



'IT WAS LIKE FALLING IN LOVE'

WORDS: LUCY DAVIES

Discarding the camera opened up a whole new world of creative possibility for Garry Fabian Miller HonFRPS

SECTIONS OF ENGLAND 1976-77

LEFT

'Documentary was the dominant mode in photography in the 1970s. It didn't satisfy my search for meaning as I was more interested in engaging with nature, and was very influenced by the land art movement. For two

years I recorded this view from the roof of my house in Clevedon across the Severn estuary. Some days there would be a horizon; the view was continually in flux. [Influential curator] John Szarkowski included part of the series in a group exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in 1978.'

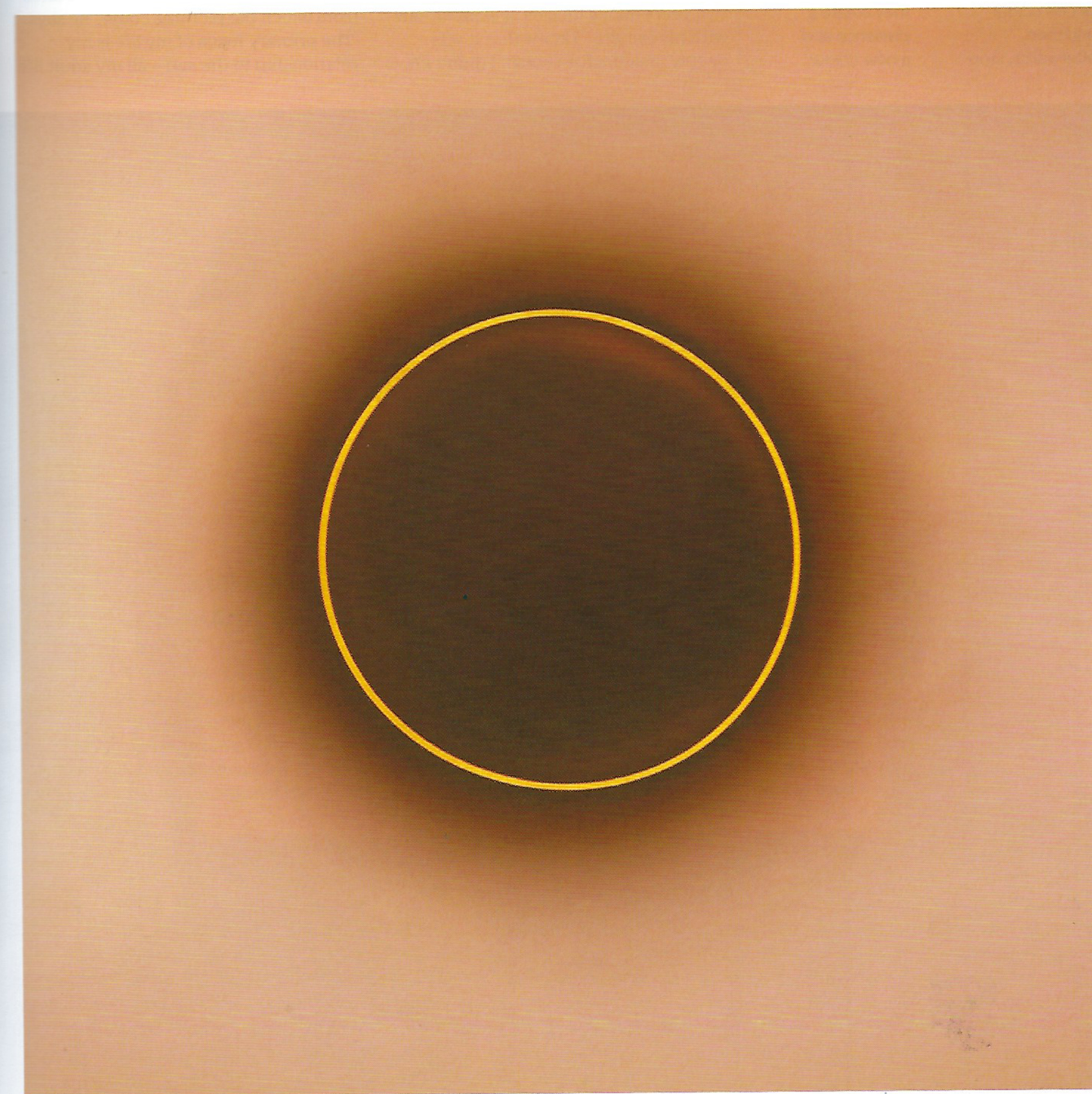
ISAW MY DARKNESS

BELOW

'In 1999, a total solar eclipse approached. I was asked to create work for an exhibition at Tate St Ives to coincide with this. This is a photogram. A piece of Cibachrome paper is placed on the table of the enlarger and, on its surface, I built a

tower from three glass vessels – the middle one containing oil, the other two with materials that affect the way light passes through: tissue paper, which draws the light inward, and a reflective material, which pushes the light outward – this controlling the light's journey. The

