



Matthew Penn's sense of light

Matthew Penn combines traditional painting techniques with the latest lighting technology to create portraits that come to life. He relies on ERCO for the spotlight systems which he tailors precisely to his paintings to enhance their production and the display of his art.

Portrait of an Unknown Man in Oil: His skin shows delicate nuances in colour – tiny wrinkles, pores, each hair, silvery stubbles stand out from darker parts of the face in almost three-dimensional reality. More precise, it seems, than a photo, the whole image appears to be emerging from the deep black of the background. The use of bold contrasts between light and dark elements of a picture – known as the "chiaroscuro" effect – is a technique which was commonly employed in art in the late Renaissance period and in Baroque. It was very popular with painters such as Caravaggio, Titian or Rembrandt.

"One must understand: the light is part of the art"

26-year-old British artist Matthew Penn uses this approach to enhance the whole aspect of his photo-realistic portraits and their spatial effect. His artistic skills, precision and sculptural compositions are impressive, to say the least – all the more in light of the fact that Penn is a self-taught "hyper-realist". From an early age, the artist found a strict teacher in his grandfather, a painting restorer: The latter

agreed to let his grandson in on the secrets and techniques of painting with oil only after Matthew had trained his talent for painting with great diligence in nature. A classic didactic sequence, in fact, and in earlier centuries by no means an exception, yet at many art schools today the studying of surface textures, colours and light moods in every minutiae is an often neglected aspect. For Matthew Penn's development as an artist, however, it was crucial.

Talking to Penn, one soon gets the impression that this artist leaves nothing to chance. This applies to his artwork as much as to his studio, which he designed in every detail to suit his requirements. Penn has come to see the illumination of his paintings as an integral part of his art: "From now on, I won't sell an artwork, unless someone uses ERCO lighting to light the picture. One must understand: the light is part of the art. Although it is not attached to it, it is part of the artwork. It gives the exact effect I desire," he explains. "I will only use ERCO lighting because I believe it's the best. Also, using LED lighting has the important advantage that there is no UV damage to the pictures and no heat damage either."

Penn had come across the tools of the German specialist in architectural lighting around three years earlier. Today, he uses the spotlights throughout the painting process in his studio and for the final display of his art: "In the future I plan to exhibit only in a specially designed room where there is only black walls and no light from elsewhere and only ERCO lighting set up and precisely manipulated to point to certain areas of the pictures. In an exhibition environment we want to use sensor-controlled lighting, so when a person enters the room, the 3000 Kelvin ERCO Pollux comes on, slowly first, out of the dark and then the 4000 Kelvin spotlight comes on slowly so you get the feeling the picture is evolving right before your eyes. It comes to life. By this we can enhance the visual effects I have created as a painter, spotlighting, say, the forehead, the eyes, the chin and the shoulders of the portrayed person individually, so there are up to four of sets of lights involved to achieve this kind of effect."

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Penn paints only around ten or twelve portraits a year – his painting process requires utmost precision, patience and perseverance. In it, he follows his own style with the confidence and commitment of a true artist: "There are billions and billions of things you can do in the art world, an endless number of ideas and concepts that can be realised. But I am only interested in this tiny percentage, this one thing that I believe is the way that I should continue. There will always be these dark backgrounds in my work and the highlighted areas in the faces of the people I portray. By sticking to this principle, it will also give collectors the opportunity to see how I progress as an artist over the years within this defining set of rules."

Luminaires used in the project



Pollux

Copies and links requested.

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About ERCO

The ERCO Light Factory in Lüdenscheid is a leading international specialist in architectural lighting using LED technology. The family business, founded in 1934, now operates as a global player with over 60 subsidiaries, branches and agencies in over 40 countries worldwide. Since 2015 ERCO's portfolio has been 100% LED. Inspired by "light digital" as its leitmotif, ERCO in Lüdenscheid develops, designs and produces digital luminaires with focus on photometrics, electronics and design. Working closely with architects,

lighting designers and engineers, ERCO develops lighting tools used primarily for applications in the following fields: Work, Shop, Culture, Community, Hospitality, Living, Public and Contemplation. ERCO understands digital light as the fourth dimension of architecture – providing highly precise and efficient lighting solutions to support creative designers in turning their visions into reality.

