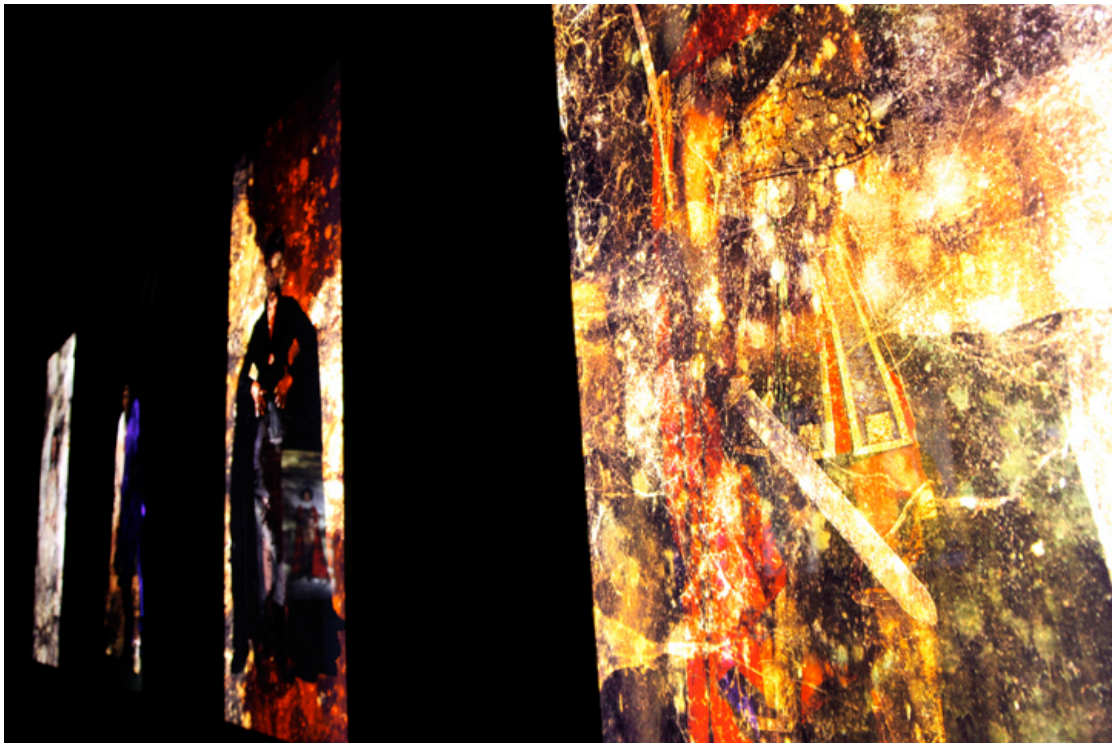
THIRTEEN

A photographic installation
by
GEORGE CHAKRAVARTHI

These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder
Which, as they kiss, consume

William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet



THIRTEEN

A photographic installation by award winning artist George Chakravarthi was originally commissioned by The Royal Shakespeare Company. Specifically conceived for the RSC's Swan Room, the works portray thirteen of Shakespeare's tragic characters all of whom meet their ends through suicide. Created as a series of powerful self-portraits embedded in light boxes, Chakravarthi assumes the role of some of Shakespeare's most celebrated yet doomed characters: Brutus, Cassius, Eros, Goneril, Mark Anthony, Othello, Timon, Lady Macbeth Portia, Ophelia, Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The tragedies of Shakespeare's plays frequently use suicide as a tool to develop plots and elevate situations and characters. It occurs an unlucky 13 times. In the 15 tragedies, there are 13 definite suicides and 8 possible or ambiguous ones. The motivations for these suicides are unique and vary for each character but most are considered honourable if not heroic.

In Shakespeare's texts, suicidal deaths were often used to convey the ultimate consummation of true love, even if Christian morality considered it a mortal sin and burials in consecrated ground were refused. Suicide or one's willingness to die still remains a complicated subject and generates debates about motivation and method, assisted suicide, imitative suicide, suicidal ideation by individuals with depression or disabilities and more recently, suicide as an act of terrorism. Recent debates over how often these factors influence the incidence of suicides rarely trace their historical longevity.

When beginning the project, and having explored several aspects of Shakespeare's literature, I was especially drawn to this subject, as it seemed to be a fertile territory for exploration. I was particularly interested in the association of our recent and current political history and the direct connection to Shakespeare's representation of death as an act of courage, honour or passion. Whilst I don't advocate unnatural, untimely death of any living being for any purpose, I am interested in the value and expediency one gives to one's own life and their beliefs; this, it's evident, is a reoccurring theme in Shakespeare's plots and very relevant to the cultural and political, post 9/11 climate we live in today.

