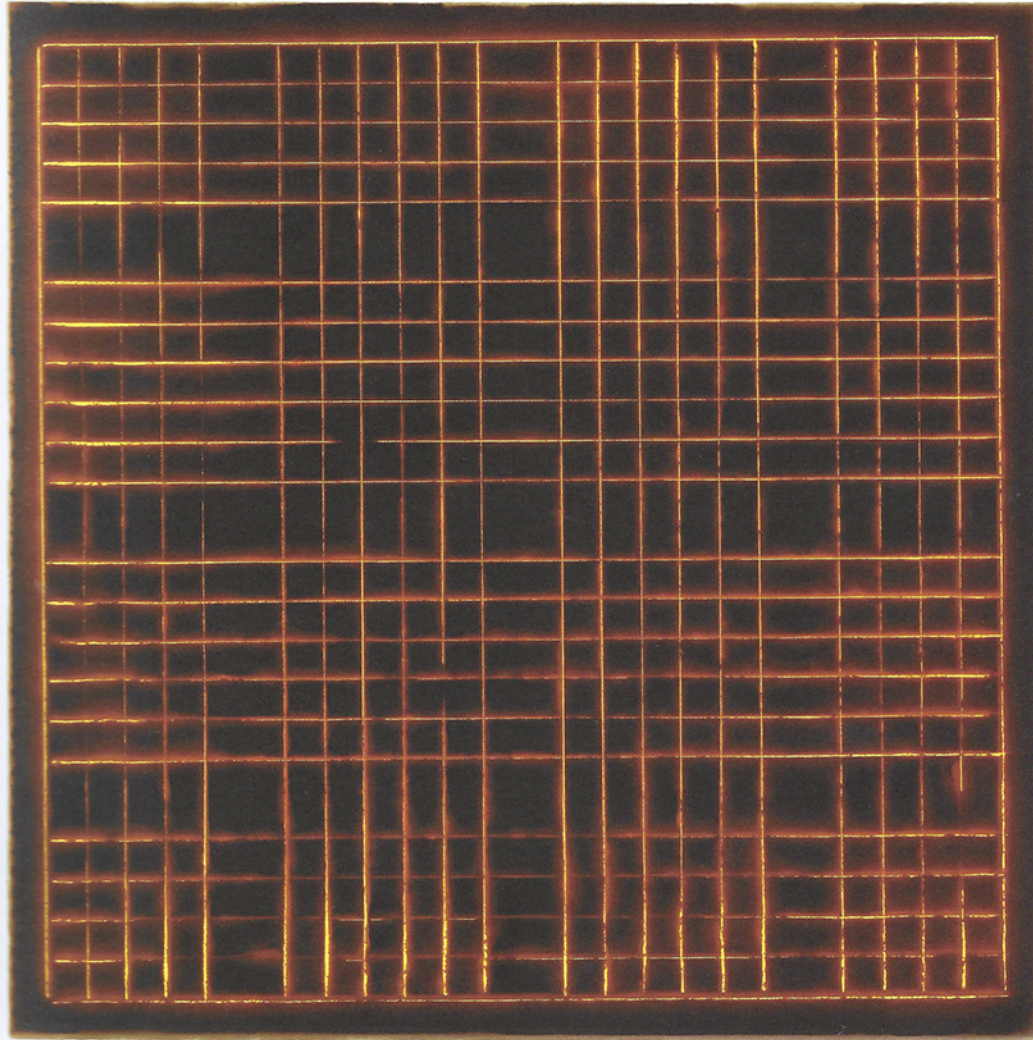


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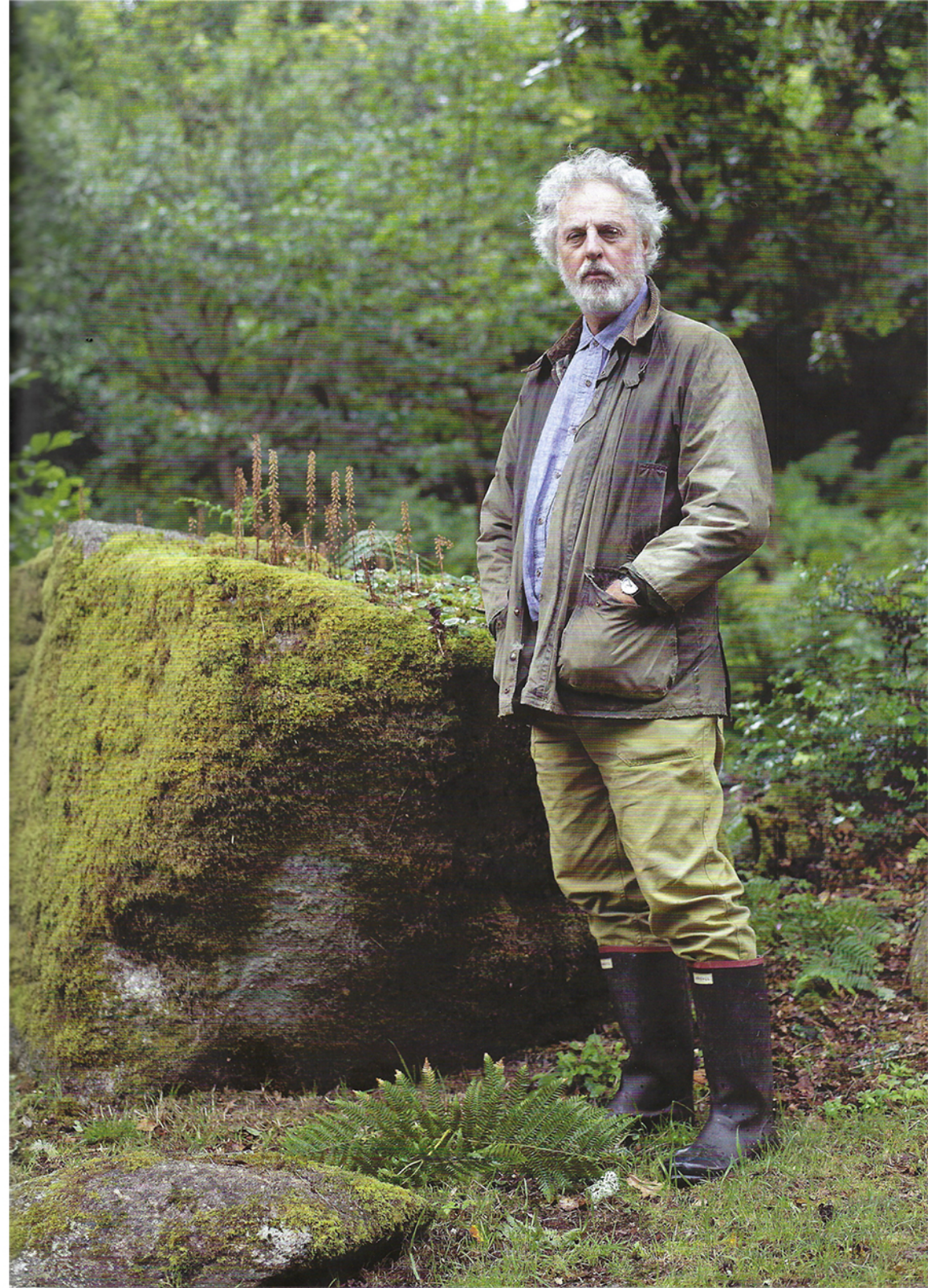


