



GUIDING LIGHT

The sun has long been Garry Fabian Miller's lodestar, shining down on a career spent steering the spectrum in his Dartmoor darkroom. The abstract artist's chromatic corpus has always distilled the spirit of the seasons: now that he's recruiting his muse as a collaborator – trading in chemical trays and Cibachrome paper for soil and seed, so as to grow dye plants – his solar power has never been stronger. Contrasting methods old and new, Tania Compton discovers there's both illumination and shadow to be found at the eclipse. Photography: Howard Sooley





Previous pages, left: a glance into one of Garry Fabian Miller's darkroom trays reveals the stains left by years of processing chemicals. Right: a work from his 2020 'Colour Seed' series, this piece was produced by positioning water-filled green and red vessels beside one another and passing light through them, transforming the hues at their juncture. This page: while this looks like a photograph of a flower, it isn't – this is a Cibachrome imprint where the foxglove flower acts in place of a colour transparency. This way, in Fabian Miller's words, flowers are themselves turned into 'chalices of light'

The journey of Garry Fabian Miller's world is coming full circle. This self-avowed heliophile has spent much of his life in a dialogue between the luminosity of Dartmoor and the discombobulating depths of his darkroom. For decades, Fabian Miller's daily walks furrowed traces from the eastern edge of the moor towards the great ridge of Hameldown, a route that has allowed him to transcribe into art all the spiritual intensity he finds in nature. His resulting body of work has pushed experimental photography to the very limits of the colour spectrum – and all without the use of a camera.

The artist's process, beaming white light via an enlarger through coloured glass or cut paper shapes, allowed saturated hue to be directly absorbed by photo-sensitive Cibachrome paper; Fabian Miller would then activate the paper's layers of azo dye using bleach, revealing the embedded colours in full force. But, as the supplies he relied on dwindled and digital photography ascended, darkrooms – the crucibles of his craft – careered into closure. Meanwhile, the toxic dyes that had made the artist's alchemical experiments possible had, all the while, been casting carcinogenic shadows.

Fabian Miller has come to understand that his cancer was caused by the years he spent in that chemical darkroom. It is a realisation that the artist has met, however, with a burst of creative energy, one with all the intensity of a solar flare. His last Cibachrome experiments reached towards the furthest ends of abstraction, capturing surprising junctures between eclipsing colours: saturated pink passes from red and blue vessels filled with water, orange from red and green, and an otherworldly aqua from green and blue. These works echo the form and hues of the Brocken spectre, a meteorological phenomenon that blends mist into kaleidoscopic rainbows; Fabian Miller has encountered them on those rare occasions when the spirits of the moor conspire with the sun.

'The primary focus of my life is my relationship with the sun,' he maintains. 'All my adult life has been based around its arrival and its end, and how I engage with it across the day.' Now the sun is being called on as co-conspirator in *Three Acres of Colour*, the artist's latest project, apportioning an acre each to madder, woad and weld: dye plants that will be harvested to produce red, blue and yellow pigments respectively. Swapping silver halides, heavy metals and petrochemicals for safer minerals and softer colours, the artist's creative reformation promises a plant-based antidote to the aniline.

