

Fabiola Menchelli *Under the Blue Sun*

Kate Palmer Albers

Abstractions are generous in their faith: an offering for you, the viewer, to connect with an idea, with an emotion, with consciousness, through an alchemy of form, shape, color, line. With a minimum of descriptive detail from the visible world, abstractions can evoke concepts and dimensions often only accessed indirectly. The artist Fabiola Menchelli draws on this confluence of the material and the cosmic throughout her work. And, descriptive or not, as with any photograph, the conditions of production matter.

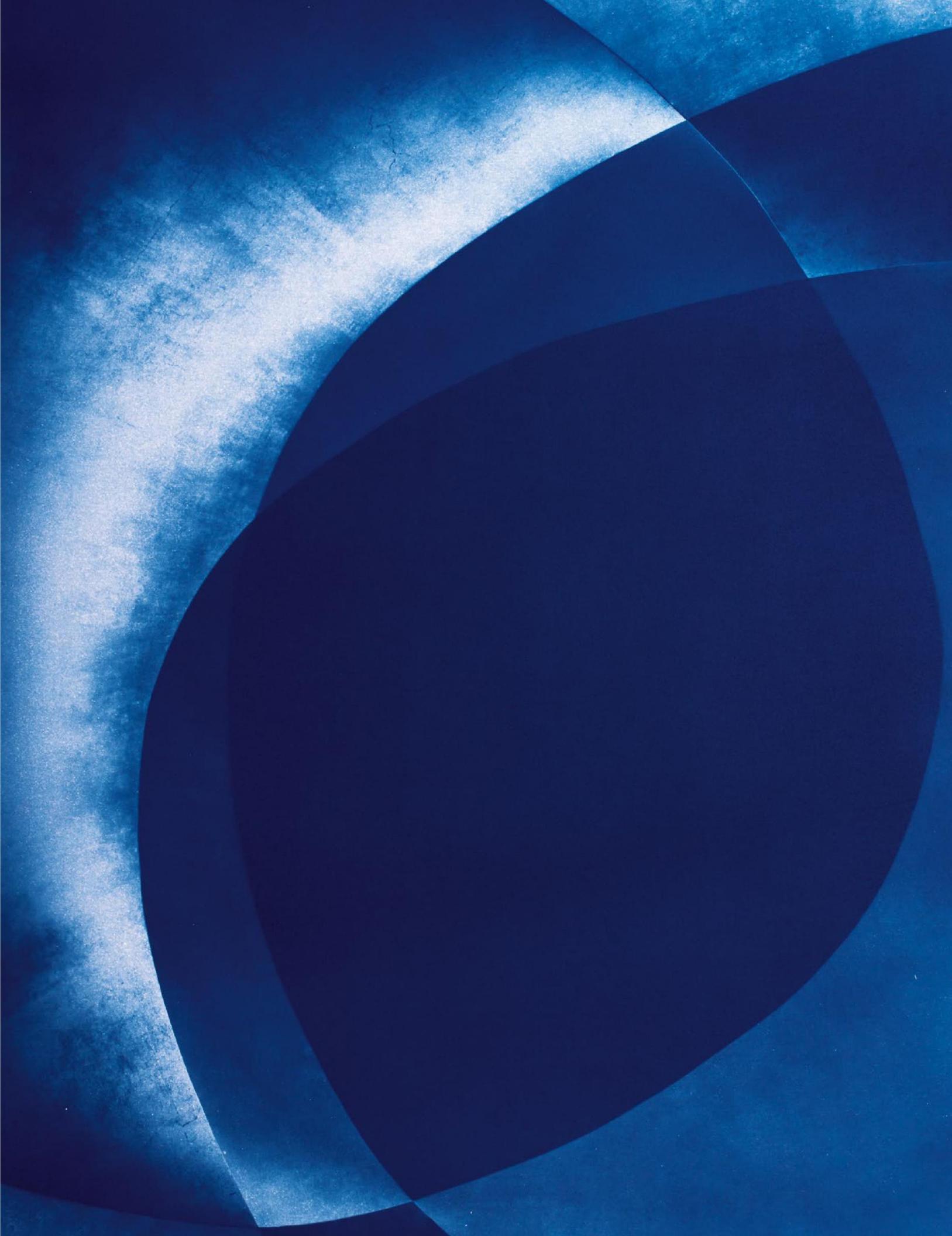
Under the Blue Sun No. 2 (2015–17) suggests the movement of a solar flare, and a shifting oculus of indiscernible depth. Menchelli made the series in cyanotype at an observatory at Casa Wabi, a space designed by Tadao Ando along the Oaxacan coast in the artist’s native Mexico. From this site, always oriented to the sky, Menchelli tracked the trajectory of the sun—the most elemental component of her medium—in multiple exposures. The effect is one of layered planes, each offering a possible entry into the image. For Menchelli, the mechanical perception of the camera eye adds dimension to the limited capacities of human senses, translating an interpretive realm beyond our own.