Blaze

Garry Fabian Miller

As supplies of his beloved Cibachrome come to an end, **Garry Fabian Miller** intends on this part of his creative life “going out in a blaze of light”. **Imogen Greenhalgh** visits him at his Dartmoor studio as his practice moves into new experiments with colour and form

Blaze



"You can tell it's a hot day from how high that buzzard is," remarks Garry Fabian Miller, his face tilted upwards, eyes fixed on the bird hanging improbably still in the blue air beyond. We are making our way across a meadow at the end of his back garden on the edge of Dartmoor. It is a landscape he reads easily and expertly, acquainted with where on the horizon the sun sets at the winter solstice, or where it rises on the longest day. Our walk takes us a few hundred yards, from his back door to that of his studio and darkroom. It's one he has walked daily, to and fro, for the past three decades, setting out each morning to compose sublime, shimmering studies of light in the darkness.

photographic exposures Fabian Miller makes. They conceal mystery within themselves. But he thrives as outlier, existing happily on what he refers to as the creative and geographic edgelands, or perhaps some far-flung orbit. "I expect to some people my pictures might look a bit like they've come from Mars," he says with a chuckle.

And in large part, he is right. Photography has a direct relationship with the visible world, capturing its contours even when it eschews any easy reproduction of reality. But Fabian Miller has sought something else, something other, ruminating instead on the possibilities of light, and its relationship with his material, the dye-destruction paper Cibachrome. He makes his exposures using only a rudimentary set of props, passing light through coloured glass vessels, liquids and cut cardboard templates for precise durations of time. His exposures might last seconds, or the length of a day, lucid experiments in time, never quite to be repeated.

It is rare too because he has known, since the early 2000s, that his medium would end. In 2011, the Swiss manufacturer of Cibachrome – which Fabian Miller has used since the 1970s – began to wind down production. Last orders were taken; final boxes left the factory floor. "You bought what seemed enough and then set about looking after it," he says. This year, he will reach the end of his carefully kept supply.

In grappling with the material's pending demise, Fabian Miller confronted the end of his art form, knowing his particular way of picture-making would disappear. So too would the spectrum of brilliant, stable colour the paper was known for, which he had worked tirelessly through his images to celebrate and understand. "To me, the colour spectrum of Cibachrome is one of man's great inventions," he says, before showing me a flushed shade of rosy pink he has only recently achieved. "Seeing that, you realise you could mix a whole new colour world, but I just don't have enough paper to do it, which is a little painful." Where it might have taken him, he cannot know.

It is the one regret Fabian Miller expresses in our various hours of conversation. On the whole, he is sanguine about the turn of events, finding what he calls "the end times", as ominous as they sound, a productive place, at once ambiguous and peculiarly modern, as technologies progress and obsolescence arrives at increasingly rapid speeds. "People assume it must be terribly sad to have your means of production taken away, but I have had a lifetime with the material. In fact, it's a privilege to be around for this cusp of change."

His latest body of work, *Blaze*, revolves around this thinking, published as a new book in October, and accompanied by a solo show, *Midwinter Blaze*, at Ingleby Gallery. Together, the book and show mark the end of an epoch, of the analogue, soon-to-be arcane methods Fabian Miller has mastered, and with it, an artistic career. Artist

and friend Edmund de Waal writes the introduction: "Not only do these new works have lateness built into their making, we are conscious that these works are near the close of this part of his practice – they have lateness as their theme." Fabian Miller smiles. "I liked this idea of going out in a blaze of light."

Yet though the works contemplate their own extinction, they also map the progression of a significant new departure within Fabian Miller's practice. The images presented are produced on Cibachrome, but finished digitally by the colour reproduction expert John Bodkin, who has become Fabian Miller's closest collaborator. In the past 10

years, the two men have evolved a hybrid way of working, one in the darkroom, the other at a computer screen. "Once I knew my material was ending, I knew I would need to work differently, in a new way," he says. "I wouldn't have sufficient paper to make exposures in the way I was used to." Before, he would conceive of an image in terms of an effect of light, or a certain composition, and then work painstakingly to recreate it, edging closer through a series of exposures. Now, he must trust in his and Bodkin's composite vision and expertise. "I know when an image has enough 'stuff' in it – call it spirit if you like. But the Cibachrome is no longer the final work." A remarkable example made this year, *Memories lived in this place* [pages 64-65], hangs on the white studio walls the day I visit. It is a large, almost liquid Lambda C-type print, a luminous collision of bright pink and mossy green. "This looks like the end, doesn't it?" he remarks with a smile.

Resolving pictures digitally in this way has freed Fabian Miller to work differently with his images, some made decades previously, and others newly realised. He no longer sells his unique exposures made before 2014, instead reserving them as a "bank of knowledge", destined in time for the collections of the V&A along with elements of his soon-defunct darkroom. Before then, however, he can rework and revisit them in collaboration with Bodkin, and in this work he sees the shoots of something new. "In the history of photography, there will come a point when chemical photography ends. There will be vestiges, but essentially it will become extinct. But as I see it, we are only in the early days of digital production," he says, pondering images in *Blaze*. "There are works we are making that exist in this rare, in-between place where we don't know yet what the future of these digital methods is."

Rather than define this shift as a change in direction of his practice, he attributes it as part of a line in photographic history, stretching back to the earliest inventors of the medium. "Those first 15 years were so primitive but so rich, and I feel like these early years in digital printmaking are similarly so," he says. "There is a learning happening. How much of the integrity of the analogue production system is simply a romantic idea, and how much of it is a real quality in the image that might be carried over? How much of the human can be carried over in the technology? Finding the answers to these questions is what the hybrid position is all about."

