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MATTE

ELLEN CAREY

ISSUE 44

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**Photos: Ellen Carey
Text: Charlotte Cotton
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ELLEN

The Greek root of Ellen is *ēlē*, meaning 'light' and 'bright'. What an apposite given name for this artist who, for over thirty years, has harnessed the possibilities of chromatic light, the experimental logic of her light-sensitive materials, and what they can be made to do within the conditions that she constructs.

I'm struck by the way in which this sequence of Carey's works that span her early self-portraits to her most recent Dings and Shadows, so markedly align. Their energetic celebration of the experience of analog color permeates these images, made between 1984 and 2017. Carey – part art historian, part alchemist – amalgamates and animates properties of the history of aesthetics and puts them into new forms of play. I suspect that the Ellen that we encounter today – although now with a profound sense of the context of her practice, the stretchable capacities of her materials, and the citations that she calls forth – is as intuitive and inquisitive as she was at the start of her creative life.

One of the first exercises eighteen-year old Ellen was set at the Kansas City Art Institute was to create a work from scratch without traditional techniques or tools for a blank white wall. She cut strips of curling paper, filled Ketchup bottles with colorful silk-screen inks, and dripped the ink upon the sculptural curls. As a performative action of making form from color, this art school exercise acts as a precursor to her Polaroid *Pulls & Rollbacks* (1996–2017). William McKim had re-established the lithography studio at the Kansas City Art Institute (the medium in which Carey majored with a minor in photography). He had, like his near contemporary Jackson Pollock, learnt well from Thomas Hart Benton about the indexicality of artistic action, and the synoptic clarity of abstraction, which in turn became the building blocks of Carey's education. She then undertook her graduate studies at State University of New York at Buffalo,, within the constellation of young artists that would become synonymous with Postmodern art. Carey took museum studies classes and deep dives into the collections at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery,

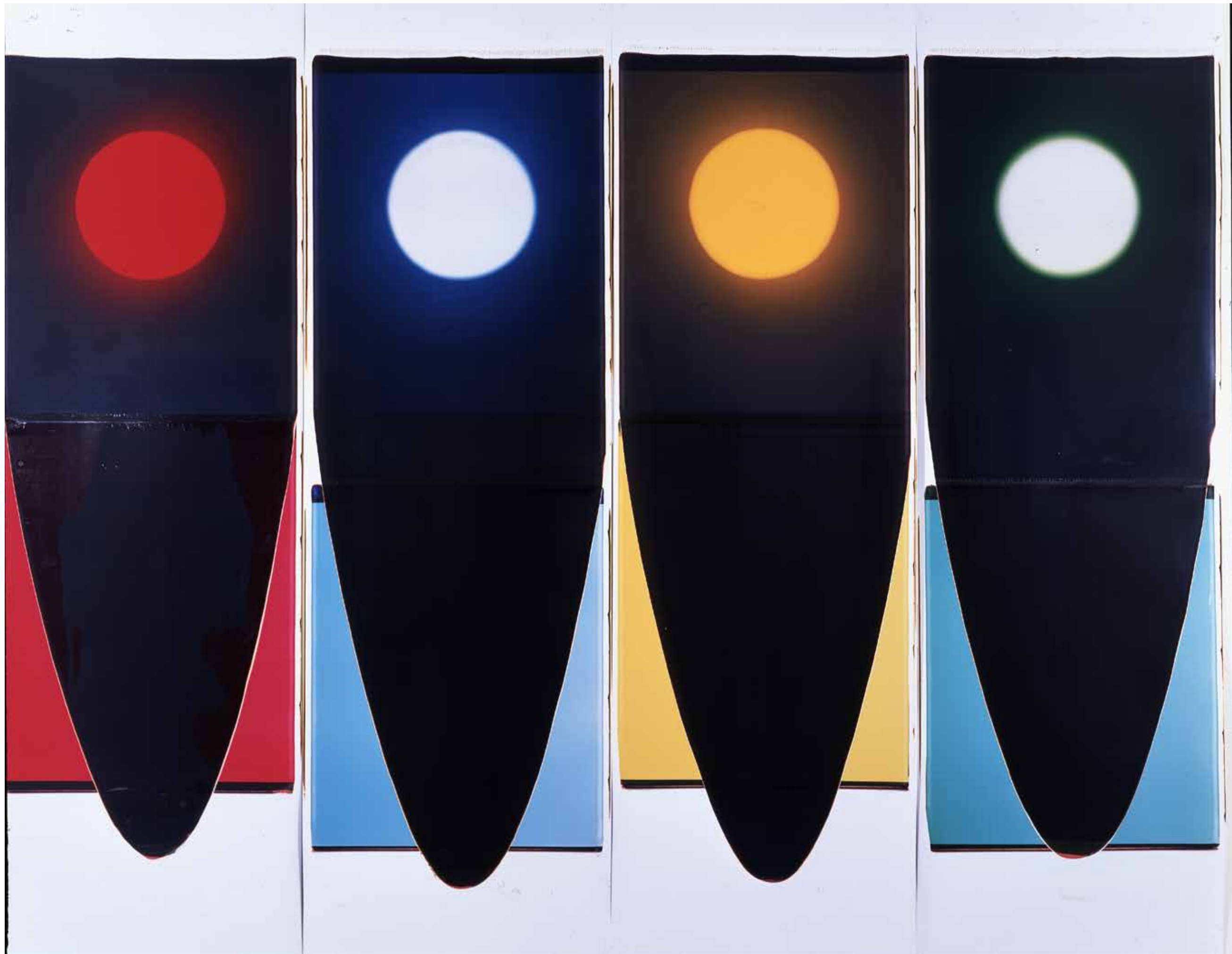
guided by its first curator of contemporary art, and the champion of these brilliant new artistic voices, Linda Cathcart.

