

Client Testimonials

Master Craftsman. Umfundisi. (Teacher) Japuon

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The other day, I went in search of a service I needed. I was looking for someone who could produce high-quality photographic prints. Someone who had the right papers and inks, and who understood the process and the need for the end product to be flawless. I went onto the internet, and found a company that seemed to fit the bill. The website had a phone number, and I proceeded to call it.

The first sign that this would not be a run of the mill encounter was that it was answered by a person who was driving, and we agreed that he would call me back. He duly did a few minutes later, and it turned out that this was the owner (and yes, he publishes his personal phone number on his website).

He invited me to come over. I thought that I was simply going to see some paper and canvas samples, be shown a price list, and be harakishwad (hurried) for an order.

No. When I got there, I found him waiting for me at the door. The first good sign was the display of wildlife photographs on his walls. But still, I was priming for a brief encounter. Get my few questions answered and be on my way.

The man, a semi-retired gentleman who still looks physically imposing in his late middle age, stopped me when I asked my first question, about whether he does giclée printing. He wanted to begin at first principles.

For the next hour and a half, he questioned me about everything. How did I take my photographs? What settings did I use to import them for editing? What precise steps did I take after I imported my photographs? And he was not satisfied with glib or not-fully-thought-through answers ('No, what do you first? When you say you're correcting for lens aberrations, how do you do it? And then? And then? How do you edit your photographs for social media? How do you export for print?').

It felt like going to buy a pair of shoes, and being questioned about everything from how you walked, to where you went, to what time you usually had breakfast.

But this was just the beginning. We then embarked on a fascinating discussion about the science of paper. Which paper would faithfully carry a print for thirty years, and which one can carry one for four hundred. How old the oldest photograph in my family collection is (it dates back to the mid-1950s), and why photographs yellow with age. Why, ultimately, the resolution of a print image doesn't matter. What size one should print an image ('the photograph itself will tell you'). Disquisitions on the fibre in fine art paper. Why lining up the paper and printing in one direction works and printing in another will mean that the image will distort in a few short decades.

The science of colour in Adobe RGB and ProPhoto RGB. How the human eye sees and processes colour. Which computer one should purchase, and which monitor. How to calibrate that monitor. How to price an image, and which factors to consider. As if this was not enough, we then went to see some of the prints he has done. It turns out that he is not only a keen and gifted photographer himself (as is his daughter), but he was also responsible for printing the photographs in the Benjamin Mkapa African Wildlife Photography Awards exhibition at the National Museum (by the way, if you ever want your mind blown by the absolute quality of nature photography, visit the exhibition before it ends its Nairobi run at the end of February).

The word 'masterclass' has been overused and abused, especially in recent years. Too many charlatans wanting to make a quick buck by recycling the trite and shallow. But it is a rare and unusual pleasure to sit at the feet of a master craftsman.

Art is vital and important, but craftsmanship is often subsumed. Steve Jobs told his biographer, Walter Isaacson, how the craftsmanship of a chest of drawers inspired the aesthetic of the iMac and iPhone. Japanese craftsmen pass down the knowledge of how to build a knife that can shave the hairs off the back of your hand, and never needs sharpening, and which is so finely balanced that you do not allow yourself to use it to cook an inferior meal.

Paresh Jai is not only an artist (his photographs are there to see on his walls, and online). He is also a master craftsman who knows the most esoteric facts about photographs, photography, and printing. And not just knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge in the service of producing the best photographic images possible. To deeply understand one's craft is beautiful. To teach it is divine. And yes, this means that the prints that some of you have been asking me for, are coming.