Forging new horizons

One senses in Fabian Miller an irrepressible streak of independence, which has guided him throughout his career. Born in 1957, he grew up near Bristol, and began making images aged 16. At the time, he recalls, the world of photography was forging new allegiances with art, and colour photography had just arrived from the US, along with new typographic styles of documentary, championed by figures such as Lewis Baltz. "It showed there was an alternative to fashion and celebrity photography, the David Bailey stuff, and the European humanist stuff in the tradition of Cartier-Bresson," he explains. "It was key being in Bristol at that time, with people like Paul Graham, Jem Southam, Peter Fraser and Martin Parr making work. And the Arnolfini was a real home for photography and showed a lot of it. But more important for me was that it showed land art too. This was a way of using photography in an entirely different way."

Through the emerging movement, Fabian Miller discovered artists such as Jan Dibbets, whose influence proved seminal. In 1976,

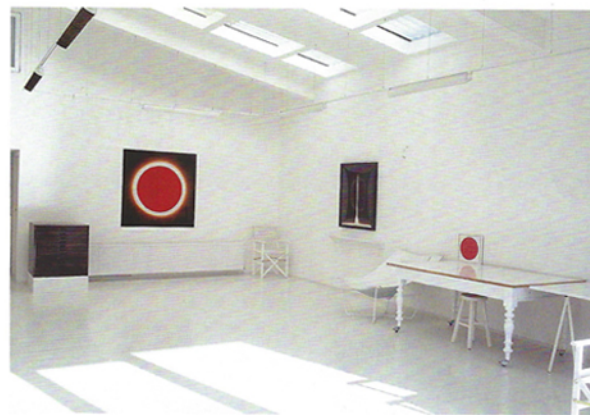
he embarked on a series of sea horizons using Cibachrome for the first time. The project, *Sections of England: The Sea Horizon* [pages 52-53], was included in a show at the Serpentine Gallery by John Szarkowski, then curator of photographs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He had found his metier, and left Bristol, moving in 1980 to a remote part of Lincolnshire to seek, as he puts it, "a direct relationship to nature, with photography as the vehicle".

In 1984, Fabian Miller stopped working with a camera, choosing instead to "engage directly with the light and my photographic materials". To begin with, he made photograms, intercepting a beam



His images deal in the atmospherics of the abstract, but it is this environment surrounding us on which they meditate – part poetry, part witness of his life on Dartmoor, products of its wilderness just like the bird above our heads.

For much of his creative life, Fabian Miller has worked without a camera, recording light directly on photosensitive paper, printing images by hand. It is for this reason, he explains, that he has lacked a straightforward community, working instead in the tradition of the medium's earliest practitioners, with whom he feels a deep alliance. There is something slow and iterative, almost secretive, to the



of light with plant matter so as to extract something of its essence. He'd work in sequences, taking a specimen – a bearded iris, say, or the seeded head of an honesty plant – to produce a series of exposures moving from the illustrative to the realm of the abstract, as if assimilating, image by image, the presence of the visible world. "With these plant series, it was never about the botanical description of the plant, but about this idea of coming into the being, and an emerging spirit place," he says. By the start of the next decade, this enigmatic territory encouraged him to part things back further still. "I realised this work was inherently narrative, but I was an abstract artist," he



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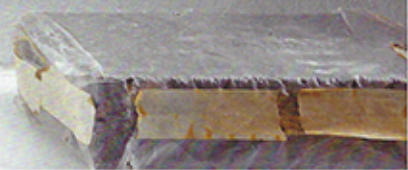
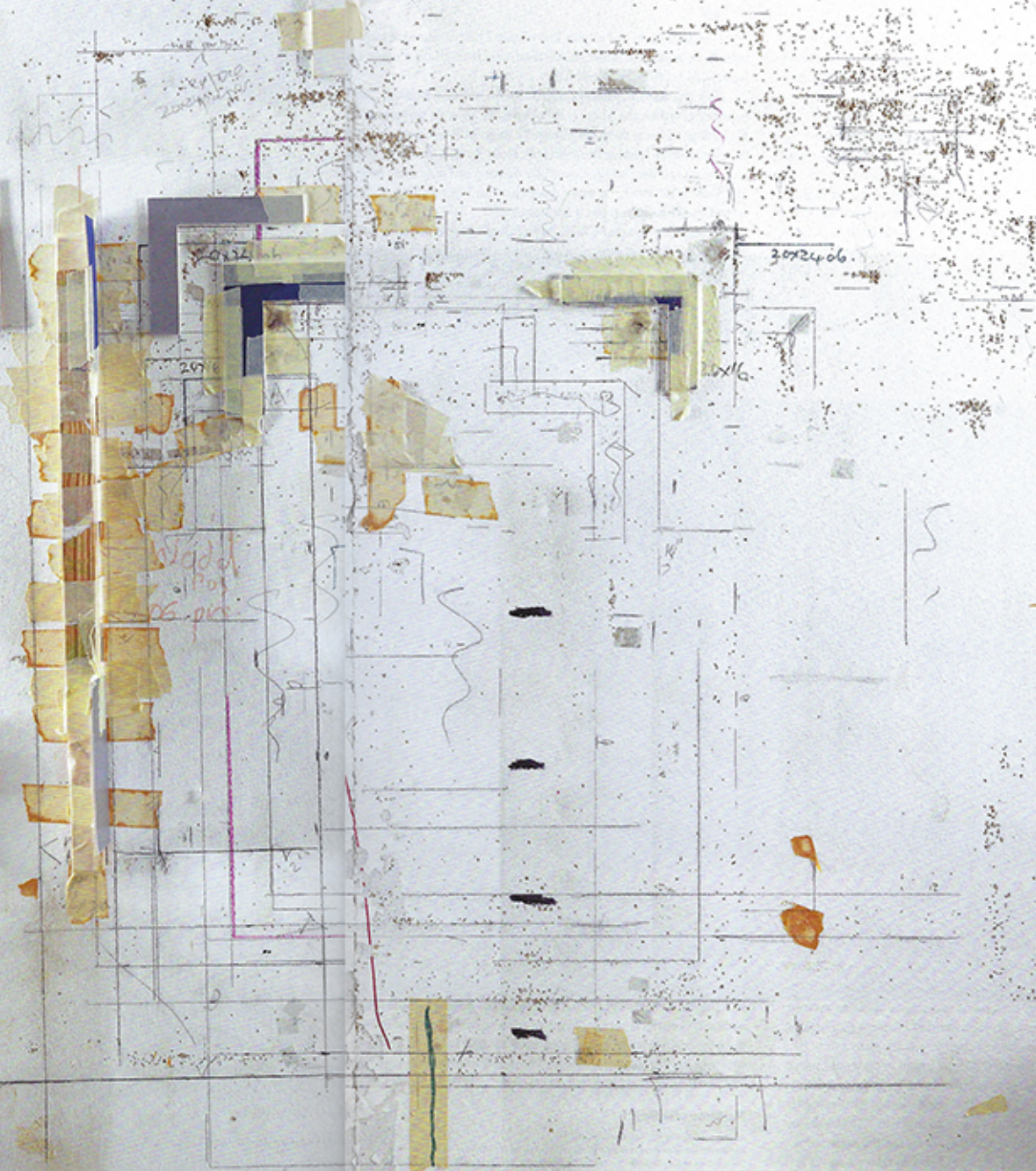
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explains. Now, his constraints became only those of colour and form, as well as his own understanding of what he might do in the darkroom. He began making the primordial-seeming pictures for which he has become well-known, planes of colour sponged in light.