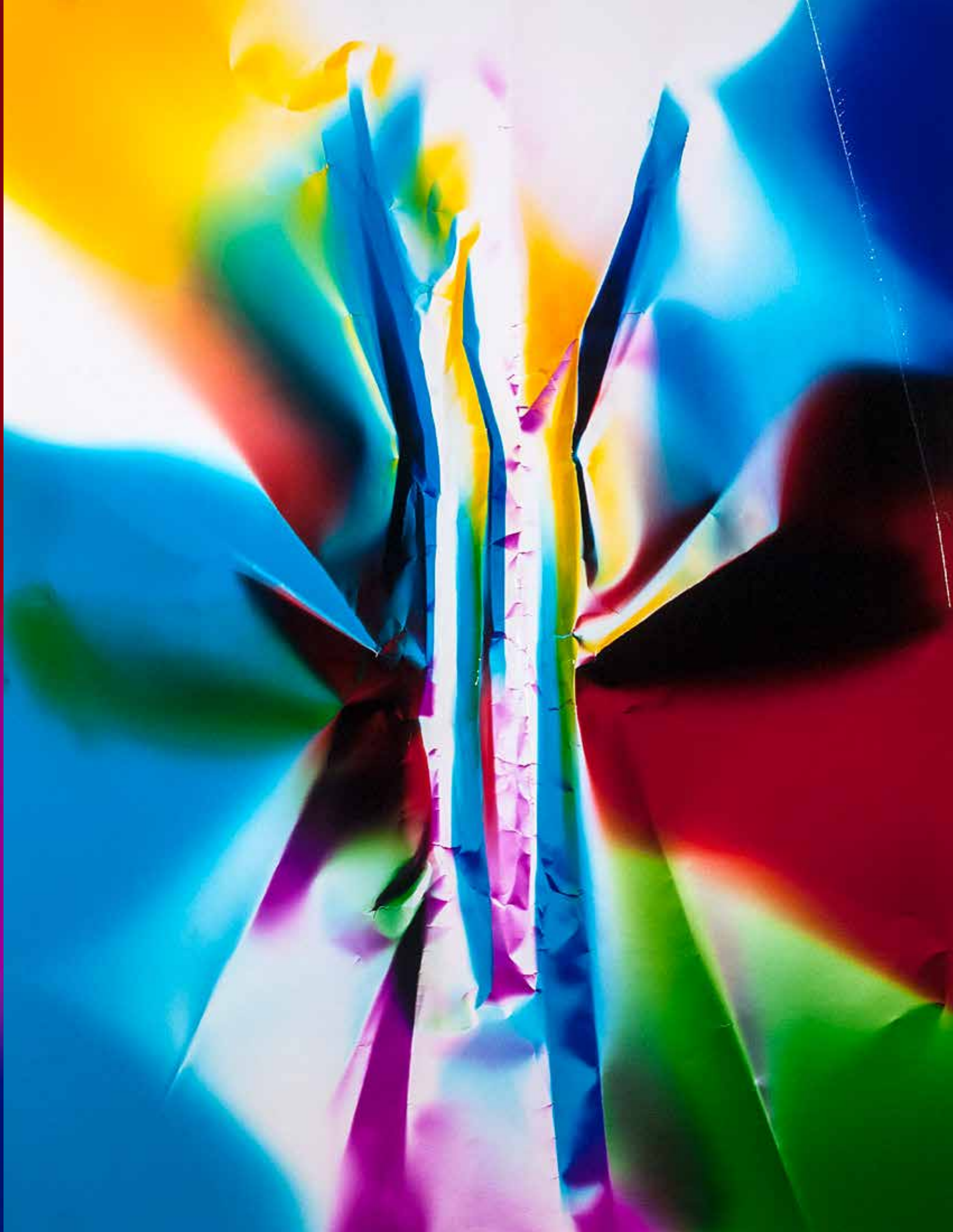
1983 was a breakthrough year for Carey when she joined the Polaroid Artists Support Program under the tutelage of John Reuter. From him, she learnt how to exaggerate the rich colors of 20x24 Polaroid with gels and lighting, and she left the over-painting with color washes of her self-portrait photographs (and straight black and white photography) behind her. Carey took a residency program in New Mexico and met the astronomer Clyde Tombaugh who, in 1930, had discovered the diminutive planet of Pluto, and talked to her about the visual codes of the square and the circle, and the DNA double helix. She returned to her Polaroid experimentation to make her psychedelic, chakra-emanating double exposure self portraits.

