



The Art of Lighting

Interview with James Tan,
Master Printmaker, in association
with Soraa Lighting

Interview | Sophia Smith
Photos | Soraa

Renowned photographers, artists and galleries look to Master Printmaker James Tan for one-of-a-kind, high-quality fine art prints. With his advanced lighting design knowledge, James also produces impactful photography exhibitions. He spoke to Journal Artistique about his skills and techniques to master the art of lighting.



SS: How long have you been a master printmaker and what drives your passion for understanding colour and light in art prints?

JT: I will answer this question in reverse as it might give a better context. I've always had a keen interest in physics and was trained as a mechanical engineer, and that laid the foundation for what was to come. My creative side eventually took hold of me in the early 2000s, driving me to take up photography initially as a hobby, then professionally.

I started as an apprentice in a commercial photography studio; working my way up the departments and ranks to become a fully fledged photographer allowed me to steadily build and shape my ethos, which I still hold firmly to today. Photographers must be sensitive to light, shadows and colours, and master techniques to craft pictures using both natural and artificial lighting. A commercial photographer's worth is equal to their ability to utilize light.

A few years after practising as an independent architectural photographer, I ventured into printmaking simply because there didn't seem to be anyone in Singapore who could produce prints good enough for what I desire my clients to receive. On hindsight, I guess through my career as a photographer/retoucher, I've been lucky to accumulate highly developed skillsets required to be a good printmaker. It takes more than a nice picture to be art. A printmaker is a conduit which

the artist uses to bring digital creations into the physical world. I need to connect with and understand the artist and their works and use craft to refine and bring forth the artwork, to create an exhibition true to the intent of the artist. It's been 12 years since, and although I received my formal Fellowship as a printmaker from the Master Photographers Association (MPA) of the UK in 2009, I felt my that my journey had barely begun.



SS: How has technology changed in recent years? In what way has digital printing impacted your craft?

JT: Digital printing, like digital photography, was a great enabler as well as a great disruptor. It opened up great opportunities to the masses to access what was once an expensive and extremely time-consuming process limited to those who devoted their lives to darkroom printing. Now everyone could print their pictures quickly, cheaply, easily, privately. But this wide accessibility to printing came at a cost. Prints in the last 15 years are poorly made, fade too soon, are coloured incorrectly, and perceived to be worthless because the craft and disciplines surrounding a good print have been mostly abandoned in lieu of cost and convenience. The swing back towards quality is bound to happen. Just like the widespread prevalence of fast food does not destroy the dreams and businesses of chefs dedicated to quality cuisine and serving their own unique experiences. So it is the same with photography, and with print, and lighting too. ▶



SS: Can you tell us more about your collaboration with Soraa Lighting?

JT: My experience with Soraa started some 5-6 years ago; when I was tasked to light a large studio-cum-gallery space for a discerning client. Prior to this project, I stayed on the safe side with halogens for their high CRI; for a short exhibition they're sufficient, but they fail too often to be reliable in a permanent setting. There weren't many good high-CRI LEDs around then, and after much research, only Soraa offered extreme flexibility with their Snap system and at a very reasonable price point, which I could easily integrate into all of my projects. I started as a consumer; back then I wasn't trained in lighting design at all, but having a background of mechanical and electrical engineering, coupled with a clear vision of what I needed in order to bring out the best from the artworks, I was able to steadily build up my experience in lighting artwork in gallery settings.

Moving forward, because of the ongoing work I've been doing on lighting analysis, the emergence of TM30-15 metrics, and the increasing awareness of how light affects the human circadian rhythm, I started working with Soraa in educating lighting designers and other related professionals on new approaches to lighting metrics and perceptual experiences. Additionally, in my opinion, Soraa's unique violet based LED is very important for artwork illumination because it can activate optical brighteners present in

some art pieces without harmful UV. Most blue-pumped LEDs will simply create a dull yellowish surface where an iridescent white is desired, like in certain tableware or textiles.

SS: How does displaying art differ in a gallery or commercial building to a residential setting, when it comes to lighting?

JT: My professional experiences are mostly in gallery lighting, but if I were to draw from personal observations, the main difference would be that commercial interiors require integration of task lighting that conforms to local building standards, and residential would require additional lighting modes for living and evening relaxation settings, whereas gallery lighting's sole purpose is artwork illumination and experience. All of which can benefit from proper application of lighting metrics and modern wellness studies.

SS: Can you talk us through some tips on manipulation of light when displaying artwork?

JT: When lighting artwork, my main priority is always to connect with the artist and understand the intent and sensibilities of the artwork. Only then can I employ the tools at hand to exhibit and light it properly, bringing the viewing experience as close as possible to what the artist intended.

SORAA® pioneered full spectrum LED light sources, the heart of which is our proprietary LED technology manufactured in Northern California. Soraa's unique approach to LED design and meticulous construction ensure our LEDs render infinite shades of white and all colors of the visible spectrum, from violet to deep red, perfectly, creating the most natural full-spectrum light possible. To achieve this, we started from scratch by developing a radically different type of LED -- a violet LED built from pure gallium nitride substrates we call GaN-on-GaNTM. This fundamental breakthrough in LED science enables us to design a superior lighting platform for our unique portfolio of lamps, luminaires, and light engines, creating an unmatched balance of uniform color and natural white rendering, superior light distribution, and clean, crisp beams that deliver beautiful light across a multitude of environments. Our novel approach has enabled and inspired lighting designers and specifiers to have unprecedented control and flexibility, giving them the ability to perfectly execute their creative vision.