Yet while he has distanced himself from the figurative, Fabian Miller remains descriptive in his thinking, his ideas rooted in the things he has seen. Walking is core to this, and he traverses a series of paths within a few miles of his house with reverent regularity, tracking the seasonal changes of the landscape. It allows him to gather fugitive effects of light in his mind's eye, out of which his images spring. *Crown*, first made in 1993, is an early example, revisited with Bodkin in 2015, and included in *Blaze*. "The effect I had seen was about the light as it rises, pre-dawn, in a kind of column," he explains of its tapered central form. "I began to work vertically, throwing light across the space onto paper, which I hung on the wall." Another motif is a luminescent halo, which grew out of a response to the 1998 solar eclipse, for an exhibition at Tate St Ives. For Fabian Miller, the natural world demands the same



close attention as his iterative approach to image-making. "If you walk often in a small area, and see it anew each time, it comes to resemble a picture series. Each time, something delivers itself in a new way."

Traditionally, when Fabian Miller gets to work, he starts an image, and in the cumulative process of realising it, spots an avenue of possibilities to explore next. Projects contain projects, like nesting Russian dolls. This changed – had to change – as the threat to Cibachrome grew, and in October 2006, he began what would prove to be one of his most significant ventures: *Year One* [pages 58-59], a seminal series which lasted 12 months. Each month, he investigated a single idea, knowing next month he would move on. "It was about learning how to make something and then deciding the knowledge must stop there. With a shortage of paper I had to take whatever it was I had learned and apply it elsewhere." It resulted in a remarkable set of time-bound experiments, and he would go on to repeat the exercise once more (resulting in *Year Two* in 2007). "These two bodies of work

represented a library of all this knowledge I had acquired, a kind of pattern book for the future. Since then, everything I have made draws from what is contained there."

His approach shifted again in 2009, on meeting Bodkin. The pair embarked on the photographer's first large-scale images, and the change in dimension encouraged Fabian Miller to make pictures that were unified, unbroken fields of colour. In that first year, they completed just four images, carefully figuring out how their new methods might work. "It was a dramatic shift," he recalls, "a different way of making images, but it felt exciting."

It was then too that Fabian Miller began to revisit earlier series, introducing, for instance, plants back into his exposures, knowing it would be his final chance. *Blaze* is unusual in that different periods of artistic enquiry are brought into dialogue with each other, and ideas that have lain dormant are given new life. Fabian Miller has also used this period to start a series of inventive collaborations with artists in other fields, to see, he suggests, "how his images might live differently in the world". Among them are the poet Alice Oswald, a valued interlocutor who contributes an original poem to *Blaze*, and the cellist and composer Oliver Coates, who created a score in response to a series of his exposures, performed at the opening of the V&A's photography centre last year. It also allowed him to build on a lifelong interest in craft, joining forces with the weavers at Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, with whom he produced a large tapestry, *Voyage into the deepest, darkest blue*. His practice might be on the edges, but it is solitary no more.