vessel containing oil creates the colour: its palette varies between pale yellow/white through to a blood red, depending on the volume of oil. The yellow ring you see here is caused by the way I've channelled the light down the rim of the vessel so that it draws its circle on the paper.'



BEST SHOTS

COBALT 6, FROM THE SERIES YEAR TWO

BELOW

'Every picture I had ever made until 2005 had been created by me taking one colour and making different variants of that colour via changing the exposure. In 2007, it occurred to me that I could make an exposure of one colour and then, afterwards, stop

light going to that place on the picture surface using a cut paper shape during the making of a second exposure. The picture becomes about the seepage of light, as it is trying to travel to places that it's not intended to reach. Where the two exposures meet, they create a presence and a new colour.'

WHEN HE WAS 19, in the mid-1970s, Garry Fabian Miller lived in a house set into the cliffs at Clevedon, not far from the Somerset town's famous pier. On a clear day he could see across the Severn estuary to south Wales – to the steelworks at Newport, and the Brecon Beacons.

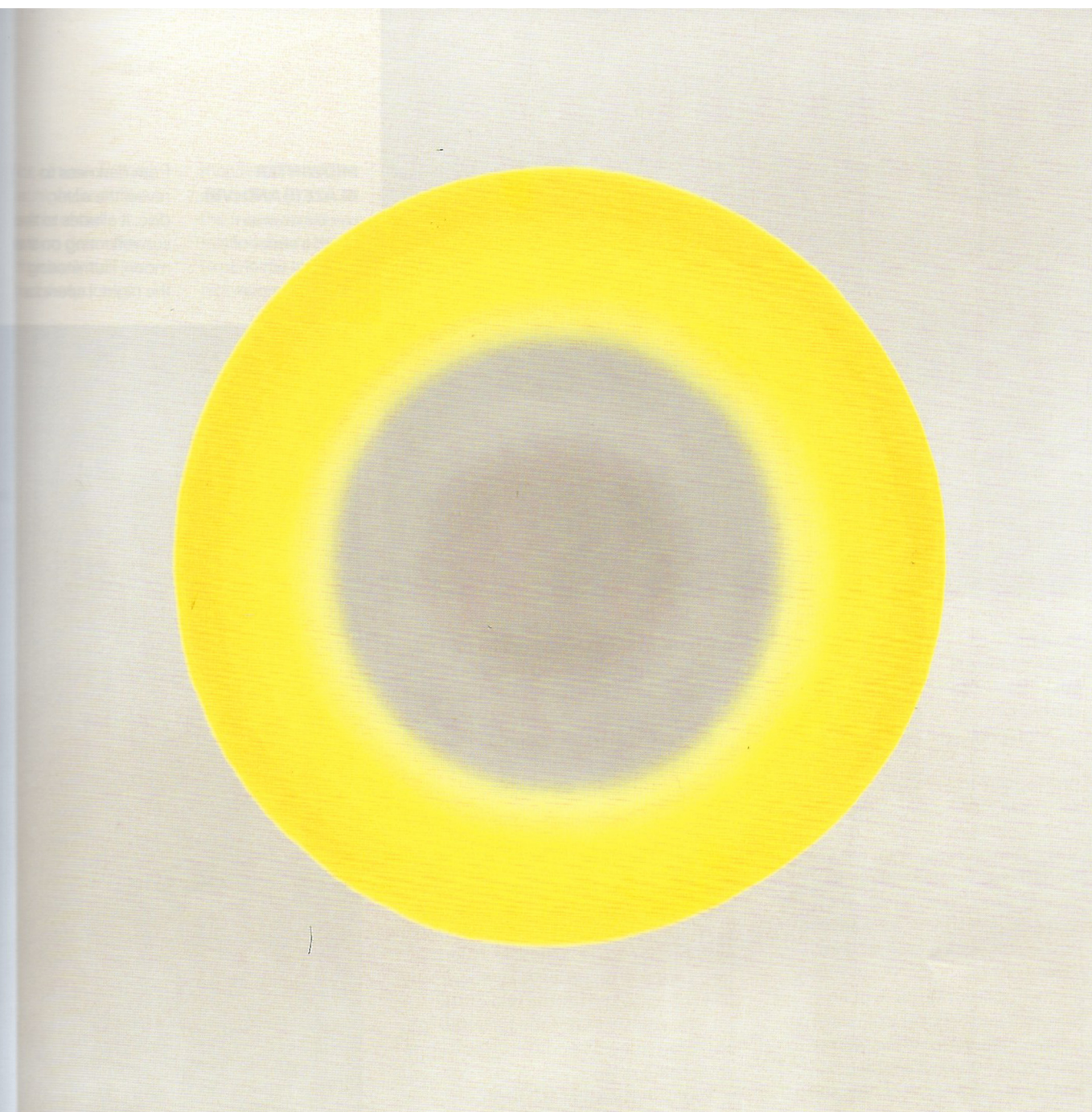
Welsh weather being as it is, though, he was just as likely to see nothing beyond continually changing combinations of sea, sky, mist and cloud.

