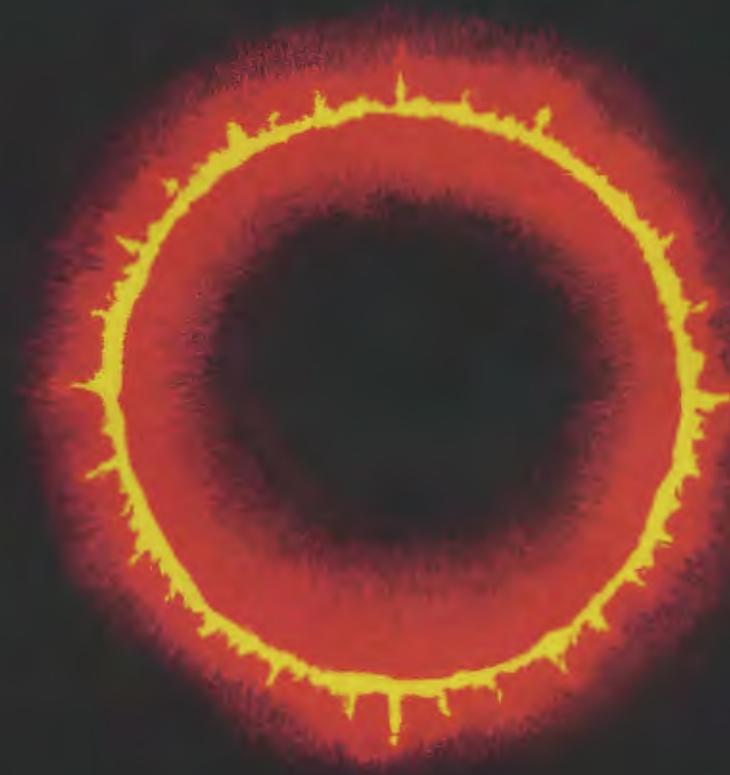


THE COLLABORATORS

Photographer Garry Fabian Miller has joined forces with Edinburgh's Dovecot Studios to create a stunning new tapestry. *Imogen Greenhalgh* finds out more. Portrait by *Sam Fabian Miller*

LEAP INTO THE DARK





Hearth Rug, The Golden Light, 2017, wool and jute, 182 x 220cm

This story begins, perhaps a little oddly, with an ending. In 2012 the Swiss manufacturer of Cibachrome, a dye-destruction paper invented 50 years previously to make stable, non-fading colour prints, announced that production would cease. Final orders were placed, a few stockpiles were built, and the last boxes left the factory floor. 'Two people have nuclear bunkers of it, but they probably won't use it,' Garry Fabian Miller tells me, as we sit in the living room of his Dartmoor home. 'People like me bought what seemed enough and then looked after it. When you placed your last order, you thought you'd bought enough. I got it wrong. But the chemistry is all beyond its sell-by date now anyway.' He is down to his final sheets.