I was also intrigued by the popularity of the representation of Ophelia by visual artists throughout the history of art. Though the Pre Raphaelites were very inspired by Shakespeare's characters, especially women, I found that the vast number of images and illustrations were of Ophelia, with Millais' being the most famous depiction. These images were sensual, romanticised and captured a dreamy translation of the scene of death, a far cry from the explicit violence and suffering in the texts.

These encounters and findings led me to think about the wider implications of my practice as a contemporary artist negotiating the issues of identity, referencing the personal and the political, suggesting questions and narratives in which we all belong.

My passion for portraiture has meant that in my artistic practice I have utilised my own self-image as a canvas upon which to build artworks. This often evokes a biographical sensibility within the work, allowing for observation from place of personal history and culture and interpretation. Working within the boundaries of the 'self' informs and presents the work from a first person point of view, where the line between the personal and the impersonal can blur, and this is what I find exciting as an artist.

There is often a cathartic and physical aspect to the process. This was certainly evident for this project once the costumes began accumulating. The occasional physical restraints or freedoms the costumes created added to the catharsis of the work. In that sense, the theatricality of the work was beginning to form.

My vision for the work was driven to reference the figurative forms of expressionism rather than expressiveness in the theatrical sense; the costumes were already providing that. I always sought to make the work as much about costume and texture as my own presence in them and to harmoniously connect the aesthetics and the literature. I did, however want the gaze of the characters to point straight at the viewer to create a questioning, confronting stare, to create a sense of wonder and not closure.

Once the final 13 images were shot and selected, I began layering them individually with various textures and surfaces. I shot and collected these abstract, veil-like images alongside the costume fittings and shoot, ending up with an archive of over 500 images. These images were then appropriately and strategically layered upon the photographs to create visual meshes.
These textural images work like a shroud and often create a non-existent distance between the figure and the viewer. They also visually resonate with the language and multi-layering of Shakespeare's plots.

Thirteen is a collection of jewel-like images; images imbedded in light boxes in a dark space to reference ideas of tombs and monuments to these heroes and heroines in a contemplative space. The Swan Room lends itself perfectly to these concepts in its architecture and design. The space also contains stained glass windows of similar dimensions to the light boxes; this creates a poetic dialogue between the old and new, the internal and the external light.

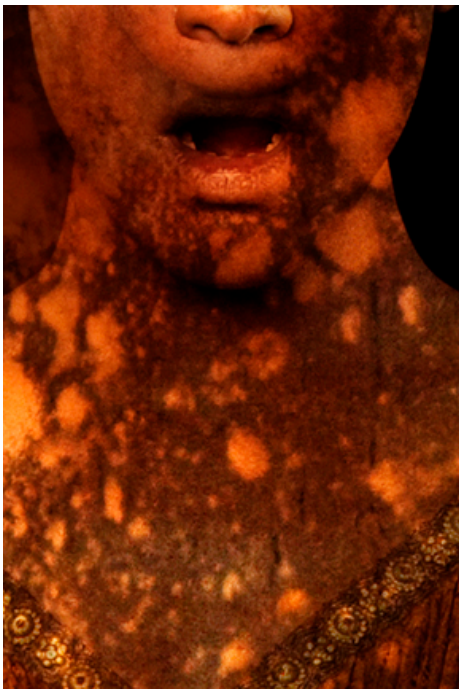
CASSIUS

Julius Caesar
Cassius, certain that he will soon be captured by Antony and Octavius, kills himself with his sword.

CASSIUS 204 x 90cm (904.66mm x 2040.02mm)

PORTIA

Julius Caesar
Convinced that her husband, Brutus, will not be able to defeat Antony and his army, Portia commits suicide in her Roman home.