'I chose to live there because of that view,' says the British artist, who spent two years taking images of what he saw with his camera. 'I knew that it was deeply meaningful, though I didn't know

why; just that in that place lay the answers, and by recording the events that occurred there I was allowing it to influence my thinking.'

Miller, now 62, has spent a lifetime searching for answers, although his view today is of the English rather than the Bristol Channel, mediated by the windswept tors of Dartmoor. While he works with the materials of photography – light, in combination with light-sensitive paper, chemicals and an enlarger – he abandoned the camera long ago, performing instead a series of complicated manipulations with liquids and coloured glass vessels, all in the complete black of his darkroom.

'Landscape, home: these are the sites from which the pictures come,' he says. 'The primary focus of my life is my relationship to the sun – all my adult life



'I wanted to make a picture about the way light pulls plants out of the ground and into the world'

has been based around its arrival and its end, and how I engage with it across the day. It's where all of those exposures inside me have come from. These are then released as new exposures on to the surface of the photographic paper.'

Miller first explored making work without a camera as an intermediary in the mid-1980s, when he moved from the Bristol area to a remote farm in Lincolnshire. 'I wanted to make a picture about the way light pulls plants out of the ground and into the world,' he explains. Finding the camera overcomplicated his process, he began placing plants where he would usually place the colour transparency (ie in the head of the enlarger), passing light through it so that it drew its own image directly on

photographic paper. He believes he would never have stumbled across the method if he hadn't already spent years working with a positive-to-positive photography process – Cibachrome. He taught himself to use this dye-destruction procedure, in which a colour transparency is enlarged directly on to positive paper, when he was still in his teens, experimenting in his father's darkroom. Miller senior was a commercial photographer.