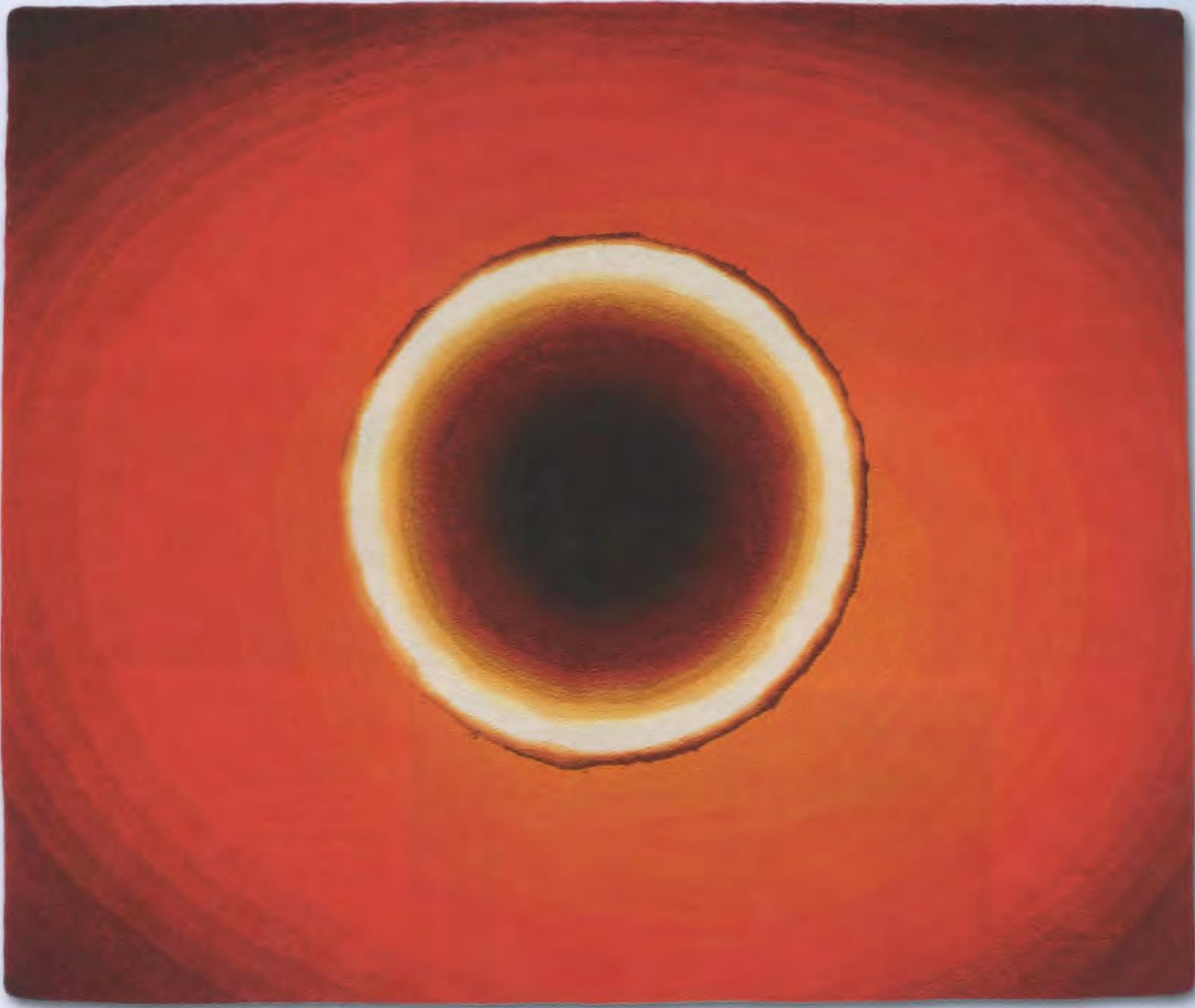
Fabian Miller is a fine art photographer, with an international reputation built around an oeuvre of luminous, often large-scale, abstract prints. Since 1984 he has not used a camera, instead confining

himself to a dark room at the bottom of his garden. There, he creates sequences of images through daily experiments, exposing light directly onto the surface of the Cibachrome paper. Through these extraordinary enquiries, he has come to understand the behaviour of his material intimately, like a potter knows their clay. And using what seems an almost rudimentary kit of props – coloured glass vessels, water, oil and some hand-made cardboard templates – he achieves a staggering range of effects, and a brilliance of colour that has drawn comparisons with Rothko, Turrell and even Turner. His only other ingredient is time, with each exposure a precise length, from a matter of seconds to almost a day.

'There's this space for the unknown to exist,' he explains of his alchemical process as he shows me round his darkroom; the walls are cluttered with various samples, newspaper cuttings and family photographs, testifiers to a life spent within

its boundaries. 'The result may be 70 per cent what you hoped, or thought, it might be. But there's this other 30 per cent which pushed itself in, and made the image appear in the way it did. And that might mean you go and make the next picture in a completely different way, because this thing happened, and you've got a sense of *how* it happened. So something wonderful accumulates, which is a body of work.'

The painstaking making process behind his work means Fabian Miller is, in Glenn Adamson's words, a photographer of the 'most artisanal stripe'. Even as an exposure is underway, his hand is a central, intervening force, bringing him closer in method to the earliest inventors of photography, and making him something of an outlier in the contemporary photography world. 'I was always a kind of peripheral figure, so I didn't have a community,' he recalls, 'but craftspeople were the people working like I was.'



Hearth Rug, Day's Eye,
2017, wool with linen
backing, 182 x 220cm

Fabian Miller's route to discovering craft was oblique. While exploring Quakerism and the peace movement as a teenager, seeking, as he has written, 'people who were living their lives with purpose and meaning', he came across Robin Tanner, the etcher and educator whose personal collection of craft would become the basis of the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham. In the lives of these British craftsmen and women working on the creative edgelands, Fabian Miller found guidance and a well of inspiration that has sustained him through his life.