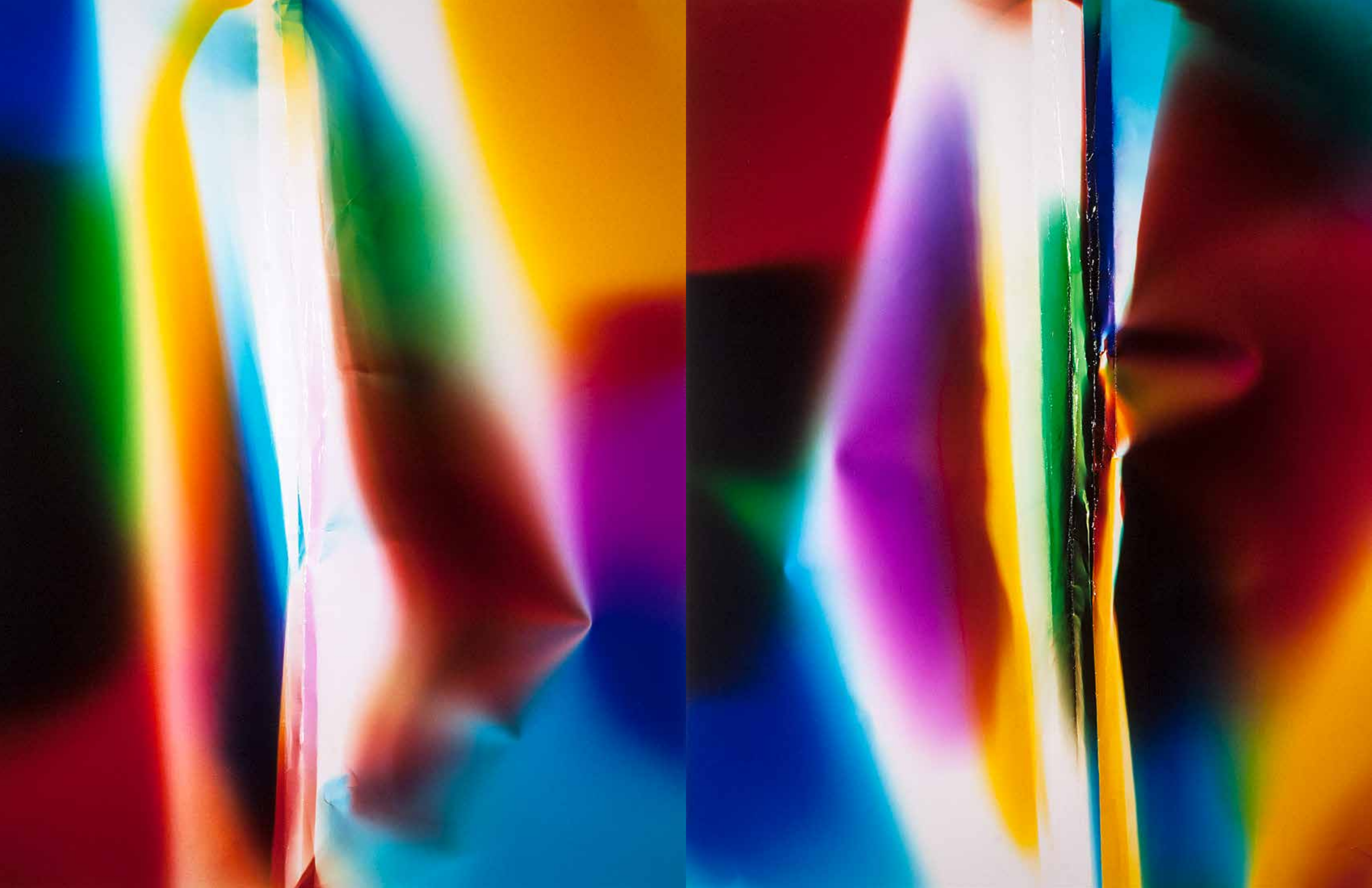
By this time, Carey was on her way to tenure-track at the Hartford Art School, and challenging herself to articulate what her increasingly abstract photographs could become. In reaction, she began her intense research of the proto-photographers William Henry Fox Talbot and Anna Atkins. Carey's imaginative and meticulous outlining of her own place within an aesthetic trajectory and sensibility continues with her research into the "women in color" – a photo history from Atkins onwards that posits the idea of women's subtle perception of color. The recent discovery of Tetrachromacy – the genetic predisposition of women to heightened color receptivity – has added new fuel to Carey's art historical investigations.

For Ellen, her 'bright light' is a feminist narrative and one that she sees as a citation that is present in her work, along with all the visual and technical breakthroughs – from Minimalism to large format Polaroid – that she has creatively lived through. Like the postinternet artists who shape the present-day context for her practice, she continues to move photography away from its default settings, feeling the impetus to embrace the medium's physicality, and to deconstruct and reinvent its apparatus.