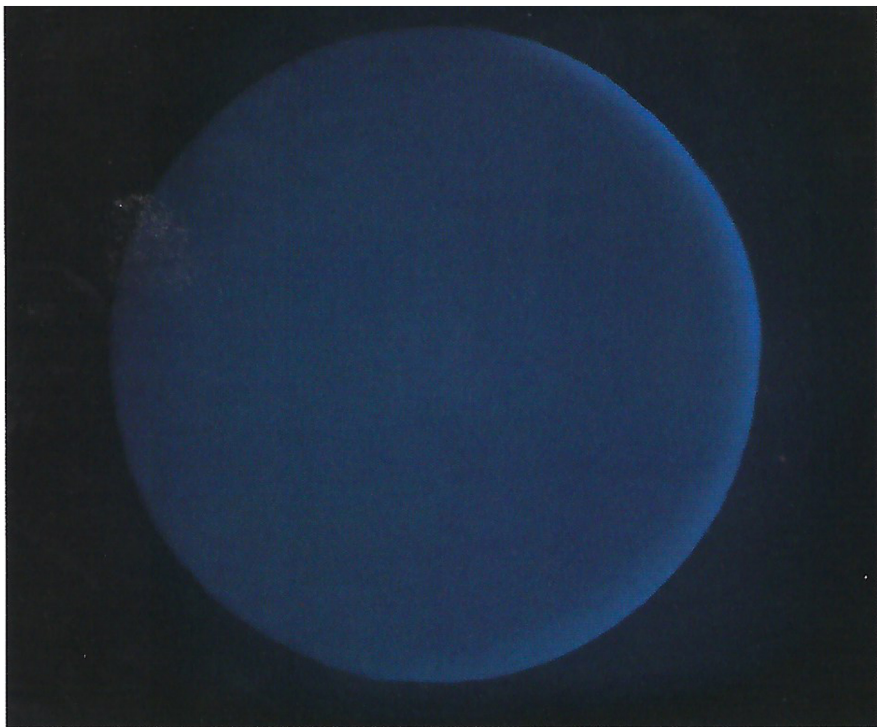
Because the dyes are already embedded within the Cibachrome paper's emulsion coating – rather than forming chemically afterwards – where their purity and intensity can be better maintained, the final image has colour of a brilliant depth. Discovering it, he says, was 'like falling in love. It's a

THERE IS NO SHADOW

ABOVE

'To make this golden yellow I've exposed the whole sheet of paper to light passing through a glass vessel filled with oil. This has a long exposure – around 19 hours. I have then exposed it again, putting white light on to the paper through a small circular aperture, to create the central area of grey. The area beyond the yellow circle is where I've

made another exposure and erased everything outwith the outer yellow ring. You can see chemical streaking, as if the picture is still active. When I made it, it felt as if the original idea was being adulterated. It took me a week to understand what was happening was actually incredibly important, creating this beautiful sense of the picture taking on a life of its own and trying to destroy itself. This became the true spirit of the picture.'



**MIDWINTER
BLAZE (I) AND (VII)**

LEFT AND BELOW LEFT
‘From a series of seven, in which I gradually move

from darkness to reveal the silver disc. It alludes to the sun reflecting on the moon, illuminating the night. I spend a

lot of time walking at night, and the cycle of the moon determines that activity. This is a darkroom

manifestation of the sun reflecting off the moon and my relationship to this experience in the night’s space.’

**HERE IS WHERE
ONE STARTS FROM**

BELOW
‘The brownish-red part is where light has been allowed

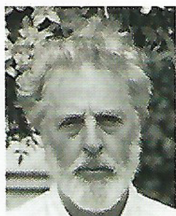
through oil during a short exposure. Above that is an exposure of green light. Then, I’ve blocked the whole

sheet of paper out apart from a tiny crack about as tight as you see between two fingers pushed together. The

vertical light is made by striking many matches, burning a line that creeps outwards into this colour field.’

**PROFILE
GARRY FABIAN
MILLER HonFRPS**

The fine-art photographer gained international acclaim in the 1970s for images of sky, land and sea. Since the mid-1980s he has worked without a camera, experimenting with the possibilities of light as medium and subject. His work is in collections including those of the V&A, London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and Bangkok’s Museum of Contemporary Art. He has worked since 2014 with Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, on a series of rugs and a tapestry, Voyage into the deepest darkest blue. He has lived with his family on Dartmoor since 1989, with his work evolving over three decades from a cycle of circular walks there.

