

INTO THE LIGHT

The family firm that has been quietly illuminating the world's foremost exhibition spaces is finally stepping out from the shadows

By TARA LOADER WILKINSON Portrait by MAX BURKHALTER



Bad lighting is the artist's kryptonite. Toronto-based painter Thrush Holmes learnt the hard way how to defeat it. 'I intentionally work with horrible, depressing lighting in my studio,' says the 46-year-old artist, whose paintings are characterised by spray paint, vibrant neon lights and a punk sensibility. Properly illuminated, they are dramatic and textural. 'Most galleries and homes totally overlook the importance of lighting, which in essence should be to replicate natural light,' he continues. 'It's a very hard thing to achieve. So I work to make my paintings strong in the worst set of circumstances.'

Holmes's work was recently on view at the New York showroom of Lucifer Lighting, a family-owned Texan company beloved of interior designers and architects. 'For once, the lighting wasn't going to be a bad surprise,' he says. Iván Navarro is the current artist presenting work at the Tribeca showroom as part of Lucifer Lighting's series with artists and galleries.

Walk into any of the following: the Nike

headquarters in Oregon, London's Natural History Museum, the San Francisco MoMA, the global campuses of Apple, Alphabet and Microsoft, the US campuses of Amazon, the US stores of Hermès, Cartier, Lalique, Gucci and Dior, five-star hotels from the Ritz-Carlton to the Peninsula Group, private airport lounges at JFK, LAX and SFO, the JPMorgan Chase flagship at 270 Park Avenue, and the UN – and one thing you won't notice, is the lighting.

That's how Lucifer Lighting – which outfitted all of them – wants to keep it.

'Most of us only really become aware of lighting when you enter a room and something feels "off",' says Gilbert Mathews, the detail-oriented 76-year-old founder of the San Antonio-based company. Gilbert Mathews is a disciple of Steve Jobs's design ethos (he even calls Lucifer's manufacturing base a 'campus'). Like Apple, Lucifer's success lies in the notion that less is more. It offers just over a dozen products, including recessed and surface-mounted lights, pendants and

pathway lighting and compact high-outlet fixtures, almost all designed to illuminate quietly but brilliantly.

For example, enter the Foster + Partners-designed Gabriela Hearst store in LA and turn your eyes from the chic dresses for a minute to look up at the ceiling. You will notice rows of matt white adjustable and dimmable Monopoint lights, like perfectly synchronised swimmers, each on an elbow that allows for a 90-degree tilt and drop lengths of up to four feet. Blink and you'd miss them. But if you know, you know.

'Our motto is, "Design, define, disappear",' Gilbert says as we tour the art-filled 13-acre Lucifer Lighting campus. Here with us are his wife Suzanne, a former gallerist, and daughters Alexandra (43), based at the San Francisco showroom, and Roselyn (32), who runs the outfit in New York. Despite living on opposite coasts, the family are close enough to finish each others' sentences. Phrases that they use to explain why their lights are simply the best, include 'clean sightlines', 'perfect alignment', 'visually pleasing', 'subliminal effect' and

‘minimal glare’. Colour and temperature of lighting is hugely important, as I will learn from Roselyn later.

While Gilbert Mathews did not pioneer the concept of recessed-lighting fixtures – that happened some time in the 1940s – he has certainly perfected them, and has filed 66 patents to prove it. ‘This is as good as it gets in American industrial design today,’ he says.

‘I know their lights are of the best quality and are going to last for decades,’ agrees lighting designer Christina Brown, founder of Studio Lumina in Austin, Texas. She especially rates Lucifer Lighting’s 2 Series downlights and frequently uses them in the homes of her ultra-high-net-worth clients.

Sustainability is increasingly important to the firm. Its demo cases are now entirely made from food waste, and some of its steel is scrap metal from Canada. The campus is landscaped with drought-resistant plants, and four per cent of energy used is from wind. As for Trump’s trade tariffs, they believe their business should be fairly immune. ‘We are fortunate in that our strategy has always been to focus on US vendors, and to rely on our own deep in-house machine, fabrication and shops,’ says Mathews. ‘Of course, working with electronics, it’s impossible to buy all parts in the US, but the impact of the tariffs to us has been nominal.’

For Mathews, the pinnacle of good lighting has been the pursuit of 46 years, but he still seems amazed by his success. ‘What is incredible to me is that I never thought we would use all this space,’ he says as he takes us on a tour of the state-of-the-art factory (which they purchased from the Campbell Soup Company). Here, high-tech engineers work with 3D printers and the latest CAD software, CNC machinery, robotic assembly, and metal-fabrication equipment. With around 150 employees, they produced more than a million parts last year. Prices of Lucifer Lights range from \$393 for an Atomos two-inch LED recessed light to \$2,048 for the Stellr LED Pendant, which comes in white, silver, gold and black.