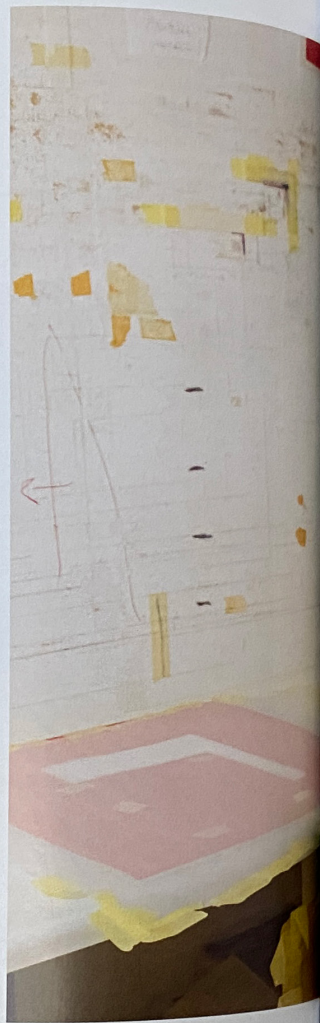
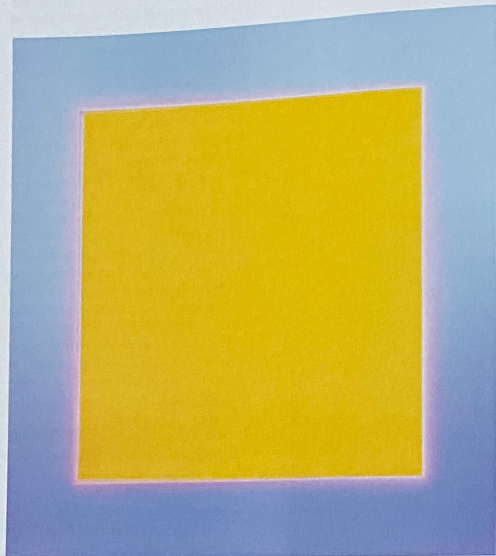
Below: the artist's light-filled studio space is set in a landscape of moss-covered stones and tall birch trees. Bottom: at work, Fabian Miller can often be seen rotating his pieces a few at a time to examine and absorb their ever-changing impression. In the foreground are a few of his plant-centred pieces, including (four nearest, clockwise from left) 'Sun Rose', 'Bramble Cross', 'Bluebell' and 'Foxglove'



Despite exchanging the darkroom for the dye vat, Fabian Miller's current, inchoate project will retain the vibrancy of his oeuvre, each dyed skein alive with the sun's power – gentler to the senses than before, perhaps, but an enduringly palpable revelation of what he calls 'the shape of colour'. In both his abstract cameraless photography and natural dyeing, white light and radiation from the sun conjure colour, though the archival permanence of Cibachrome is being eschewed for a more fugitive form of light absorption. With the seasons as its muse, Fabian Miller's new work will echo his early explorations of spring edging into summer: light cast through delicate leaf tissue; the silky gradation of mauve along a bluebell stem; the freckle-like, nectar-facing guides on the summer foxgloves. This time, these transformations are expressed in tints and shades: etching the joy of high summer in the acid yellow of weld and the rich, inky indigo of woad – madder roots harvested in autumn, by contrast, manifest a seasonal spectrum from peach to vermilion.

The germination of these dye plants marks an auspicious return to the soil for this masterful garden-maker who, with his partner, Naomi, has created a horticultural haven at Homeland. A symbol of optimism and renewal, *Three Acres of Colour* is an expansive project – for Fabian Miller is a man with a mission. Though geographically he may be keeping within the trigonometric points of his darkroom, studio and moorland, he's cast his net of artistic communication wide. In February, he'll be returning to his childhood city of Bristol for a retrospective at the Arnolfini, titled *Adore*. It is set to put the spotlight on his collaborations with Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh and textile firm Dash & Miller. As part of his honorary fellowship, Fabian Miller is also at the heart of the Bodleian's lecture series 'The Light Gatherers', on the history of photography, soon to be accompanied by his memoir, *Dark Room*, in 2023.

When he's not crowned with a halo of admiration, Fabian Miller may be found in his studio, reappraising his work in light of whether it has 'made the felt visible'. Or treading the ancient tracks of the moor, beside Bronze Age burial cairns and standing stones – themselves, perhaps, sanctified by an encircling Brocken spectre © Garry Fabian Miller's lecture series runs at the Bodleian libraries until Oct 2023. For more information, visit visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk. His exhibition 'Môrwellion', at the National Museum Cardiff, runs 18 Feb–10 Aug. Visit museum.wales/cardiff



Top left: in 'Darkroom, The Yellow We Made' (2020), light claws at the edges of a blocked-out square of Cibachrome paper, making a pink halo between the yellow and blue. Left: Fabian Miller's mission to 'project myself into the heart of the sun' is captured in his 'The Darkroom's Fading Presence' (2020)



Fabian Miller's colour enlarger sits in the centre of his darkroom. Propped up in front by a tower of books, a green glass vase stands at the ready. Among the assortment flanking the exposure wall – with its methodical marks and morsels of masking tape – is an article about environmentalist James Lovelock, one of the artist's heroes