In 2016 he paid tribute to four of these 'exemplary friends' through an exhibition, *Making, Thinking, Living*, choosing work by Tanner, Ethel Mairet, Elizabeth Peacock and Richard Batterham to show alongside his photographs at the Crafts Study Centre. 'I very much regret,' he writes in the accompanying catalogue essay, 'that their achievements have been so overlooked.'

It is this regret that brings us to the crux of his latest project: a tapestry, in the midst of being made at Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh and due to be unveiled in February. After a life spent admiring and collecting craft objects, placing them at the centre of his existence, he is deeply engaged in the creation of his own. 'The fact I'm doing it is kind of bewildering to people,' he chuckles. 'In my world I think everyone is keeping themselves at arm's length, they don't know what to make of it. But it will be wonderful when it exists, it will be totally challenging... It's just not something people expect a photographer to make.'

And he has reason to be confident, as the tapestry springs from a successful working relationship with the studio dating back to 2013. Trying to get a project about Elizabeth Peacock and Dartington Hall off the ground, he got in touch with David Weir, Dovecot's former director. From there, the conversation led to a series of collaborative gun-

tufted hearth rugs, two of which featured in Dovecot Gallery's exhibition *Dwelling* in 2015, with a new edition of one design, *The Ruby Embers*, coming to Collect in February. Weir invited Fabian Miller to make the tapestry with them in early 2017 – a rare speculative venture for the studio, for which Fabian Miller is grateful. 'I feel very fortunate everything has aligned, and it was the right thing for them, because they've taken a risk,' he explains. 'And if they hadn't, I don't think I would have ever made a tapestry, so I feel quite emotional about the whole thing.'

Once he accepted the invitation, he had a matter of weeks to select a subject, settling on an amalgamation of two Cibachrome prints that create an abstract horizon line, a meeting of orange and blue. The immutable power of the horizon has long appealed to him, from the days when he was starting out as a photographer, fascinated by the natural world. A series of studies of the sea and



Above, left: *Voyage, into the deepest, darkest blue*, oil, water, light, dye destruction print.

Left and opposite: the tapestry in progress at Dovecot Studios.

Above: weavers David Cochrane (left) and Rudi Richardson (right)

sky marked his entry into fine art photography, and were shown at the Serpentine Gallery in 1977 after he was spotted, aged 18, by John Szarkowski, then curator of photographs at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the artist R.B. Kitaj.

While those early prints depict the sea and sky in a muted palette, the tapestry, *Voyage, into the deepest, darkest blue*, presents a different kind of drama. When I visit Dovecot in early November, it is still weeks from completion, a sliver of shimmering orange only just visible at the foot of the loom. The original image sits behind the warp, and though it is small, there is something suggestive about it, an elemental meeting of light and dark.

As a design, it is also strikingly simple. To construct an image out of two planes of colour, albeit a blazing orange and a rich, cavernous blue, shows faith in the skill of the weavers to create extraordinarily nuanced blends of colour. 'The increment of colour is so minute,' explains Emma-Jo Webster,

one of the tapestry's weavers, 'but it makes a huge difference. It's so gradual it plays with your eyes.'

This waywardness, where the colour becomes the protagonist of the work, can only be achieved through the weavers' supreme mastery of their medium – something which sits at the heart of Fabian Miller's intention for the work. 'It's going to be an all-embracing experience. I want it to be a statement about what tapestry can create, something bigger than the photograph which doesn't have a lot of physical presence. Even if the photograph was very large, with the tapestry there is something about the way the colour is soaked into the surface that will draw you in, in a very physical way. It's going to be exciting.'

For both the photographer and the weavers, the tapestry is indeed a leap into the dark, a voyage, as the title suggests, which will no doubt bear discoveries on both sides. Once complete, it will be shown at Dovecot alongside Fabian Miller's first

studies of the sea horizon from 1976-77. But that's only where its story starts, with plans afoot to exhibit it at Eastbourne's Towner Gallery in the summer, where it will hang alongside pieces by some of his prized early mentors: Henry Fox Talbot, Anna Atkins, William Blake, Samuel Palmer, but also, and perhaps most significantly, Ethel Mairet in whose footsteps he now follows.

'She is really the reason I made the tapestry,' he says. 'It's why it mattered to me, because [she] matters to me. She and Peacock were pioneers, but they are not valued because they're craftspeople. So the fact I ended up in the position in my life where I could work in this tradition, and contribute something to it... it's hugely meaningful.' An ending, but one replete with new beginnings. *'Garry Fabian Miller: Voyage' at Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, 2 February – 7 May. dovecotstudios.com. At Collect: Oxford Ceramics Gallery, stand no. 1.1. garryfabianmiller.com*