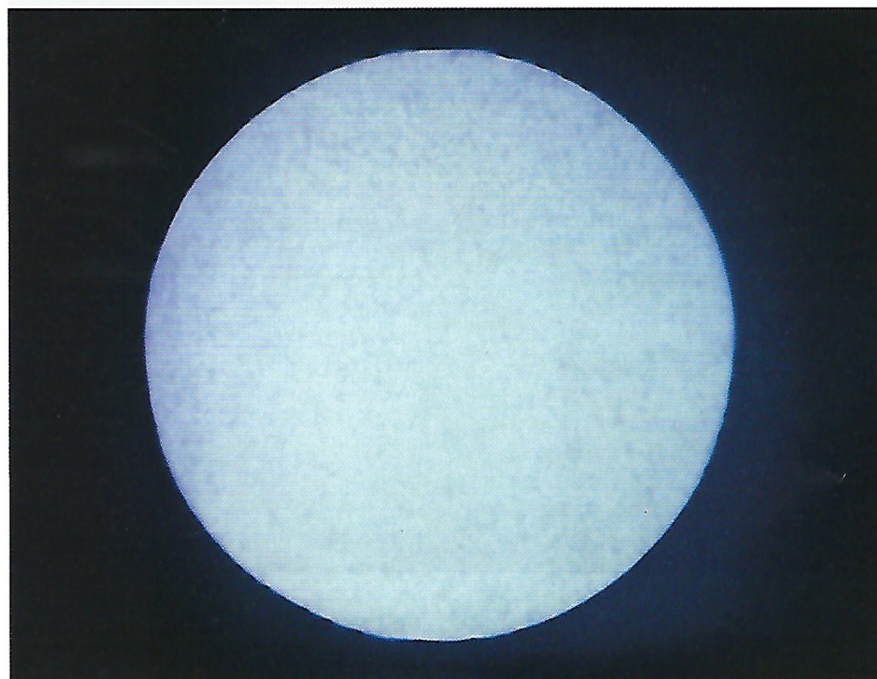
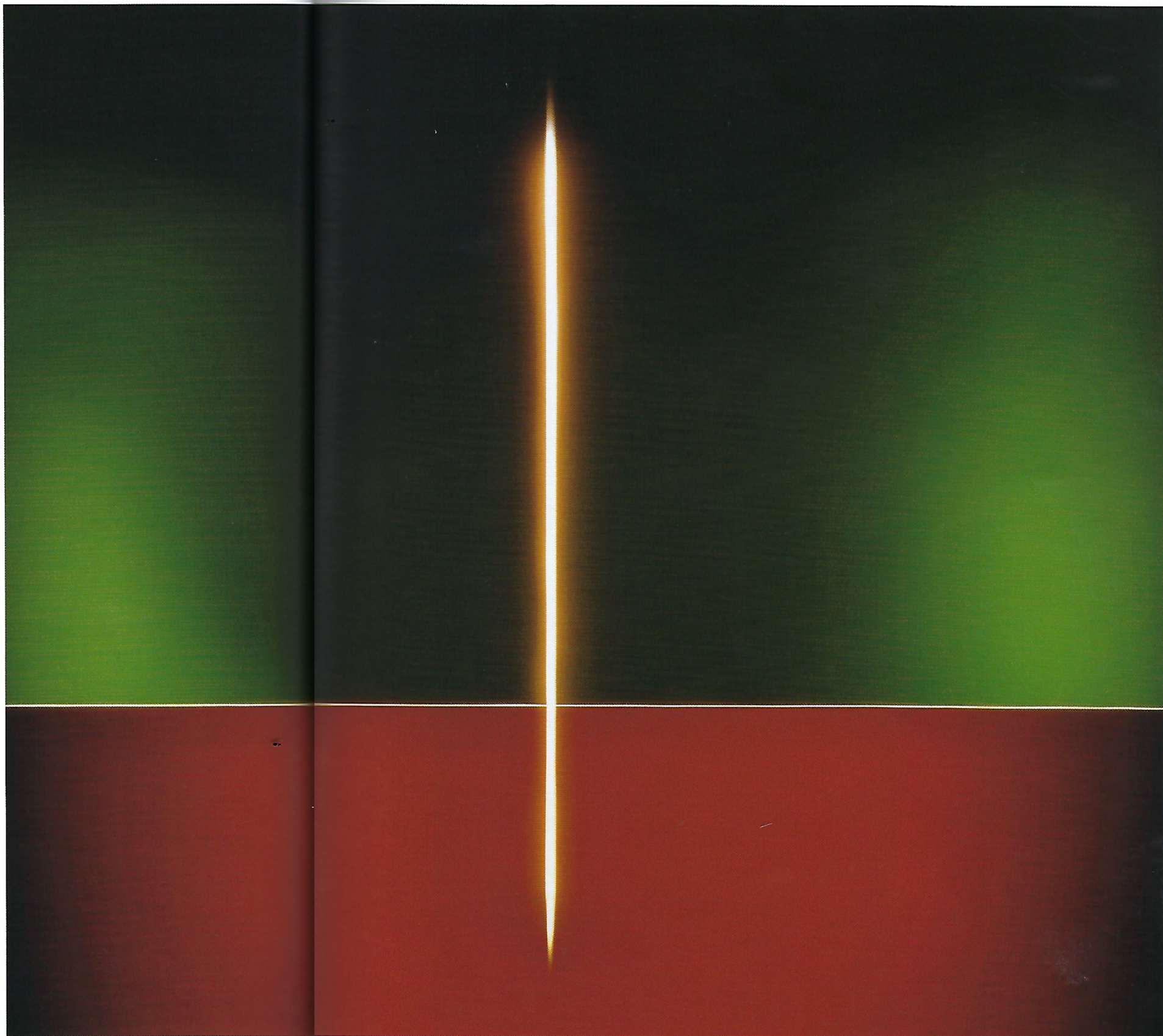