BY
CHARLOTTE
COTTON

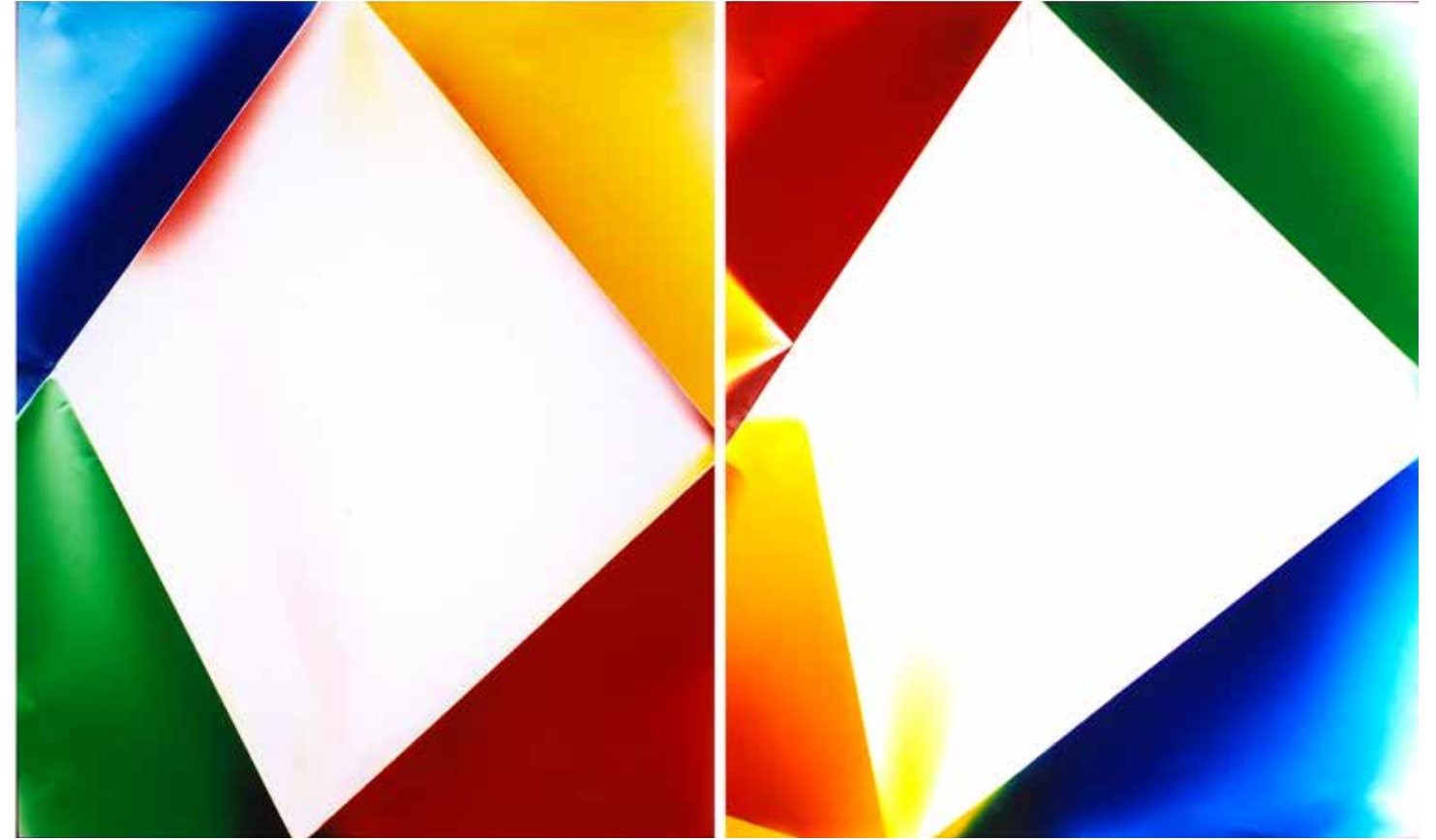
