

## Garry Fabian Miller: Adore

Arnolfini, Bristol  
18 February – 28 May 2023

## Môrwelion: The Sea Horizon

National Museum Cardiff  
18 February – 10 September 2023

In photography, images of the sea horizon offer a view which is, unusually for the medium, close to abstraction: horizon line and sea/sky planes appear blocked out and flattened. Such photographs, from the first separately composed views by Gustave Le Gray in the 1850s to Hiroshi Sugimoto's three-decade study of *Seascapes* (published 2015), also tend to hold their gaze as if on a thin plane. They invite contemplation rather more than recognition.

In the British photographer Garry Fabian Miller's work, his first focus on a repeated single-point view over the Severn Estuary in 1976/77 began this invitation through a career spanning over 50 years, now deservedly receiving attention in multiple events and exhibitions in England this year. Showing at the National Museum Cardiff, the 40 photographic prints which make up his *Sections of England: The Sea Horizon* series are Miller's only significant body of work made with a camera. After this, he worked in the darkroom making images with light's direct transmission through objects such as leaves and glass jars of water held over exposed paper. 'Adore', at the Arnolfini in Bristol, tells the story of this journey through a retrospective of some 50 artworks, the most recent evolving into collaborative and performative pieces (with musicians, poets, and weavers) following the closure of his darkroom in 2020.

The story has a certain mythology of looking and making. Miller is interested in showing what light is, rather than the objects it illuminates. Representations of light in the large and diffuse *Colour Field* series (made in 2021 from original cibachrome prints) or the symbolically charged *Year 1* series based on the Celtic calendar (2005 – 2006) are given the kind of reflective commentary and ambience that draws on the mystical. In a darkened room at the Arnolfini, captioned 'Night', deep blue hues across wall and print create



Garry Fabian Miller, *Dancing Sun (i)*,  
1987 to 2020

a hushed, interior, atmosphere, within which the cruciform *Petworth Window* 13th February 2000, the triangulate *Sites of Departure*, 2018-19, and the circular *The Night Drift*, 2009-18 concentrate certain formal properties. Other rooms are spread with beanbags and yoga mats. The curator and writer David Alan Mellor, writing elsewhere about Miller's Petworth series (one of which is permanently installed in Ginzza Church, Tokyo, following a period Miller spent in Japan) called them 'spiritualised abstractions' and 'flaring, luminescent, spiritual ciphers'.

The prints, saturated and glowing, are beautiful and absorbing works. Yet for Miller, abstraction for its own spiritualised sake would miss several points, and his work must be seen for its emphasis on interested, rather than disinterested, contemplation. Among other things, Miller's experiences in a Quaker community as a teenager were formational: 'a kind of home place where a group of people met seeking an understanding of what light might be, and a belief in the purpose of being. Words such as contemplative and spiritual are things one should commit one's life towards rather than

other values'. So saying, his influences amongst creative practitioners who established integrated domestic, working, and worshipful lives, such as Samuel Palmer, Robin and Heather Tanner, David Jones, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Ethel Mairet are prominent in both exhibitions, with several included works and quotes on display.

Perhaps the outworking of this commitment in Miller is most particularly understood through the sense of a shared philosophical identity with specifically photographic practitioners. In William Henry Fox Talbot and John Herschel, Miller finds kindred 'free spirits' for whom attention to a kind of alchemical magic was key – they and other darkroom practitioners were outliers who drew art, science, and philosophy together for the first time. As seers, their light literally shone in the darkness, and for Miller the experimental craft that now faces extinction (due to the ceased manufacture of certain materials and toxic chemicals for cibachrome printing) is a cause both for deep lament and also, possibly, new horizons. In a work called *The Ark*, 2020, a composite array



Installation shot, 'Adore' at Arnolfini, showing *The Ark*, 2020 far right

of red, yellow, and blue squares shows what Miller calls his 'lost family of colours' acting as a repository which he hopes will one day open again onto new fields. The promise of this new creation is to be pioneered with a project called 'Three Acres', growing the colours afresh, and photosynthetically, in a crop field in the Vale of Pewsey.

Indeed, it is a fundamental attachment to the land and to place which perhaps underwrites Miller's outlook as a whole. In his close and intimate illuminations of beech and hawthorn leaves, of fox glove and delphinium petals, he peers more closely at the luminous qualities of plants seen as cycles of life flow and deep time. First exhibited at Lincoln Cathedral in 1990 as part of 'The Journey: A Search for the Role of Contemporary Art in Religious and Spiritual Life', these images also feature in the pocketbook publication *Honesty: A Book of Prayer* in 1992, with meditations by Sister Wendy Beckett. There the potency of growing seed and chlorophyll, later realised again in Miller's *Colour Seed* series, has what Beckett called 'the sap of grace as it moves through the tissues, a slowing and an ageing as the

motion of grace changes into the stability of grace, a surrender to what time is doing'.

It is in this sense, attending to the physicality and colours of light through a life exposed to light as an active force, that Miller assumes a prayerful posture and habit – whether through crop-growing in Wiltshire, gardening in Lincolnshire in the 1980s, or through walking across Dartmoor in all seasons (Miller's home for the last 30 years). There is an immanent and immersive quality to all Miller's photography, and it connects him to an English Romantic tradition which reverberates with the sacramentality of nature. What is explicitly credal about Miller's work today is his continued commitment to seeing and believing as a matter of self-involving transformation and becoming as he steps from the darkroom into the world's field and seeks to understand further its spiritual return.

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## Tartan

*V&A Dundee*  
1 April 2023 – 14 January 2024

The interior of the great waterside V&A in Dundee is currently awash with tartan. This lavish display charts in spectacular form and intricate detail the irrepressible spread of the Scottish fabric that – the curatorial approach makes clear – is so much more than just a Scottish fabric. Among the many unexpected dimensions of tartan's chequered history a fascinating element emerges, of particular interest to readers of *Art and Christianity*: the surprising story of the place of tartan in religious contexts. This review considers such insights together with the wider propositions and challenges offered by this rich and thought-provoking display.

The story of tartan's role in one religious context is there in the first room of the exhibition. The Dutch modernist architect and Benedictine monk Dom Hans van der Laan (1904-1991) was keenly interested in tartan both as artefact and as an elemental organising principle for design. In his book,