

Homework · Alison Britton

THE THREAD THAT RUNS through *Making thinking living* in three echoing words, follows interconnected strands of Garry Fabian Miller's practice and way of being, and the things he cares about. My visit to his place on Dartmoor, where he has lived and worked for nearly thirty years, showed me the remarkable consistency and rhythm of needs and possibilities that he might give his attention to within the average day. There is a house, a studio, and a huge garden. All are beautiful resolved spaces. They are set within the extraordinary landscape of wilder nature; heights, dips, moorland, woods and rivers, bridges, sheep and horses, hill farms, villages, and more strikingly the marks and traces of the ancient history of Dartmoor, within the National Park. Back in London I found I had to buy the Ordnance Survey 2cm to 1km map of North Dartmoor before writing this essay to see more deeply where exactly I had been. For Fabian Miller, walking on the moor beyond the boundaries of the garden is an almost daily habit.

This exhibition brings together a group of his photographs, chosen to illuminate and converse with objects and documents he has chosen. Largely these are craft objects, many are pots, but also an etching, archival photographs of things in their original home, a seminal book on dyes, and samples of hand woven cloth. These objects either belong to him, or he has selected them from the collections and archives of the Crafts Study Centre. There are those who would be surprised that a renowned photographer of the international fine art world should choose to focus an exhibition on his relationship with craft, but

this is not new for him. He understands many of the behaviours and convictions of craft practice, and they are akin to ideas embedded in his work. Underlying these is his belief in an integrated life in the hinterland, the back country, where independent thinking can grow. As he has written, he sought 'a balanced, settled life, one in which work and a larger domestic life co-existed.'

In a fundamental way this brings him in touch with the ideals of the pioneers of the craft revival in the first half of the 20th century, and the confluence of their hopes with his are an important reason for his wish to curate this show. He has organised many exhibitions since the early days of working in photography but this one brings him particularly near to home. We see a number of things he lives with and encounters every day; we also sense in the modern history explored in this show a comparable relationship of art and objects to natural phenomena, in an overt or abstracted way.

Surrounding the house the garden has been grown from nothing over the decades of living there. Terraces near the building let you find the sun at all times of day, or keep out of it. Hedges have reached a great height. There are formal parts and more natural parts, a pond, a wooded area. There is a sense that work is always ongoing, trees have been planted and replanted, the garden recovers in the aftermath of box disease, tended in a regular flow of labour and consideration. Getting to the nub of what he makes, the studio is a short walk through the garden, and is a modern barn-like building in two parts. A black outside wall has a tally of skulls from the moor nailed up on it in lines; sheep,