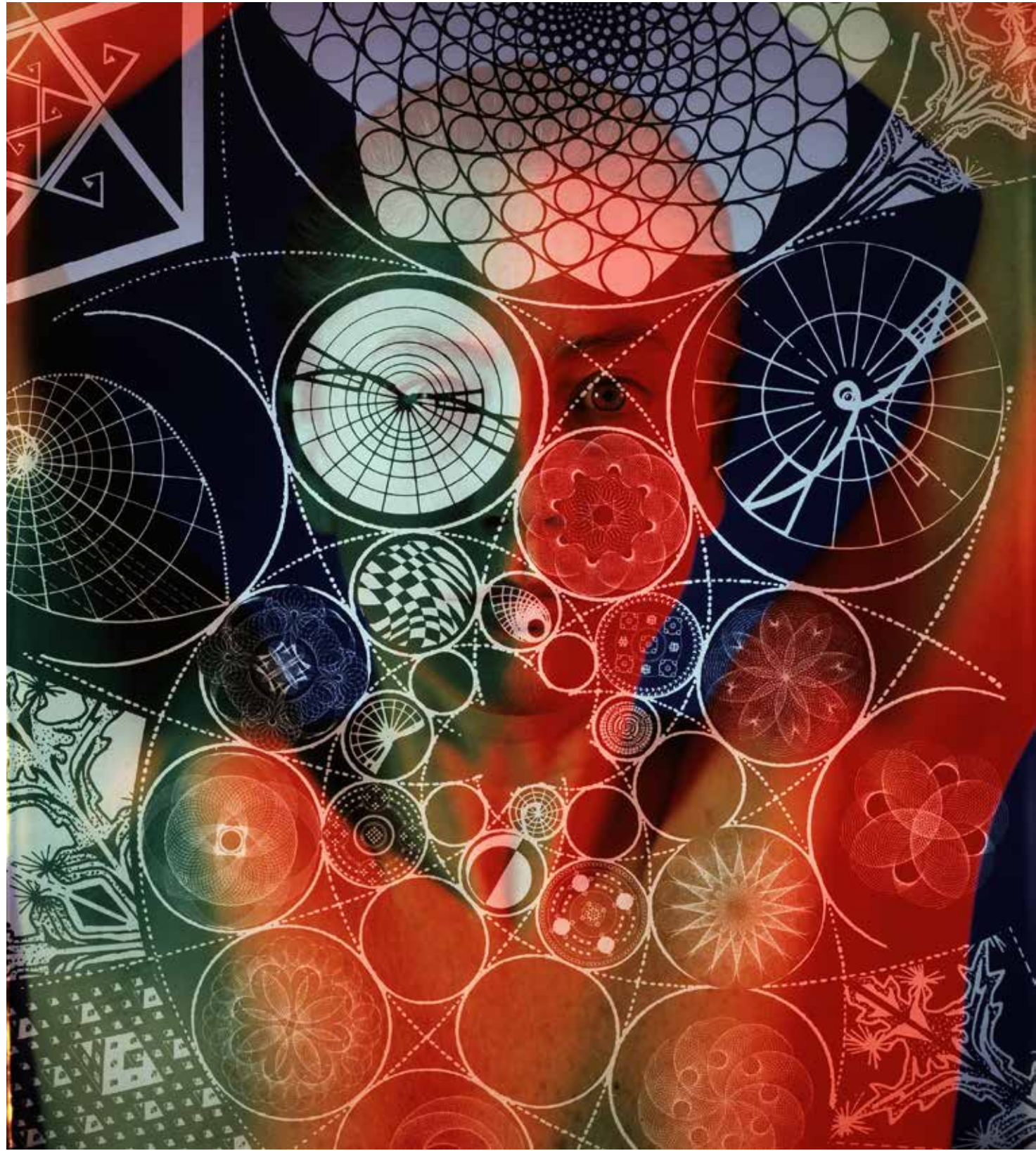