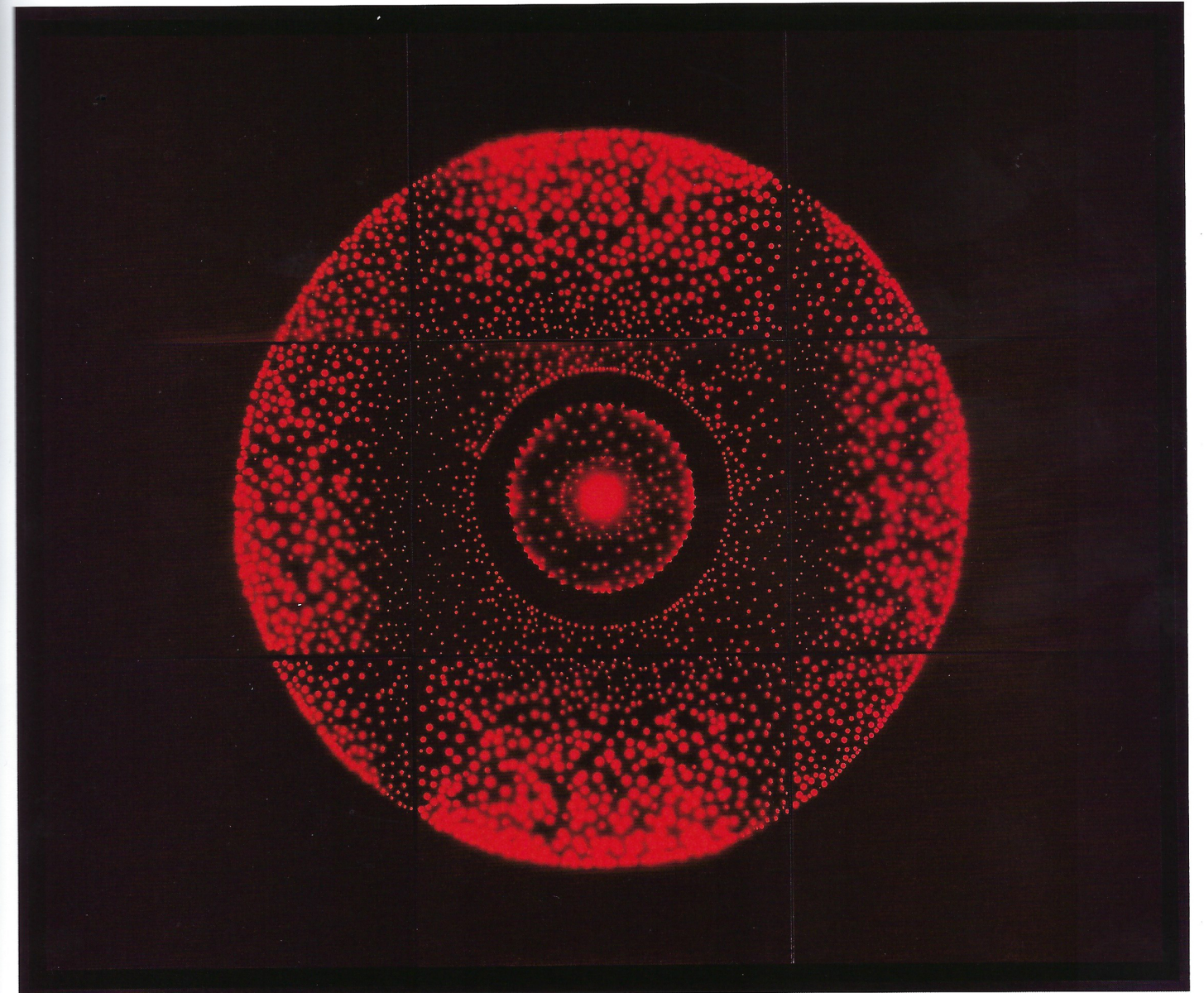
It will be on a collaborative note too, on which Fabian Miller brings his allusive body of exposures to a close. For his final series of Cibachrome exposures, he aims to produce a monument to the material's distinct colour spectrum, to place in conversation with those in other mediums, starting with natural dye-makers, working in the tradition of the great weaver, Ethel Mairet. "Coming together with others like John [Bodkin] and the weavers has been about finding those with the same detailed commitment to colour and colour systems, but using different means of production," he explains. With his final hundred sheets, he will realise "the last-ever Cibachrome colour palette", in the shape of an abstract, geometric series, "like Malevich squares, icons of colour, to remember what we have lost, and what we had achieved". After that, he will shut his darkroom, and walk home, a few hundred yards away. **BJP**

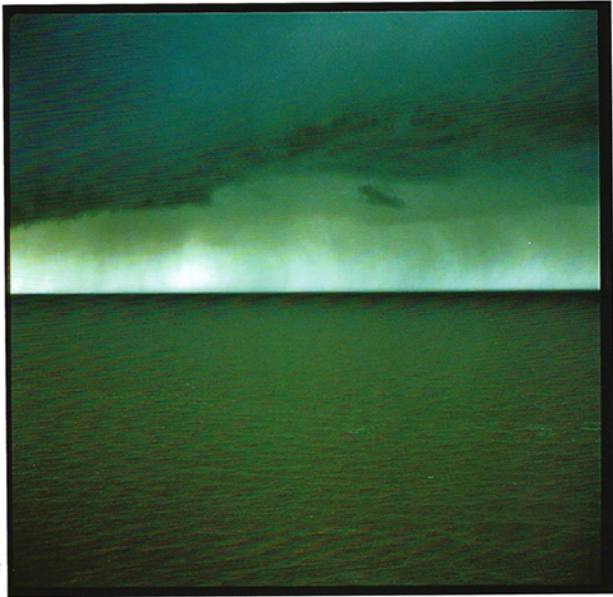
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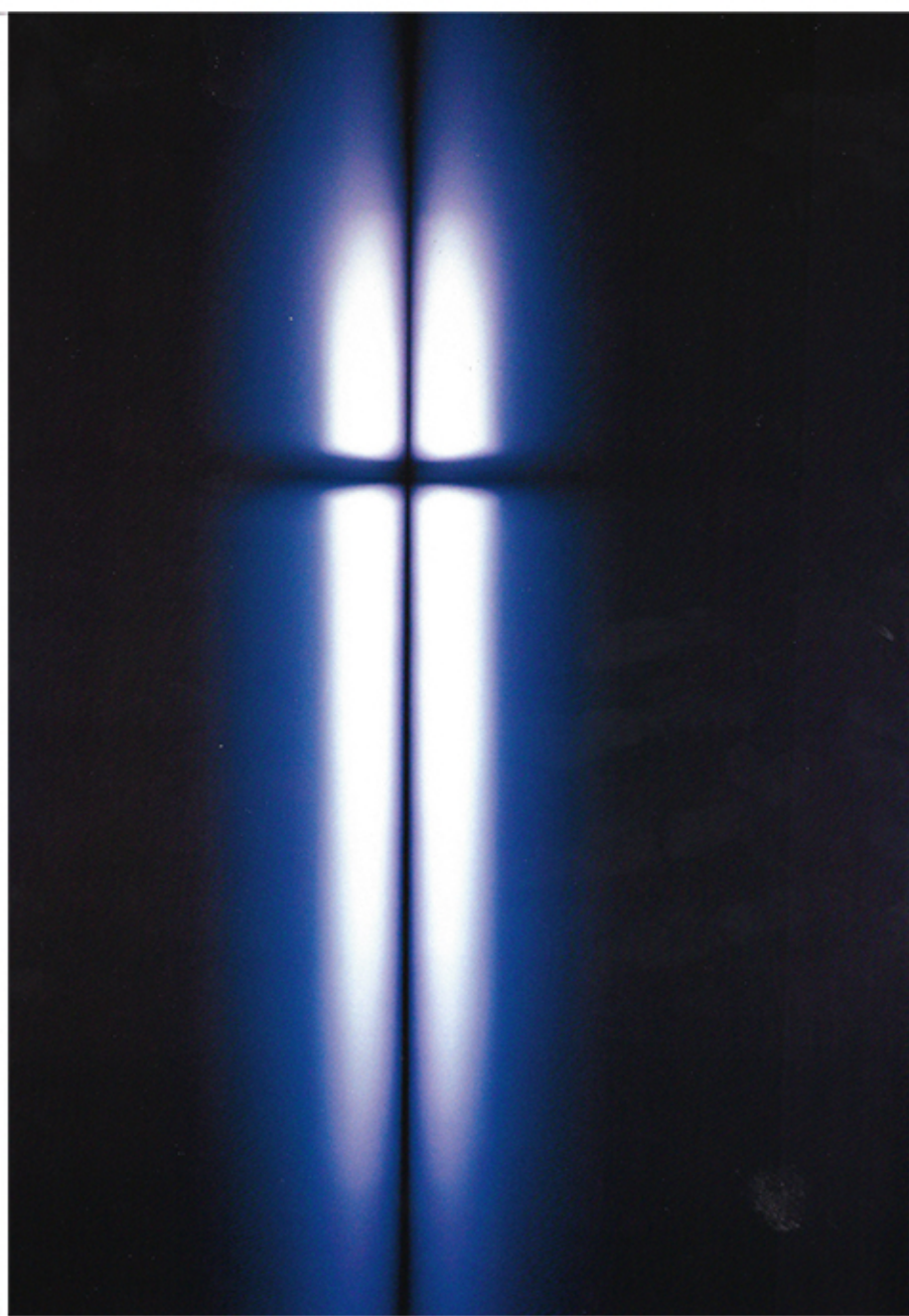
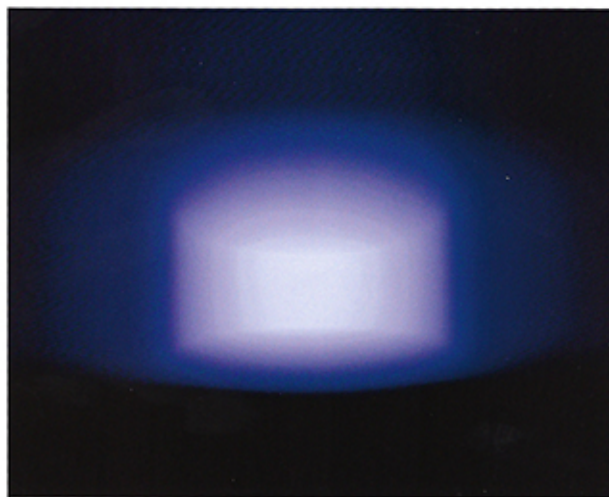
Further viewing