PORTIA 204 x 96cm (959.38mm x 2040.02mm)

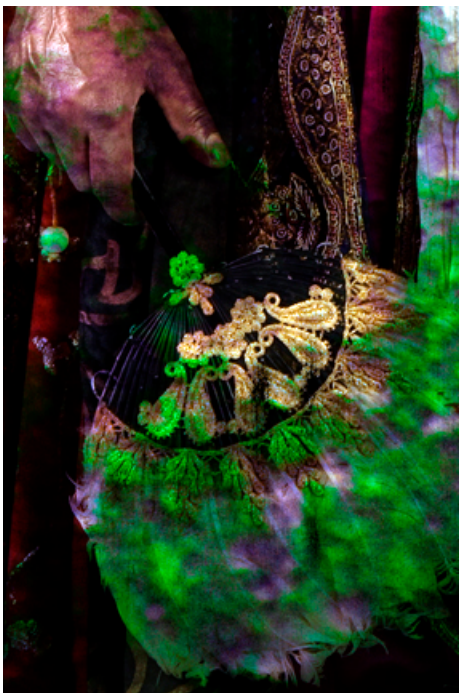
EROS

Antony & Cleopatra
To soften his heart, Cleopatra now hiding in a funeral monument reserved for her sends a messenger to tell Antony a lie that Queen Cleopatra has taken her life, she thought and spoke only of Antony at the end. Devastated, Antony orders one of his men, Eros to kill him but Eros commits suicide rather than strike down his beloved master.

EROS 204 x 87cm (869.23mm x 2040.02mm)

OTHELLO

Othello
When Othello discovers that his wife, Desdemona, whom he has murdered, is not guilty of adultery, he drives a dagger into his chest and falls dead beside Desdemona's body.



OTHELLO 204 x 87cm (871.43mm x 2040.02mm)

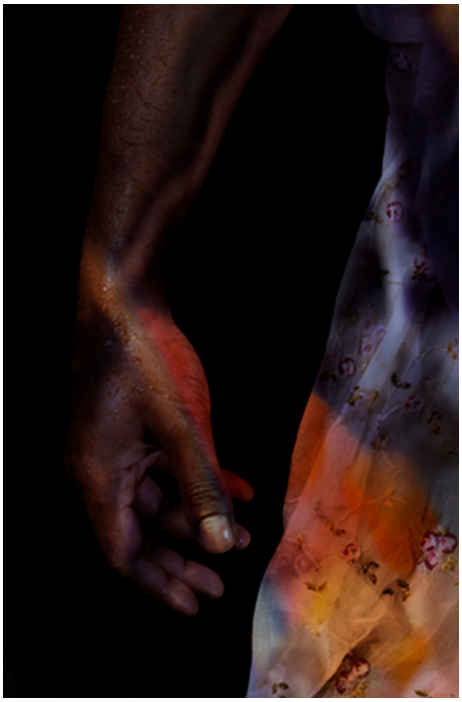
ROMEO

Romeo and Juliet
Carrying the fast-acting poison he has purchased from an apothecary in Act 5, Scene 1, Romeo arrives at the tomb of Juliet. He believes her to be dead and drinks the fatal potion, exclaiming, "Thus with a kiss I die." (5.3.121).

ROMEO 204 x 90cm (904.76mm x 2040.02mm)

OPHELIA

Hamlet
Ophelia, driven insane by Hamlet's cruelty and the murder of her beloved father, plunges from a tree branch into the current below. Although her fall is an accident, Ophelia makes no attempt to save herself, and thus her drowning is viewed as a suicide.



OPHELIA 204 x 109cm (1086.18mm x 2040.02mm)

LADY MACBETH

Macbeth
Although we are told in Act 5, Scene 5 that Lady Macbeth is dead, it is not until the closing lines of the play that we learn her death was a suicide:

"... his fiend-like queen, who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands, took off her life."

LADY MACBETH 204 x 90cm (904.47mm x 2040.02mm)

TIMON

Timon of Athens
Wandering through the wilderness, Timon can no longer take the hypocrisy of mankind. He is found dead in his cave -- an apparent suicide.

TIMON 204 x 90cm (904.47mm x 2040.02mm)

JULIET

Romeo and Juliet
As she kisses her beloved Romeo one final time, Juliet stabs herself with Romeo's dagger and falls dead upon his body.

JULIET 204 x 87cm (869.23mm x 2040.02mm)

BRUTUS

Julius Caesar
Brutus, knowing that he has lost the battle with Antony and Octavius, convinces a servant to hold his sword as he throws himself upon it.

BRUTUS 204 x 86cm (856.53mm x 2039.93mm)

GONERIL

King Lear
Goneril, the depraved scoundrel who concocts nefarious schemes against her father, Lear, and her husband, the Duke of Albany, commits suicide when her plots are exposed.