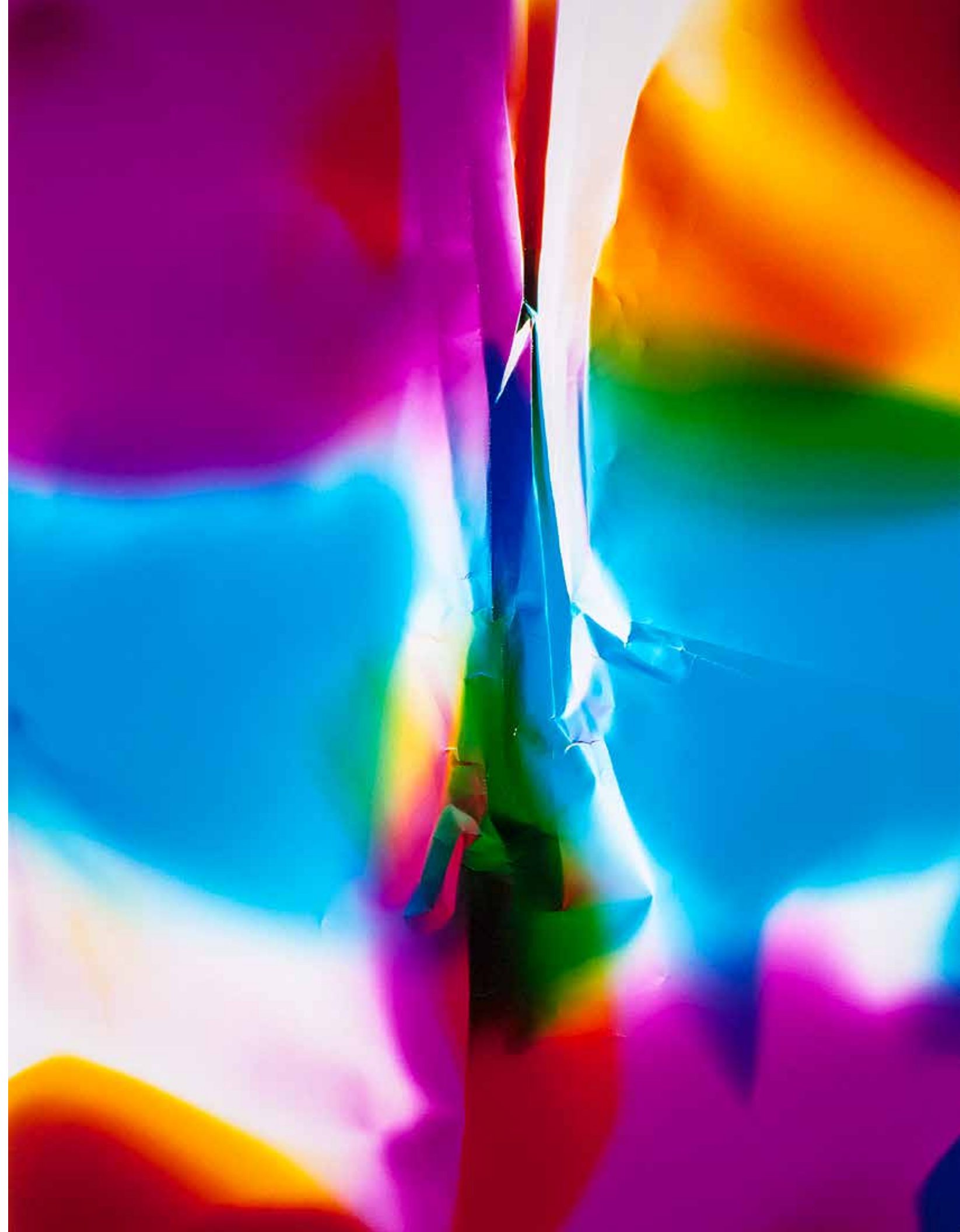
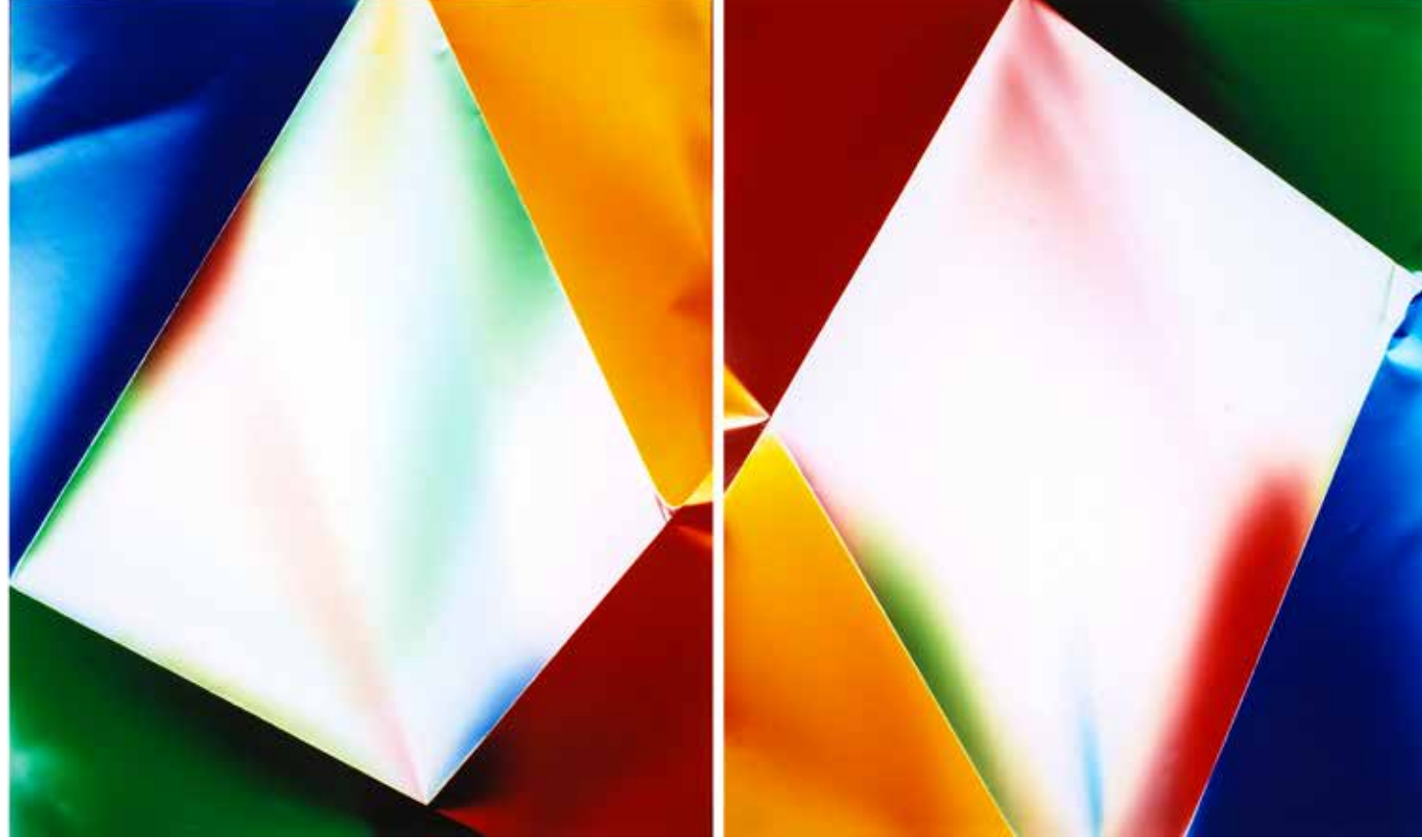