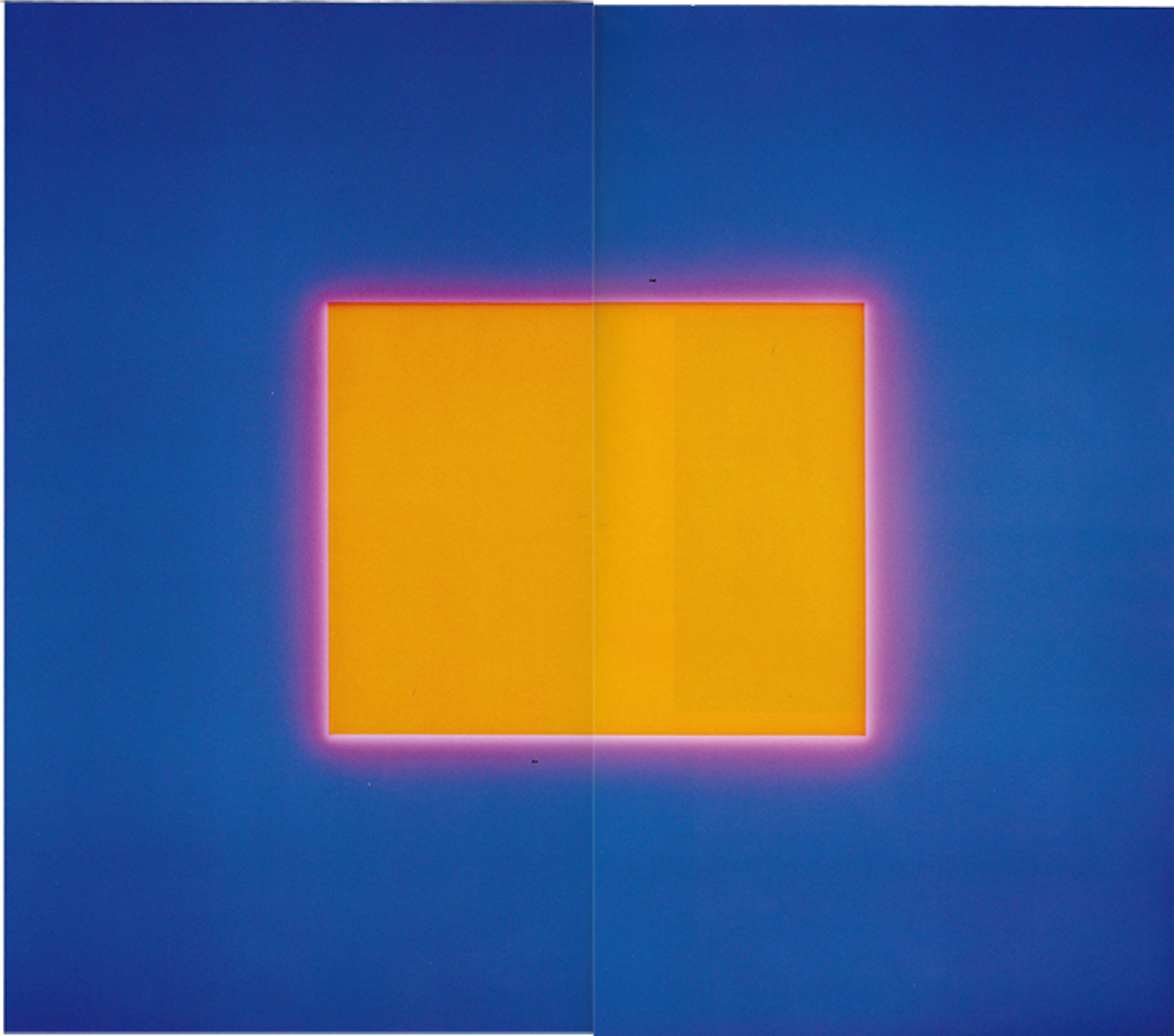
Blaze is published by Art/Books, priced £30. *Midwinter Blaze* is on show at Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, from 12 October to 20 December. Garry Fabian Miller will deliver the Annual Photographers' Lecture at the Scottish Society for the History of Photography at National Galleries Scotland, Edinburgh, on 15 November.