Titles, too, connect the observed world with celestial and poetic pathways. *Eclipse* (2020–21), from the *Parallax* series, links the circular forms recorded by discrete objects in the artist’s chance experiments with darkroom photograms to an imagined realm of overlapping orbs, cosmic in scope. An eclipse, of course, is an occurrence in which the light of one astronomical body is obscured by the path of another—yet this moment of concealment is also an event of alignment that is always subject to the position of the viewer. Menchelli’s *Eclipse* is a scene of abundance, a collective gathering that suggests its own exponential growth.

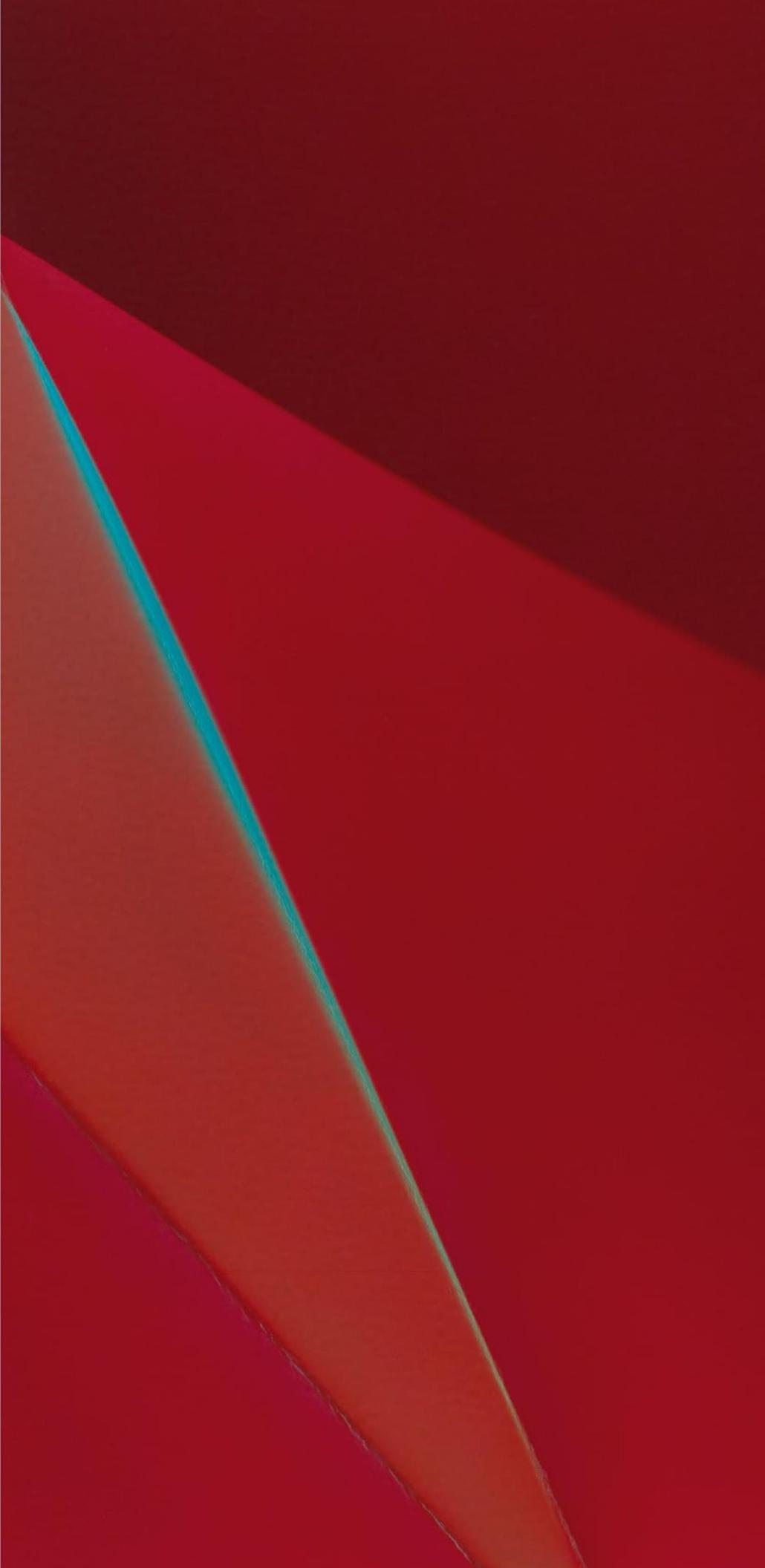
Yoru (2020–21), from the same series, offers a darker visual puzzle. Here, shadows permeate the image, only punctuated by elements of clarity. The artist traveled to Japan in 2019, finding a Buddhist cosmology rich with interpretive connections. *Yoru* translates into English as *night*, but, phonetically, also reminded Menchelli of the Spanish word *lloro*: “I cry.” As with *Eclipse*, the first-person singular is conjured in unexpected ways, grounding the seemingly nonspecific and chance visual imagery with an unfixed, but distinct, sensing body. Menchelli shifts her earlier process of mediating perception via a camera’s multiple exposures to a cameraless process of recording multiple times within the photogram. Each process is direct, yet ultimately as abstract as it is literal. These repeated sleights of hand—or, rather, sleights of vision and perception—invite a viewer to consider sensorial interchangeability on a radical scale.