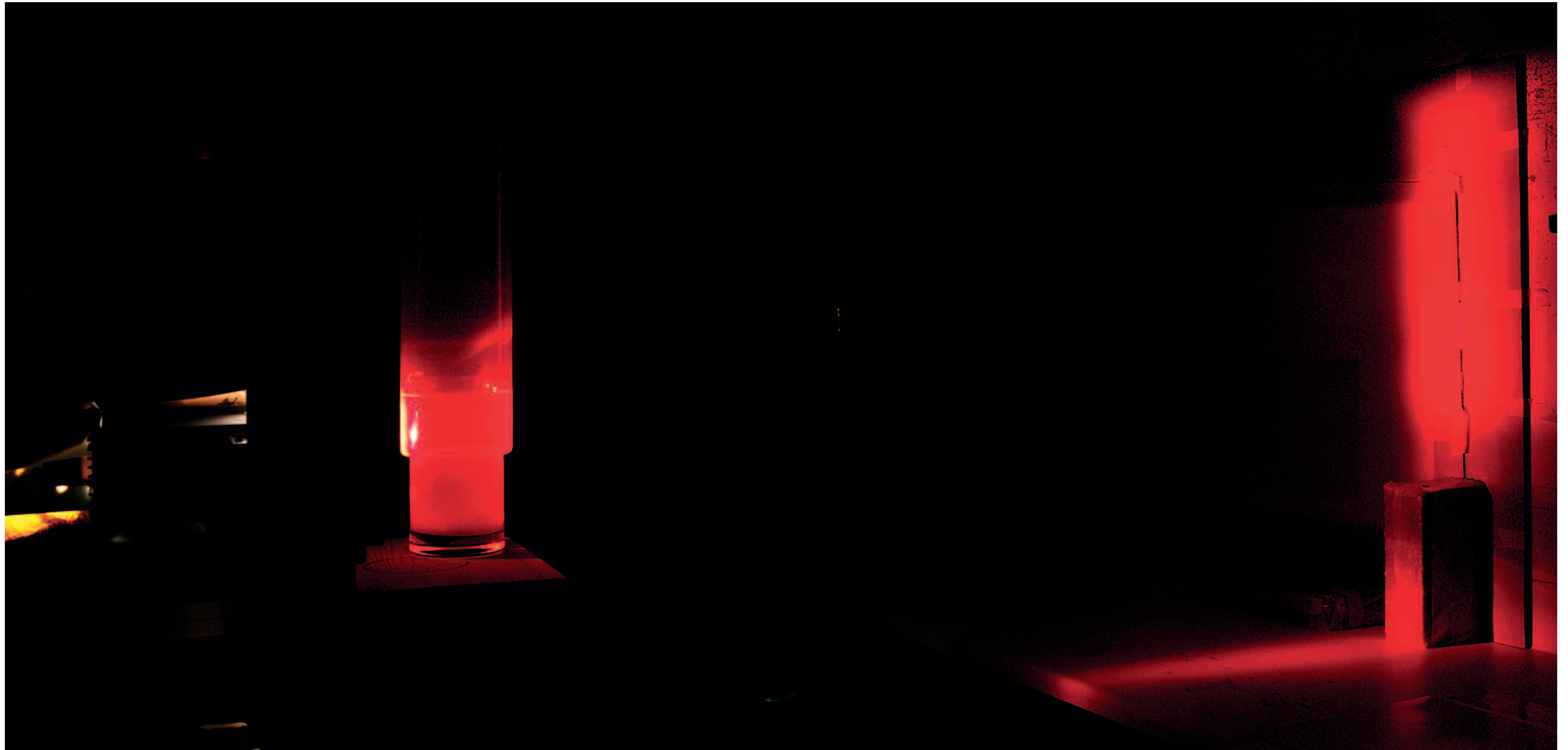
A caption here for all three
might not hurt?



cow and deer, found in the course of walking. There are two spaces – a darkroom and a ‘light room’, as extreme in their difference as night and day. First you come to the darkroom which is a small tight space crowded with equipment, shelves and benches and big enlargers, with walls covered in years of accretions of information and artwork; many are drawings by his children, now grown up.

In making his images, often with very lengthy exposures of light on to Cibachrome paper through coloured glass vessels, which are sometimes filled with water or oil for the intercedence of differing qualities of light, he has to work in pitch blackness. So in feeling his way around the space its tightness is helpful. The rhythms of repetitive slog in the small, dark, habitual space may feel like alchemy. Fabian Miller has a plan for a museum project in the near future to compare ‘the darkroom’ with ‘the kiln’, in an exploration of the meaning of working technologies, and the intuition of physical and chemical changes, in the production of art. A kind of equivalence exists between the kiln and the darkroom as transformative spaces; you wait with caution and semi-control, anticipating results with restricted access to what is taking place inside.

In this studio you emerge from the darkroom blinking into a blazing bright white space with daylight flooding into it from one whole glass wall and also a large skylight. From *manufacture* of the print, in a cave, you come to *consideration* of it bathed in light. Photographic images are held on rails with magnets, for decisions on the next move to be gradually evolved. The large space can be





strolled through or you can sit and think in a low white canvas chair. Most of the view outside is green, in the garden¹.

The two contrasting phases involved in the making of each image, dark space and light space, evoke the fusion of scientific experiment, craft and material understanding, and aesthetic determination, which may lie underneath most brilliant discoveries. Fabian Miller has moved the photographic image into truly abstract territory, where the vibrant luminous presence of a geometric form seems to shimmer in a gradual collision of colour, red into blue, yellow into green, or grid lines of light flare and scorch through a brown background². That the path into making these discoveries began with nature, with exposing light through the flat translucent seed heads of the honesty plant, for instance, is surprising but entirely credible.