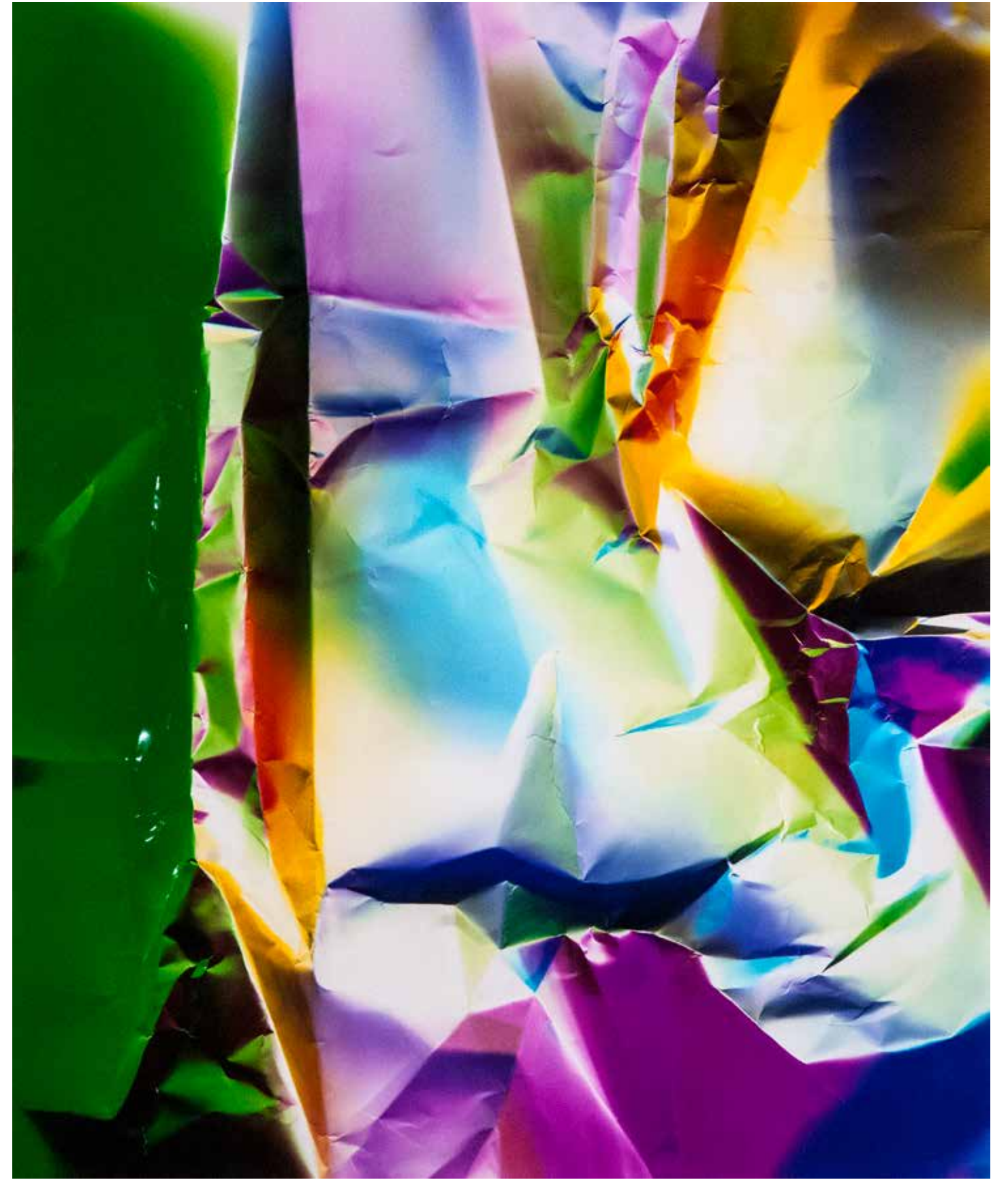