• wonderful thing. And once I had found it, how could I use anything else? I suppose what I’ve done over the last 40 years is to explore its potential.’

In 2005, though, it became clear that Ilford, the Switzerland-based manufacturer of Cibachrome, would no longer be producing this revered product. Miller had to adapt his process – and fast. ‘I knew I was running towards the end, and it was a case of managing that end.’

Where previously he had been making series that could take a year or longer, he embarked on series that would only last a month, ‘and at the end of the month, whether I felt the idea was fully explored or not, I would stop and start something new’.

Today, he has just 11.5 litres of Cibachrome chemicals left, all of it way beyond its official expiry date. Even so, he says he feels fortunate to have had this chance. ‘When young people come and see me, they ask “what was it





MEMORIES LIVED IN THIS PLACE

LEFT
 'My most recent piece, drawing on the experiments of 2007 but I've moved into a palette of greens and pinks, which I hadn't found a way to make before. It's made using three exposures. In the first I allow light to shine through a green vessel containing water,

holding it back during the exposure to give the particular range of tones. The pink is made by passing light through a red vessel containing water. On top of that, another exposure is made through a blue vessel. There is a sense of resolution and a poignancy in knowing that such discoveries cannot be developed further.'

'A work might not be the same as the one you made the day before, but it is still true'

• like?" They'll never know, and that makes me sad.'

Miller has lately sought alternative ways of bringing his exposures into the world, such as live performances, in which his works are presented in collaborations – with musician Oliver Coates, for instance, and poet Alice Oswald, who has written a piece for the book accompanying his forthcoming exhibition, *Blaze*, in Edinburgh.

Miller has also been working with Dovecot Studios in the city to produce his pictures in tapestry and as rugs, pleased to find that the artists there have an understanding of the colour language akin to his own. 'My main community is craftspeople,' he says.

He and ceramic artist Edmund de Waal, whose essay is in the new book, have been friends for more than 20 years. 'We talk about what we do and find it very similar, says Miller. 'Going daily to a workshop, throwing a pot, a pot that might not be the same as the one you made the day before, but which is still true. Those stages on the way to the perfect manifestation of your idea – the craft of making the slow, incremental gaining of knowledge – is never without value.'

Blaze is at Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, 11 October–22 December. Garry Fabian Miller is leading the Distant Light workshop at RPS House, 8 September. See events, page 575