Fabian Miller is an artist who has patiently and gradually explored the potential of his materials. Cibachrome paper, with its particular strengths in giving brilliant and unfading colour, invented in Switzerland in the 1960s, has been crucial to his expression for decades but it is now almost extinct. So in recent years he has had to face a transition into new material and process. The larger prints he can achieve now are a synthesis of old and new methodology, and what we see is a final digital print. The Cibachrome images from his darkroom are now painstakingly worked on for many weeks to get to a faithful colour representation, to be printed onto a different substrate, by a digital collaborator. His colleague John Bodkin is another kind of contemporary

craftsman, working in a colour print lab in north London. The greater scale possible in the new way of working is arresting.

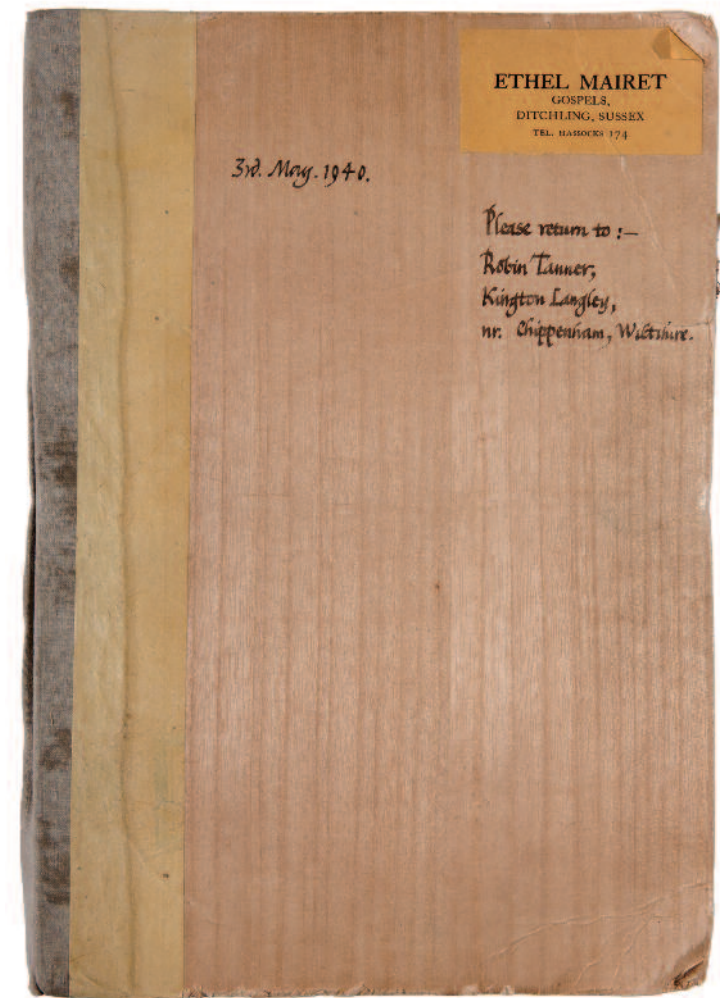
So how do such ultra modern images link themselves into the craft works he has chosen to exhibit alongside them? I will look into a number of these relationships. There are thousands of things in the Crafts Study Centre collection, and Fabian Miller has been very decisive in choosing to focus on only four people. Three of them are pioneers of the modernist period who were experimenting and discovering, feeling a way into a new body of thinking about what craft is and why it matters.

One of these is Robin Tanner, and he is pivotal in the exhibition for two reasons: firstly because as a young man Fabian Miller encountered him in the context of the Quaker movement and peace marches in the 1970s, when Tanner, a longstanding pacifist, was in his own seventies; and, secondly, because without him there might never have been a Crafts Study Centre. Robin and Heather Tanner were collectors, and became dedicated friends of many in the craft revival world of the interwar years. Some artists left their extensive archive materials, notebooks and recipes, samples of weaving or printed patterns, or fragments of ethnographic craft collected on far flung travels, in Robin's care 'because he will know what to do with them', as Phyllis Barron wrote in a letter. This care, in several instances, meant compiling beautiful books of their samples and discoveries³. The Tanner collections were the foundation of what became the Crafts Study Centre, opening in Bath in 1977.

