mathews negotiating the rights to market Swiss-made low-voltage strip lights for casework all over the US, and later Europe, to shops wanting better illumination for products. Proper lighting had been an afterthought — it wasn't really an option. But illuminating the fire of a diamond ring or the exquisite leather detail on a Gucci handbag, made all the difference for customers. "The stores saw an uptick in sales, so they kept ordering more." It became a side hustle alongside his law business for just over a decade, until it outgrew hobby status.

Now in its 46th year, Lucifer Lighting provides the minimalist, recessed downlighting for many company headquarters in the Fortune 500 list, including the highly anticipated new JP Morgan Chase offices at 270 Park Avenue, as well as all Apple flagship stores. Many of its commissions are to light billionaire homes, including reportedly, those of the Kardashians, as well as high-end restaurants such as triple-Michelin-starred Eleven Madison Park, museums from San Francisco's MOMA to London's Natural History Museum, luxury designer maisons, including Chanel, Dior and Irene Neuwirth, and five-star hotels such as the Beverly Hills Hotel and the Andaz Hotel Group.

Christina Brown, a lighting designer in Austin, Texas and founder of lighting studio Studio Lumina, whose clients including billionaire art collectors all over the US, says that she predominantly uses Lucifer Lighting, particularly the 2 Series downlights. "I know they are going to last for decades and are of the best quality," she says.

Lucifer Lighting has a workforce of 200, mainly located at its San Antonio factory sprawled over a 13-acre campus, which was once a production site owned by soup-maker Campbell's. In its high-tech manufacture, some one million parts are made each year, with a commitment to sustainability through use of wind energy, xeriscaping, post-consumer recycled packaging, recycling of scrap metal, re-using of water and by employing PVC alternatives. Juxtaposed with the high-tech equipment and 3D printers, the walls

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Top: Installation view of Dan Christensen's *Western Blues* (2001) at Lucifer Lighting, Tribeca. Photo by Brett Beyer. Artwork courtesy of Berry Campbell Gallery.
 Below left: Installation view at Lucifer Lighting, Tribeca. Photo by Brett Beyer. Artwork courtesy of Berry Campbell Gallery. Right: A custom sculpture made by Gensler San Francisco entirely from repurposed Lucifer Lighting products and materials





Natural History Museum, London, England, lit by Lucifer Lighting.



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of the San Antonio campus are filled with fine art; Suzanne is a former gallerist and the whole family has a deep connection with the arts. It's a quirky, familial, place to work; it tasked one of its head engineers to build a state-of-the-art mobile smokery — now it holds regular company barbecues for its employees.

It also has a showroom in Tribeca, New York, where younger daughter Roselyn spends time, as well as San Francisco showroom that older daughter Alexandra extends her executive responsibilities, from her home in Los Angeles where she lives with her husband and two daughters.

Since the girls came on board within the last 18 years, after both perusing degrees in the arts and stints working in publicity and the art world, the company has become more visible. "It is in my father's nature to be humble and quiet, but we felt now was the time to create a buzz about what we are doing," says Alexandra.

The company's motto is design, define, disappear. "The sign of good lighting is not noticing it," says Gilbert. The challenge is how to illuminate interiors and exteriors when your purpose is to be invisible. In a dramatic departure from its usual style of disappearing, Lucifer has just launched a line of dramatic decorative lighting, shown for the first time in Milan at this year's Salone Del Mobile. Its statement piece, the Stellaris pendant, is 30 inches wide. The brand collaborated with global architect Gensler's New York product development team on the spaceship-like design. Its staple product range, however, will remain minimalist architectural lighting. In its Tribeca space Lucifer now invites galleries such as Marianne Boesky to exhibit fine art, which, illuminated by a Lucifer-dotted ceiling, shows artwork to its best potential.

Patenting products is a big part of the company's unique selling point, and it has around 50 patented fittings and fixtures on its product range. "It is

important to develop designs we owned that no one else can copy." Recessed ceiling downlights are commonplace now in modern homes, but Lucifer introduced the first-ever recessed downlight that was totally flush with the ceiling. "There is a purity, a beauty in that minimalism," says Gilbert, who has a passion for art fostered by growing up with the blue-chip art collection of his grandparents', which included Picasso, Giacometti, O'Keefe and Pollock. This led into a love of architecture, and he particularly admires the work of John Pawson and Norman Foster, both known for their clean lines.

There are challenges, including competition from regions where work can be done cheaply and patents are overlooked, such as China. And the name Lucifer, recalling devilish associations, can raise eyebrows, admits Roselyn, especially for companies with religious affiliations. "But we still have a registration on the Emmanel name that we can use on invoices for anyone who is sensitive." Lucifer also means 'bringer of light', so it is appropriate.

For Gilbert, growing an international company was never about the money, he was motivated by the chance to see more of the world and broaden horizons. "For Suzanne and me, and later, our children, it has given us a way to work with fascinating, creative people from all over the world, and move beyond the boundaries of Texas," he says.

Now having been selected to be an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects, he has no plans to retire. "It's been a joy. The girls are very capable, but I still have a passion for design and love the interactions with designers and architects. It gets you out every day into other worlds."

The next generation is already assuming substantial roles in the business. The new Stellr lighting range is named after Alexandra's eldest daughter Stella, who is five. "She told me recently that she wants to work here when she grows up," says Gilbert. "I am so proud of that." ◇

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— Gilbert Mathews.





Left: The Lucifer Lighting zero waste booth at Salone del Mobile, Milan.
 Top right: Lucifer's Cylinder, Squilinder and Stellr lights.
 Below Right: Products on show in the Tribeca showroom.