GONERIL 204 x 91cm (911.06mm x 2040.02mm)

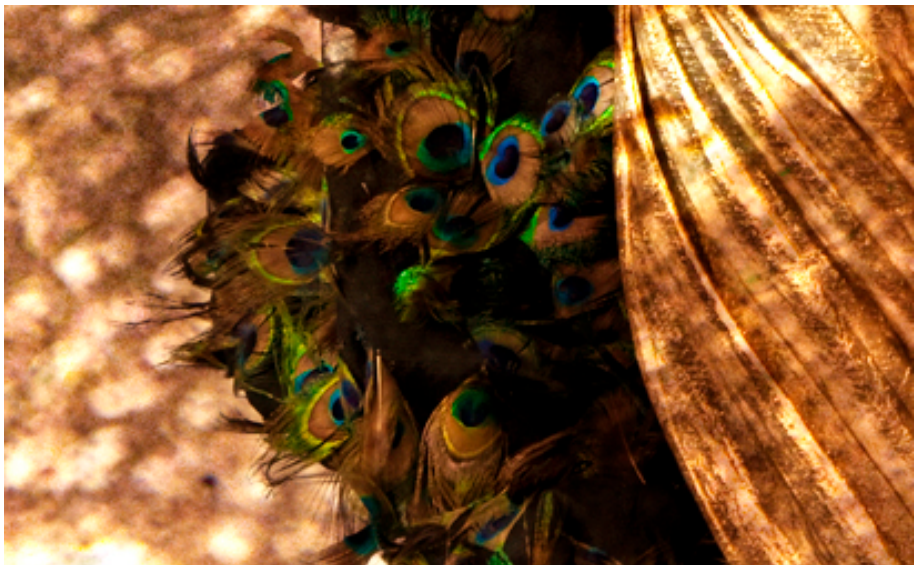
MARK ANTONY

Antony and Cleopatra
Antony falls on his own sword but lives longs enough to meet one final time with Cleopatra.

MARK ANTONY 204 x 97cm (965.49mm x 2040.02mm)

CLEOPATRA

Antony and Cleopatra
Cleopatra chooses the deadly venom of two asps.



CLEOPATRA 204 x 185cm (1854.2mm x 2044.7mm)

GALLERY TEXT

George Chakravarthi has kept a diary for almost as long as he can remember. When he was fourteen, he began to create a visual journal alongside the written one, taking pictures of himself in photo booths. Then, a couple of years later, when working in a dark room, he came across a photographic manual containing images by the American photographer Cindy Sherman, known for her myriad self-portraits, often in costume or role. It seemed to George like a validation of what he was already practising: 'I thought, "maybe I could carry on doing this". I started taking it seriously.'

Here, Chakravarthi takes his place in a long tradition of self-portraiture in role, in which the artist shows him or herself looking directly out of the work and engaging knowingly with the viewer.

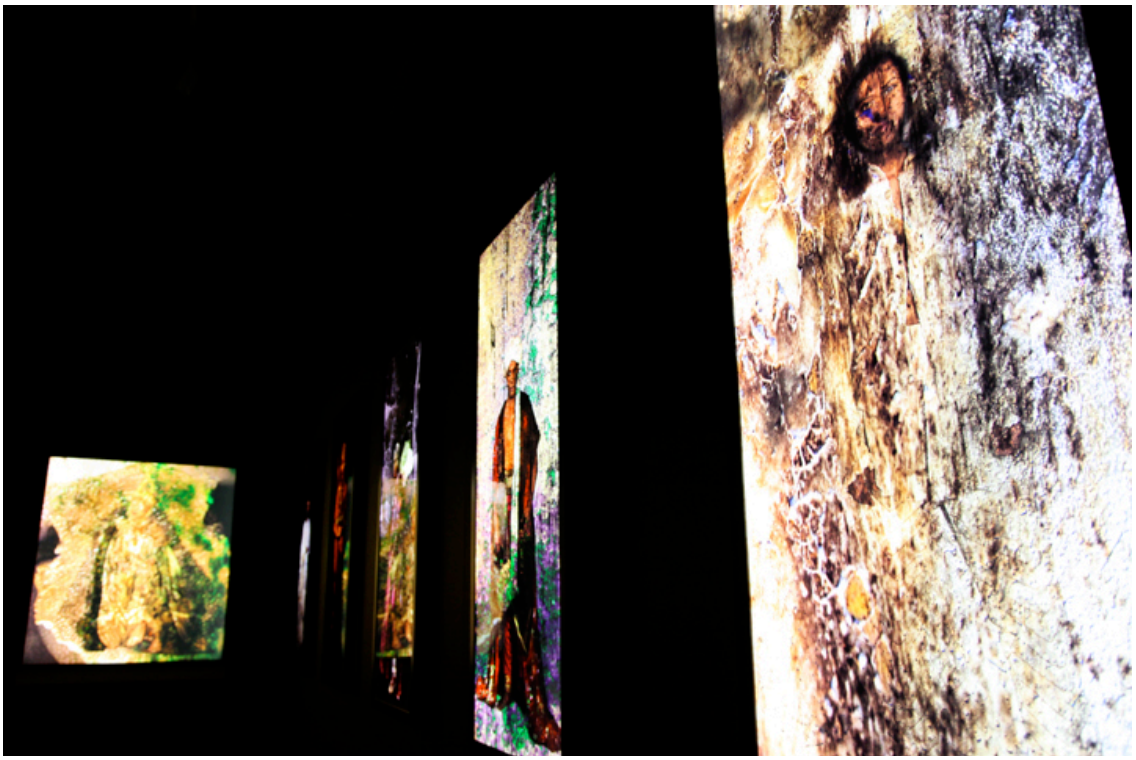
The process – and art - of dressing up is integral to Chakravarthi's work and meant that the RSC's invitation to create a work drawing its inspiration from Shakespeare's theatre chimed with his project of self-portraiture, with its qualities of theatricality, display and image-making.