Tanner was a Primary Schools Art Inspector for much of his career, also an artist and printmaker, and he published a number of books. He trained as an art teacher at Goldsmiths in 1922-24, and learnt etching at an evening class there. A love of Samuel Palmer's pastoral work, shared by Tanner and some of his fellow students, was in the air, and part of a new appraisal of his early poetic landscapes of the close small hills in Shoreham in Kent in the 1830s. A Palmer retrospective shown in the V&A in 1926 had a deep impact on Tanner and he bought an etching press the following year. In this exhibition his print 'Autumn', of a vase of wild flowers and brambles on a window sill in front of a hilly landscape with hay stacks, etched in 1933, can be seen in that light. In dialogue with this modern pastoral, Fabian Miller is showing his only photograph here that is a clear depiction of nature, *Honesty from May to September*, of 1985, alongside archive photographs of the Tanners' home built in a field, and their breakfast set of jugs cups and bowls, glazed in off-white stoneware with manganese rims, made by Lucie Rie in the late 1950s.

Another modern craft icon is *A Book on Vegetable Dyes*, made by the weaver Ethel Mairet in 1916. Published a century ago, it is a small and directly written practical recipe book on making your own dyes for weavers, and the ethics of what she calls *good colour*, writing that 'strong and beautiful colour, such as used to abound in all everyday things, is an essential to the full joy of life'. Elizabeth Peacock was a pupil of hers who worked with her for some time before setting up her own weaving shed, often working large scale. Fabian Miller has chosen

Robin Tanner/Ethel Mairet
Front cover of weaving sample book
Gospels Workshop, Ditchling, Sussex
3rd May 1940



hand woven samples from both artists in the intense and confronting colours of red and blue.⁴ These relate to two large square images of his, *In Blue* and *In Red*, part of a new series appearing in their digital form of Lamda prints, made between 2010 and 2014.

The sequence of ten images for *Harvest. Autumn 1991*, made using his former process of exposing directly onto Cibachrome paper (without the digital phase) shows the dramatic effect of a changing exposure of light filtered through an honesty seed head. The palest image had light coming through one layer of plant tissue, the darkest image had the light held back by ten layers of it. The colour moves from pale cream to very dark greenish brown, and the prints are shown consecutively in a horizontal line. Their colours communicate with the line of pots shown beneath them, a powerful collection of lidded jars, sometimes called caddies⁵, made by the potter Richard Batterham. They are part of Fabian Miller's big collection of Batterham pots. I am happy that it is *this* quietly sculptural form we see as a multitude in so many different sizes, with their gentle shifts of glaze and tone, ash glaze and iron glaze, often over an ochre slip. The glaze has a lighter band where your hands would reach to pick it up. It is a plain form, not having many particulars of function to accommodate. The jar is almost a cylinder, but wider at the top, and the way it arcs a bit into a ridge, where the domed lid meets the pot wall, works so well at both the small scale and the large, and is splendid and apt.

Unlike Fabian Miller's other chosen artists, Batterham is still working and is eighty this year. His capacity for constancy and the ongoing thread of unselfconscious rigour in the pots, both seen and felt, is important. I have a leaflet from an exhibition of his in 1984 at the British Craft Centre in London. There is a small caddy illustrated that would fit well, I am completely sure, with the ones in the current display. After just 25 years in the studio, he wrote, 'After several years of working, I began to notice that firings were falling into an unplanned regular pattern, linked with the gardening year, and also that making always flowed more freely during March and September, though of course it continued throughout the year. It was becoming clear that a pattern and rhythm were emerging, which must be acknowledged and made the most of, and that is what I try to do.' These words flow, I think, into Fabian Miller's radical sensibility of image and source, art and being, and his youthful hope that 'walking and working, life and ideas would slowly evolve together.'

¹ The historic practice in Europe of laying white washing to dry on the green grass was in the belief that it made it whiter.

² *Year One. Rioros, 2006*, paired with Elizabeth Peacock's red white and green sample of checked woven cotton.

³ Robin Tanner did make two large volumes of Barron and Larcher printed textiles samples that are in the CSC collection

⁴ In her book the list of ten indigenous plants that make red, and the nine that make blue, is inspirational, partly for their names.

⁵ The word 'caddy' is linked with the tea trade and the Far East.