This seeming contraction is furthered even more in Menchelli’s most recent abstractions, which have become highly visceral, the product of a deeply sensorial process. In the series *Unfold* (2021), Menchelli works with color photographic paper entirely by hand in complete darkness, folding and unfolding, feeling her way around the edges of the sheets and combining color through multiple exposures. Over the hours in the darkroom spent on this work, “the distance becomes personal, measuring visual space with the tips of the fingers,” she says. Mingling perceptions from the intimacy of touch to the scale of a planetary orbit is at the heart of Menchelli’s endeavor.

Kate Palmer Albers teaches the history and theory of photography at Whittier College in Los Angeles. She is the author, most recently, of *The Night Albums: Visibility and the Ephemeral Photograph* (2021).

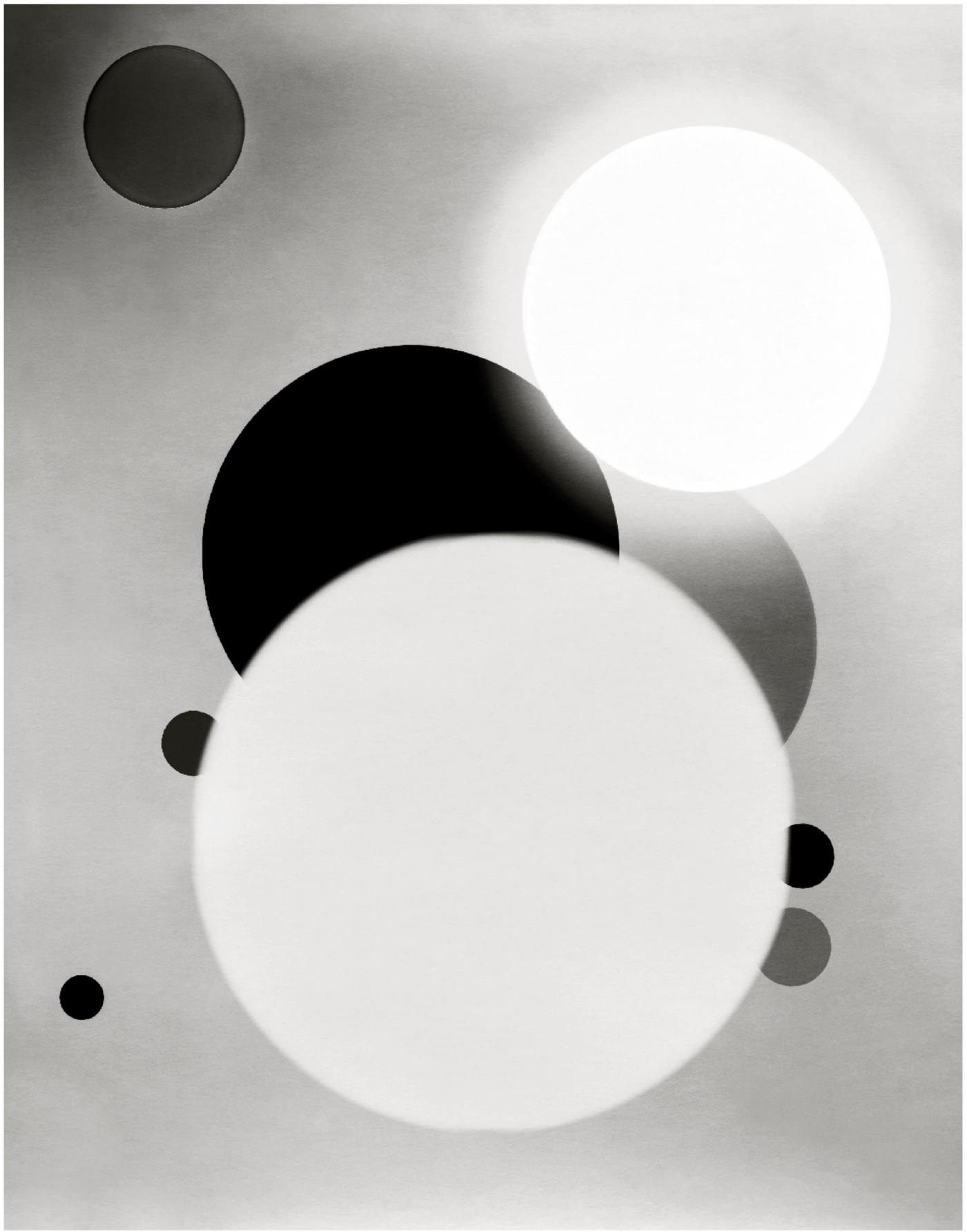


Previous page:
Under the Blue Sun No. 2,
2015-17; this spread:
Tenkai suru VI, 2021,
from the series *Unfold*