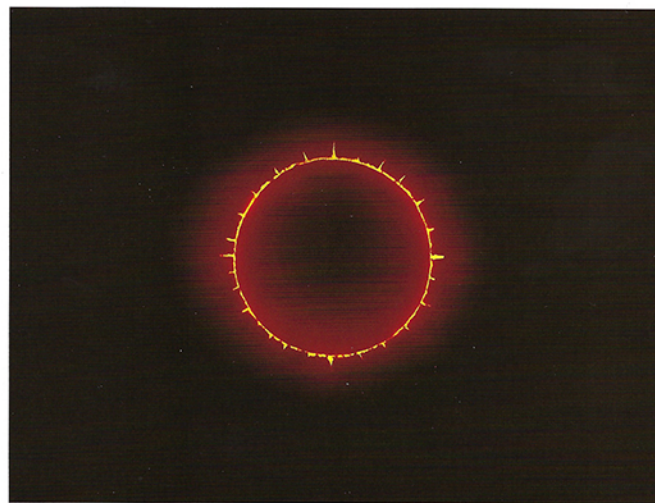
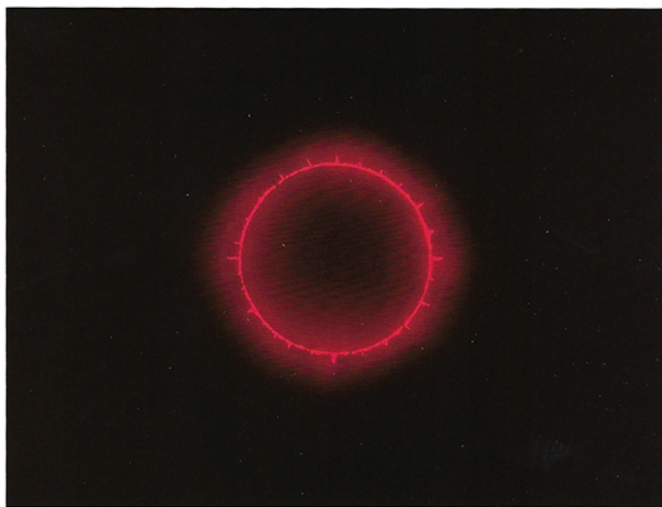
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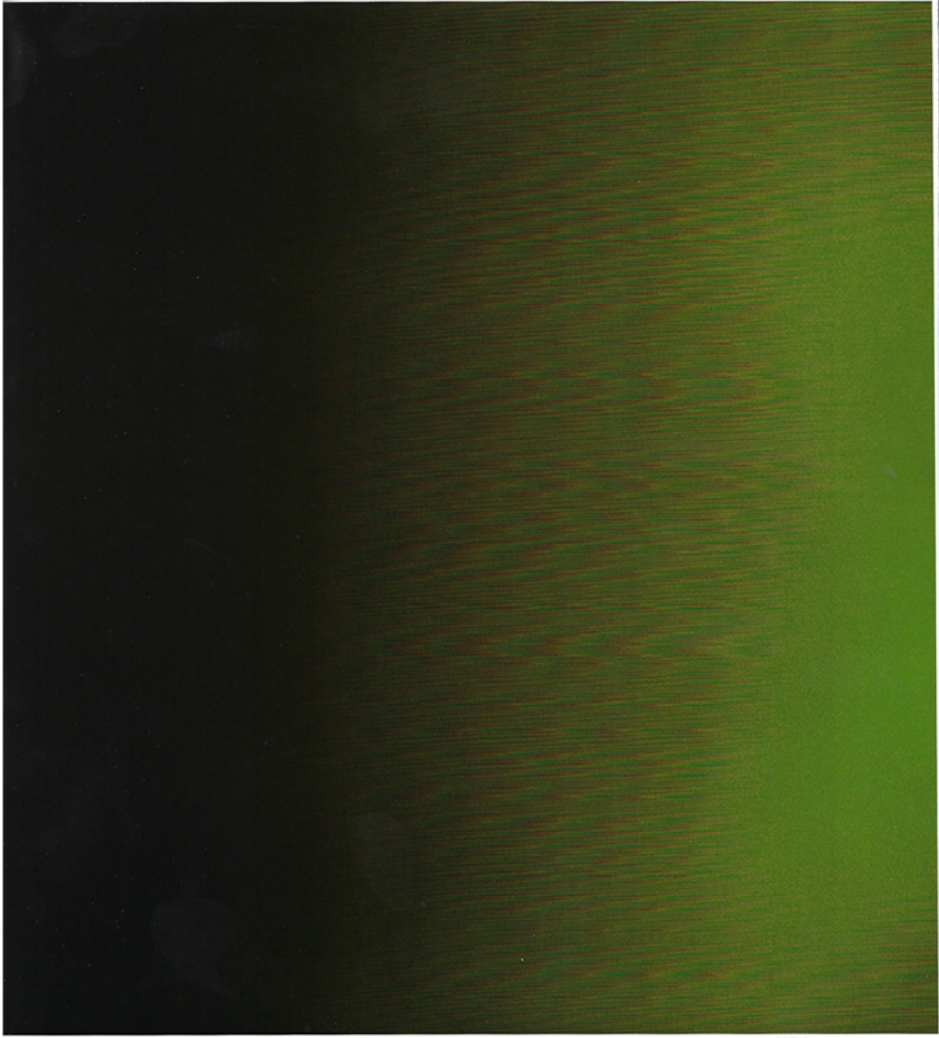
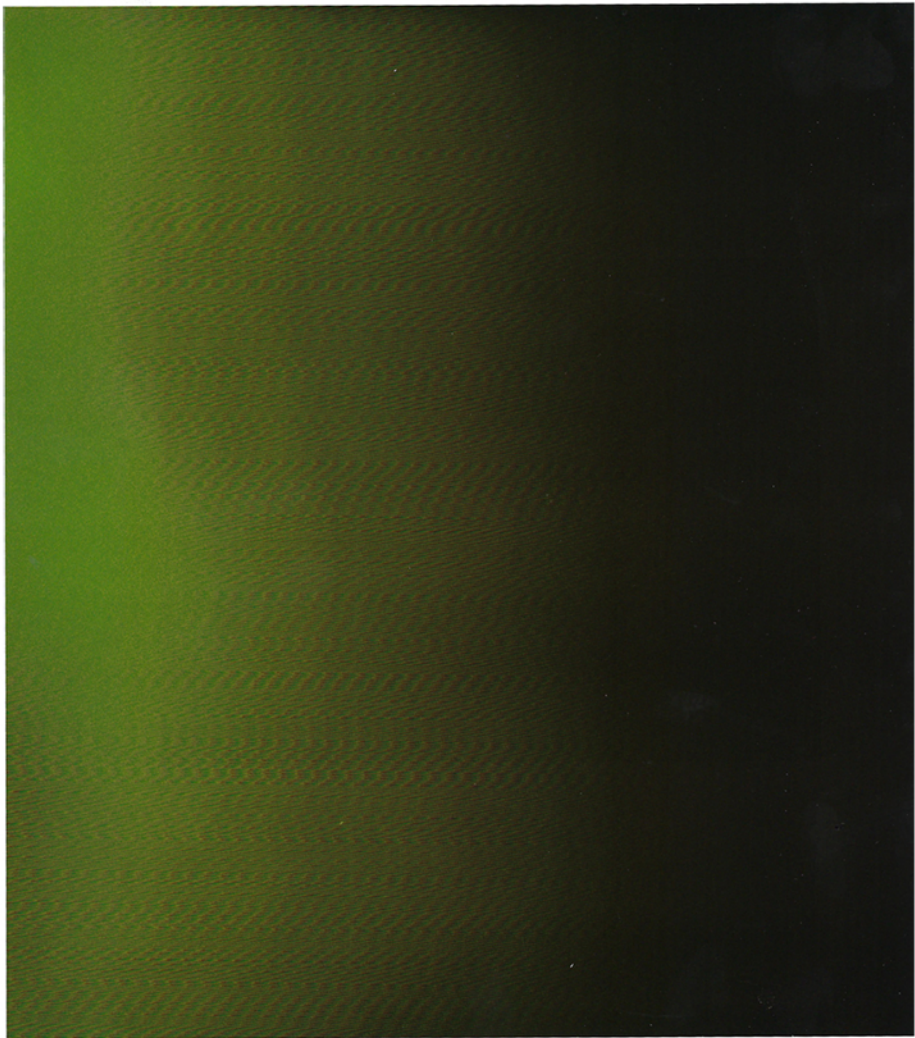