However, Mathews explains, it all started somewhat accidentally, with an observation he made as a young lawyer. During the late 1970s, while building a successful legal career, Gilbert remained closely involved with Frost Bros, a high-end Texan department store where his father, Irving, was chief executive. On a buying trip to Europe, he discovered a Swiss strip light, and secured the international rights to export it. Recognising its potential to reduce glare and better showcase luxury clothes and accessories, Mathews saw

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an opportunity to improve lighting in shops. He soon developed his own version – laying the foundation for what would become Lucifer Lighting.

‘We were inspired by what we saw in Europe – sleek, architectural lighting that simply didn’t exist in the US at the time. My father had a deep appreciation for design, and we both saw the potential to bring that refinement to the American market. I realised we didn’t need to wait for suppliers – we could hire our own engineers and develop our own downlights, built to our exact standards. But to do it right, I knew I had to fully commit. I still remember my father’s reaction: “You’re going to give up your job as the head of a law firm to become a travelling salesman?”’

He did, and in 1979 he devoted his full time to the company that had become known as Lucifer Lighting. It was initially called Emmanuel Lighting. ‘Of course, nobody could remember that,’ says Mathews, ‘but the name of the strip lighting we developed, which was the Lucifer Light, was memorable. So, it stuck.’

Of course, Lucifer means ‘bearer of light’ in Latin, despite associations with the fallen angel. The reference hasn’t held the company back in religious circles: Lucifer Lighting has worked on a Tabernacle in Utah and other religious sites across the world.

Back at the Tribeca showroom, Roselyn, who also works as the company’s chief of staff and vice president of brand, is cradling her fluff-ball puppy Bodhi in one arm, while demonstrating how the lighting transforms one of Kikuo Saito’s colourful abstract paintings, from drained and lifeless to vibrant and energising.

She flicks the switch wirelessly on an iPad using an app. ‘This is our 2 Series, our legacy downlight you’d find in the Chanel fine jewellery store or the Beverly Hills Hotel, and here it’s at a temperature of 2,500K,

which is popular at the moment,’ she says, gesturing to the warm, shadowless wall. ‘This is the closest temperature you’ll find to candlelight; it makes you feel cosy and relaxed.’ Natural sunlight, the light that illuminates Holmes’s work upstairs, is on the cooler end of the scale, around 3,000K.

I point out that if my light switch were on my iPad, I would definitely misplace it and be forced to go to bed with the lights blazing. She adds that for the less digital-savvy, lights can be fitted with regular wall switches. ‘Lighting was once a lightbulb, now it’s a complex science,’ reflects Alexandra. ‘The question we ask ourselves is, picture yourself in a white cube room with just a floor and walls, how do you figure out if it is a luxury space or not? That’s the holy grail of lighting.’

The sisters grew up surrounded by an art collection including works by the likes of Francisco Toledo, Alberto Giacometti and Jim Sullivan, some of which is still in their home in San Antonio, a Slim Aarons-worthy modernist lateral building; some is housed at the nearby McNay Art Museum. Both girls went on to complete fine art masters degrees, and Roselyn worked at Phillips auction house, so curating artwork in their respective showrooms came quite naturally. And given that it’s not always easy to sell fixtures that are ‘designed to disappear’, showing not the product but the end result – beautifully illuminated artworks – can help.

Gilbert and Suzanne met in their early 20s, when she was already a junior art curator. She opened a gallery in San Antonio that she ran from 1977 to 1988, bringing names such as William Scott and Emilio Sanchez to Texas. Gilbert’s aunt Louise Reinhardt Smith was a trustee of MoMA, to which she bequeathed her collection.

With art in their blood, it was only a matter of time before the next generation of Mathews would stop disappearing into the background and deploy a bit more main-character energy. Enter the Stellaris, unveiled at Salone del Mobile in Milan this year, a 30-inch round decorative pendant lamp that looks more like a delicate spaceship than a chandelier. With two independent light sources, it uses waveguide technology to distribute indirect light and offers directional flexibility. In collaboration with long-term partner, architectural firm Gensler New York, it took three years to complete.

With sculptural clarity yet brilliant technical engineering, it is the poster child for Lucifer Lighting’s move into the future. As Alexandra says, ‘We spend all this time above the ceiling. Now we’re ready to come out.’ ●



OPPOSITE Left to right, Alexandra, Roselyn, Gilbert and Suzanne Mathews at the Lucifer Lighting New York showroom. LEFT Their products in lighting designs at (from far left) London’s Natural History Museum, the Madison Avenue Apple Store, and Cartier’s SoHo boutique