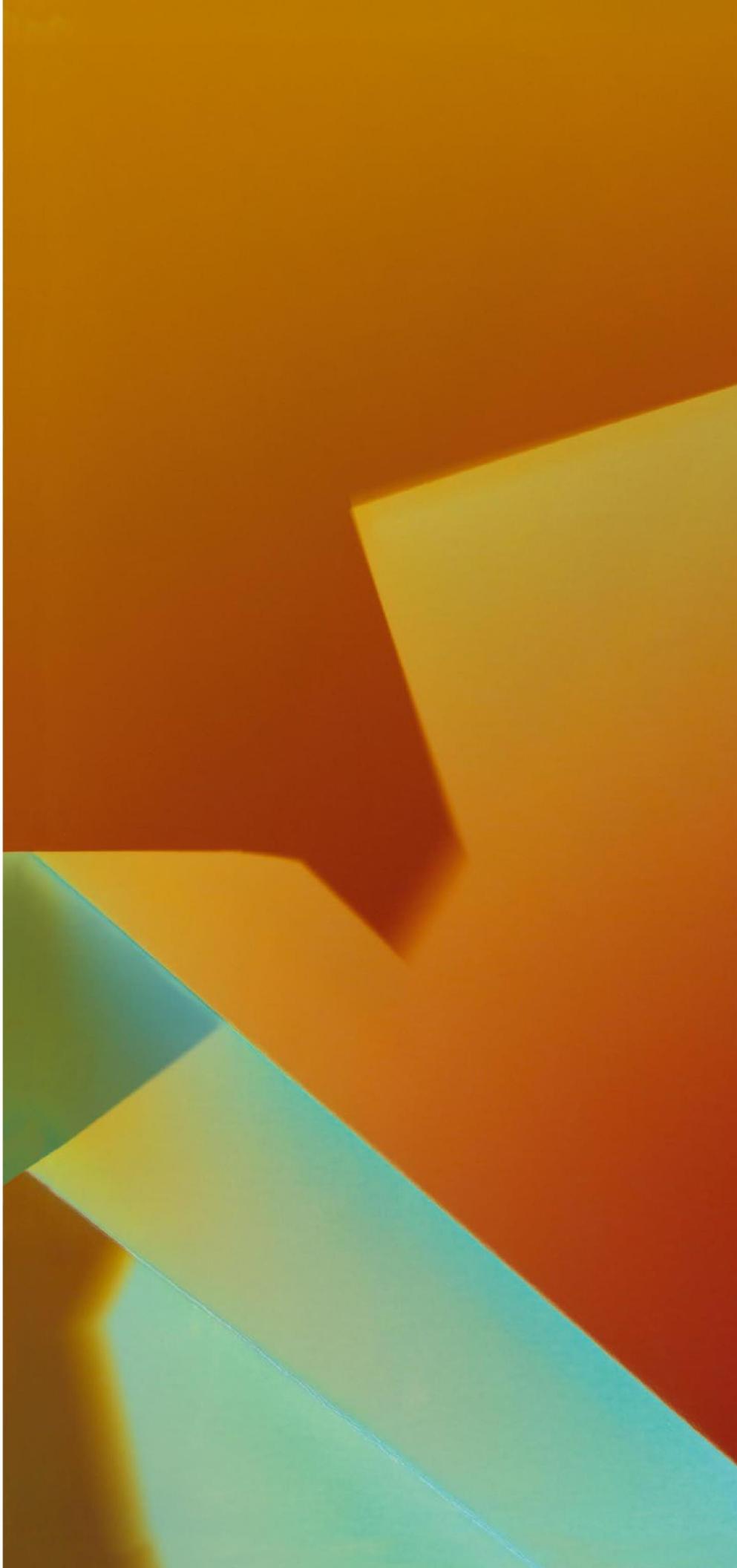


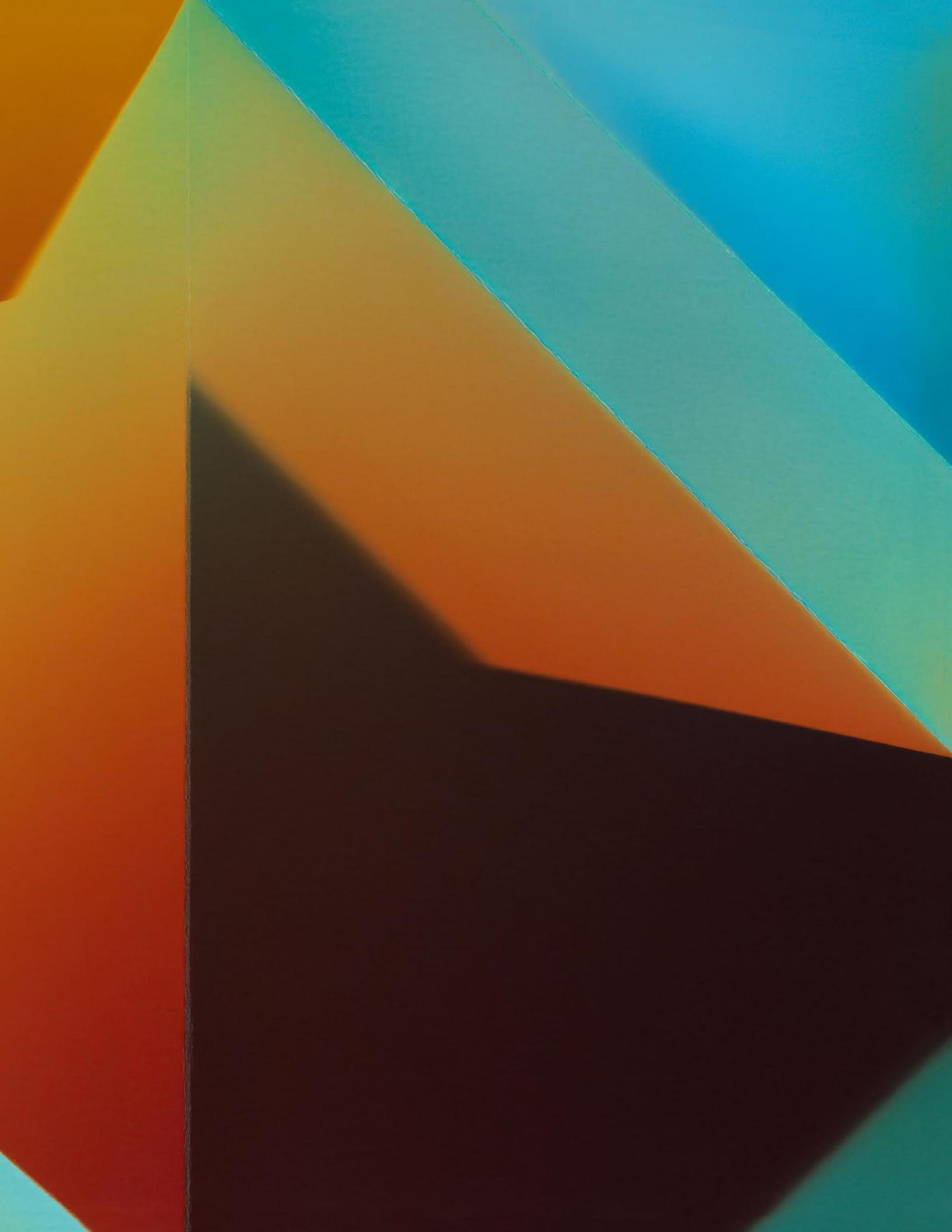




This page:
Eclipse, 2020-21; opposite:
Okami, 2020-21. Both works
from the series *Parallax*

Tenkai suru IV, 2021,
from the series *Unfold*
All works courtesy the artist
and PROXYCO Gallery,
New York





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Aperture | SPRING 2022



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