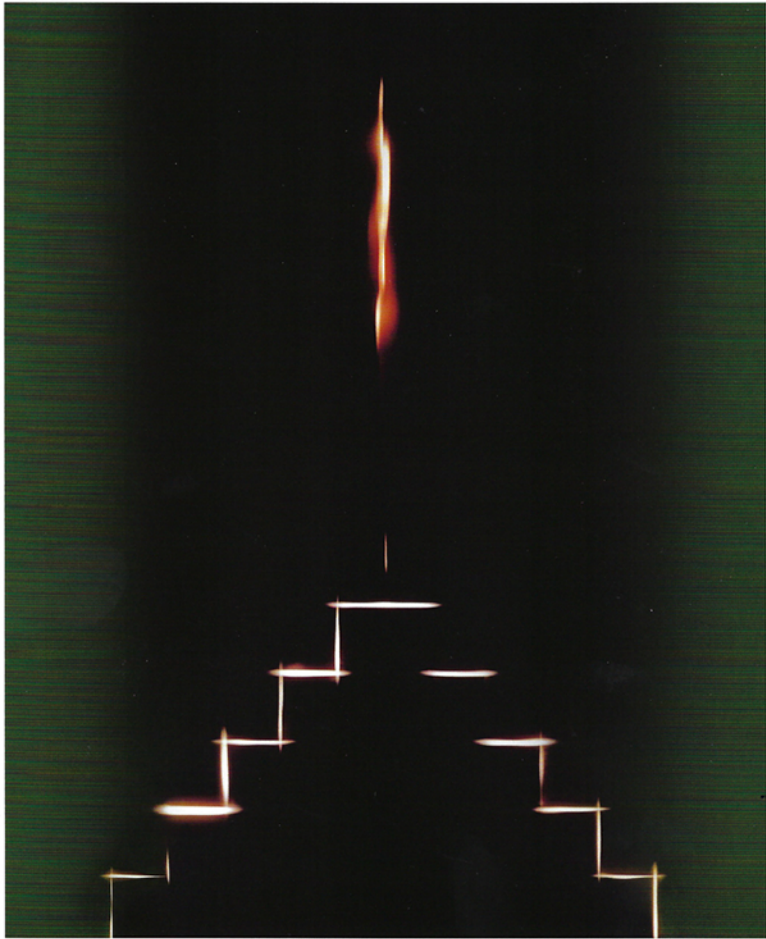




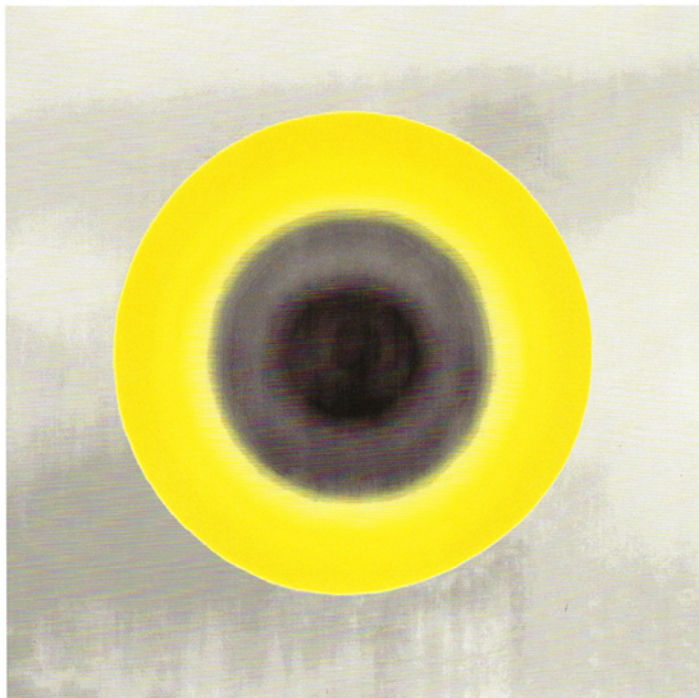












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 Pages 44-45 Light and white space in Fabian Miller's studio © Leonie Hampton.
 Pages 46-47 Fabian Miller's darkroom © James O Davies/Historic England.
 Pages 48-49 Darkroom wall detail © James O Davies/Historic England.
 Page 50 The artist during the exposure process © James O Davies/Historic England.
 Page 51 *Exposure, five hours of light*, 01 July 2005. Courtesy of the V&A Collection.
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