His technique is one of painstaking layering of texture, image and allusion. He began work on this project in the RSC wardrobe department, a huge collection extending over five floors. When he had chosen the costumes for his thirteen characters, he was photographed wearing them, in front of a plain background, in some cases taking as many as 150 shots. 'I tried to avoid being too theatrical because the theatre is in the costume, the visual texture and the colour'. The gaze of the each characters is direct and, for the most part, deadpan. 'I wanted the faces to remain as neutral as possible.'

At the same time, he was taking photographs wherever he went, building up a rich photographic archive of surfaces – from a mesh of cobwebs in an abandoned house, to wisps of straw, to the stippling on a block of stone.

The next part of the process was the work of collaging texture and colour over the basic portrait, sometimes superimposing up to eight layers. The result is these richly patterned images, in which the visual effects often relate specifically to the particular character or experience of the individual portrayed. For example in the portrait of Cassius, one of the principal plotters against Julius Caesar, the man seems caught in metamorphosis, somewhere between flesh-and-blood and marble Roman statuary.

Character and texture and colour have different values in the pieces.



Sometimes, the relationship between the self-portrait and the visual effects is often the opposite of what one might expect, with the individual character becoming the background for the textural elements of the works.

Paradoxically, Chakravarthi explains, the application of layer after layer is for him a process of revealing not concealing the truth of character:

“It’s a taking off, a pulling apart”, in which the dense visual weave also suggests the multi-layering of Shakespeare’s plots and the complexity of character and motivation.

The final part of the process consists in of printing the photographs onto Duratran, a strong, flexible material which is then mounted on Perspex. The image is placed on a sheet of LED lighting, lit from behind and the entire piece is then locked in by a frame. The finished work glows like stained glass windows.

Looking for a theme with strong contemporary relevance, Chakravarthi became interested in the various characters in the plays who commit suicide.

‘Suicide, in the post 9/11 world, is central to our culture. I hope to bring to the texts a contemporary debate about suicide.’ Many of the suicides he has chosen are deaths motivated by honour or love – different variations on the theme of suicide in an ideological or a moral cause.

The image of Brutus' wife, Portia, who kills herself by swallowing fire, is unique among the works in its stark portrayal of the horror of the suicidal act. Again, the message is in the texture: her face seems to be turning to soot, as though consumed by the fire within and her body is stippled red and black, like burning coals or charred wood. Lady Macbeth, by contrast, is a study in mad defiance. Playing here with the question of whether suicide should be a mortal sin, Chakravarthi has provocatively shown her ascendant in a heavenly cloudscape. As a Roman Catholic, born in a Hindu culture, he is fascinated by the goddess Kali, who embodies both energy and destruction and it was this complex pairing he had in mind whilst making these two fierce images.

Despite the theme of suicide, Chakravarthi is emphatic that this installation is not about death, but its opposite, immortality. It is looks at the glamour attendant on these deaths, however dreadful, which transforms them into icons of beauty, terror, nobility and tragedy. He has created this installation as "a memorial…a temple" to celebrate the iconic nature of his subjects.

The largest portrait in the series is that of Cleopatra, whose iconic status extends well beyond the reach of Shakespeare's play. Chakravarthi was conscious of this: "There's so much [said] about Cleopatra – I wanted this image to be the noisiest."

The queen is seated in a form that is part "burnished throne", part Venus shell, from which she glares disdainfully. The gold that envelops her makes a connection with the portrait of her lover, Mark Anthony, with his golden helmet and armour. The peacock feathered cloak of the queen, is also reflected in the plumes on the Roman general's helmet. We find other such visual pairings and allusions in the images of Romeo and Juliet, whose pure white gowns seem to metamorphose into the white stone of their tomb and again, in Portia's lion medallion head dress headdress which links her to the image of Brutus, who has a lion's head on his armour.

Uniquely, among the thirteen portraits, the physical decay of death is overtly present in the image of Timon. His body transforms into mulch or fossil layers and he falls or burrows head downwards, back into the earth and darkness. Chakravarthi finds this particular image disturbing. In this gallery of terrifying divas and heroes and shining, angelic innocents, it is Timon who reminds us that we all come to dust and that immortality is, after all, just an illusion.

POLLY COLES

ABOUT THE ARTIST

GEORGE CHAKRAVARTHI was born in New Delhi, India and moved to the UK at the age of ten. Most of his work explores ideas of 'selfhood' and deconstructs socially accepted definitions of gender, sexual and racial identity within live, photographic and video performances. A multi-disciplinary artist he draws inspiration from cinema, art history, public and private spaces, and from collective social histories. He has performed and exhibited nationally in venues including The Site Gallery, Royal Academy of Arts, Tate Modern, Victoria and Albert Museum, and internationally, Mousonturm - Germany, Tilburg Dance Academy - The Netherlands and The Queens Gallery - India. He has been has been commissioned by the BBC, Artangel, INIVA, Arts Council England, The National Review of Live Art and The British Council. He trained at The University of Brighton, The Royal Academy of Arts and The Royal College of Art where he finished his MA in 2003. He was 'Thinker in Residence' at The Live Art Development Agency and lectures at The University of Brighton. Chakravarthi lives and works in London.

The work Metro undertook was to produce the Duratran film panels to be displayed in the LED light panels. I put the RSC in touch with Peter Sargent and Gary Dyson as we had worked together on previous projects. Gary is fantastic at making custom built light boxes and Peter supplies the LED panels and is a whizz with the electronics.

The combined work is to a standard and style that isn't available elsewhere in the UK.

We worked with George's digital files on screen with him to achieve the mood and balance that he wanted from his amazing dream like images. Once George was happy with what he saw on screen we produced tests on Kodak Duratrans material which is designed as a long life display film. The tests were produced on our Durst Lambda via lasers directly onto a 50" wide roll of the material.

George then revisited us to view his tests on an LED light panel and make any adjustments to colour, depth of the image and contrast that he felt would complement his work. Again once George was happy with this part of the process we went on to produce the full size originals which were then bonded to clear cast perspex for the light boxes.

It was a total privilege to work with George and the RSC on this project and to be able to see all the elements come together to a successful conclusion. We have a lot of amazing images coming through Metro that we work on but George's images are quite beautiful and totally unique.

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The process for the construction of the lightboxes started 18 months prior to the exhibition. Litehouse had started the process of designing a fine-art lightbox to offer artists a sleek way to present back-illuminated artwork with a high quality framed finish. Working in partnership with Chris Jackson at "Metro Imaging" litehouse selected an LED at a colour temperature of 5300k to suit photographers and the way in which the Duratran images would be printed. Using Litehouse Lite-panels Metro imaging were then able to calibrate the printing process to ensure that the saturation of the colours was not leached by the lighting substrate. Throughout the build up to the exhibition the framing process was developed in conjunction with Gary Dyson from "Dyson Art", London's top fine art framer. The framing process was developed to incorporate differing filetts within the frame to stand off the artwork, the lite-panel and any diffusion material required.

The time frame allowed for a degree of testing, needed for a piece the size of "Cleopatra", 1829mm x 2040mm. The lighting solution had to be made in 2 pieces joined centrally down the middle of the image. The challenge was obviously not to allow this join line to show - which of course it does not.

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Winner of The Gadget Show's Top 5 Lights

Here, here will I remain
With worms that are thy chamber-maids;
O, here will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars from this world-wearied flesh

William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Duratrans mounted on acrylic, framed within light boxes