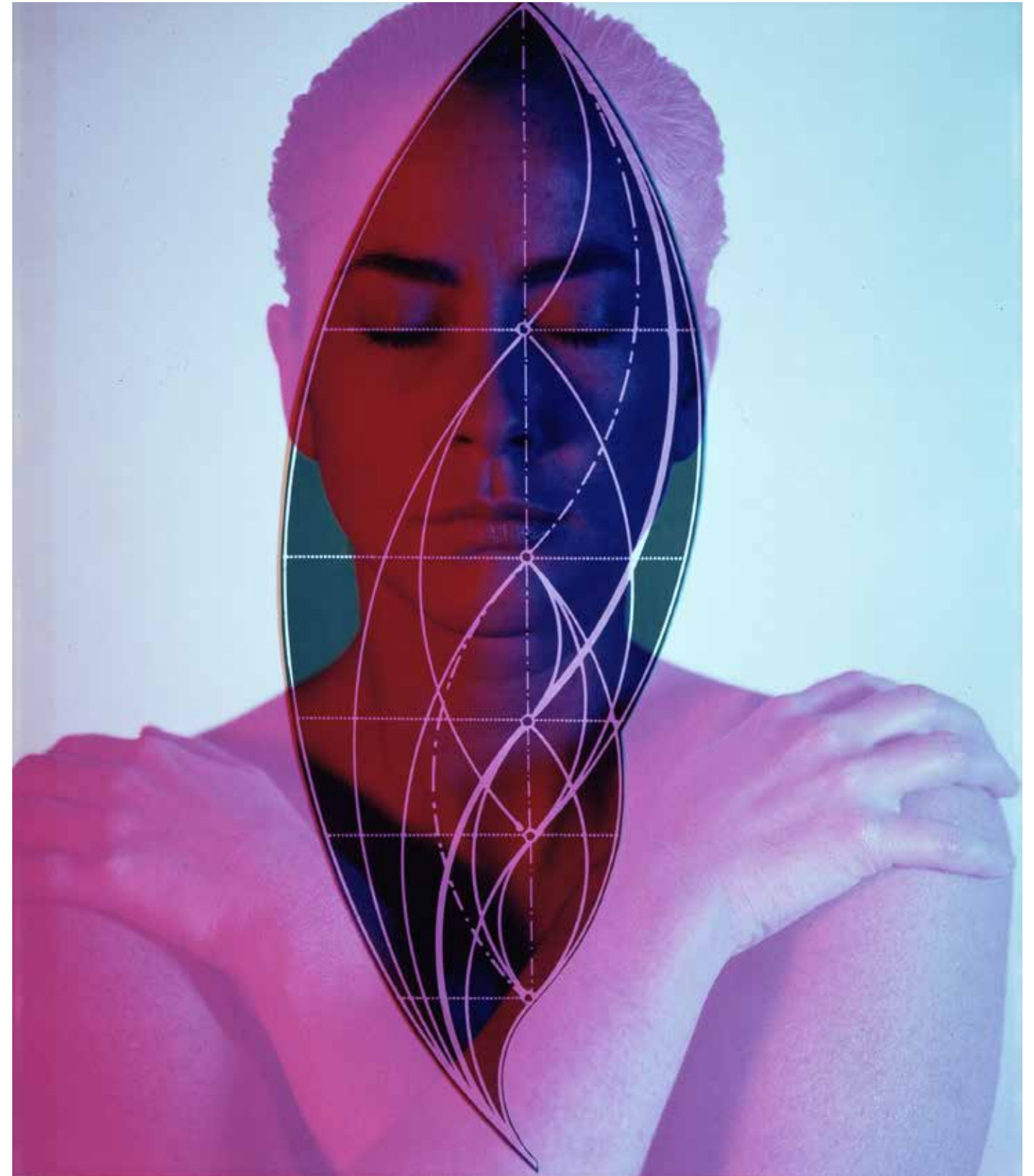
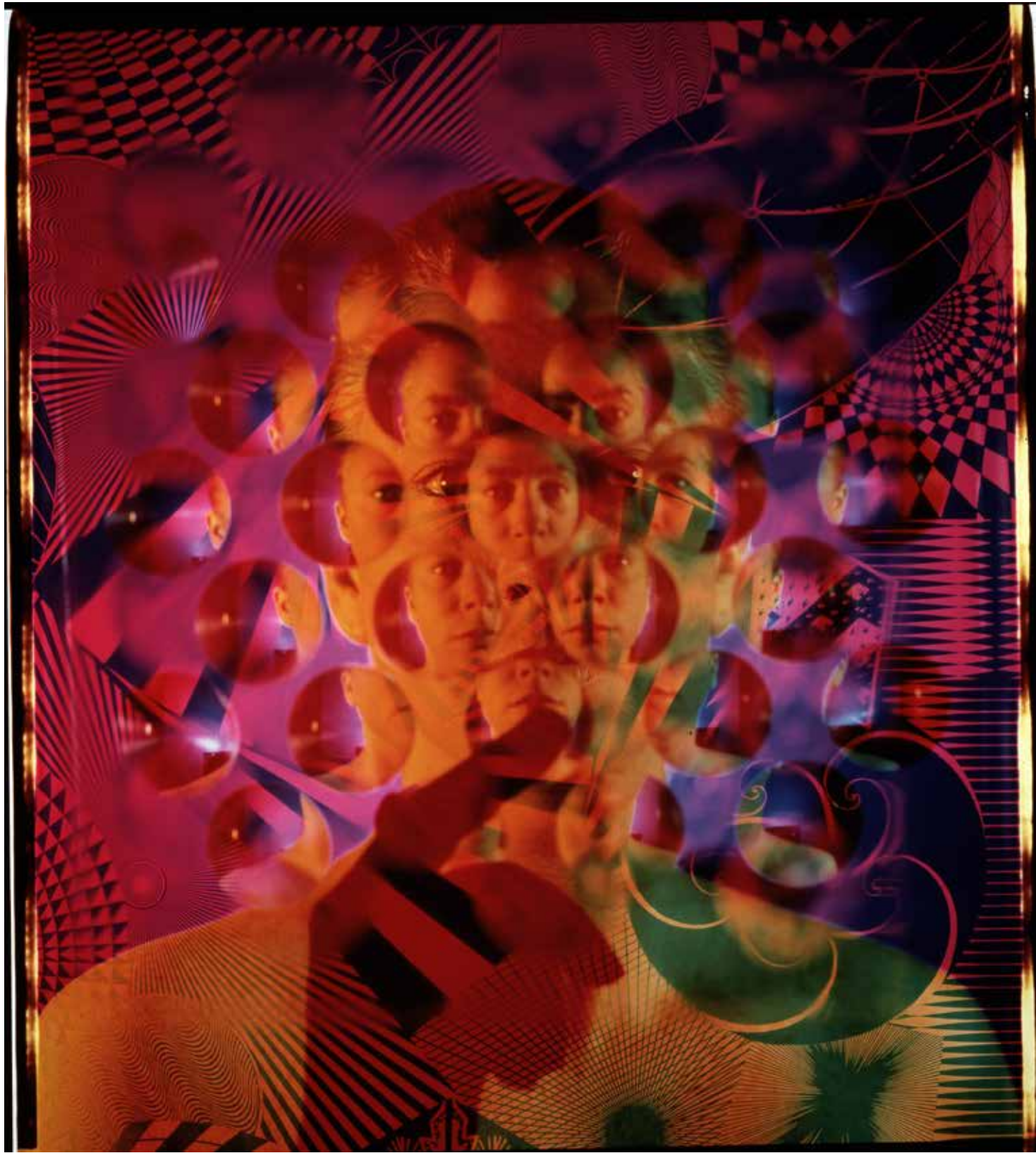


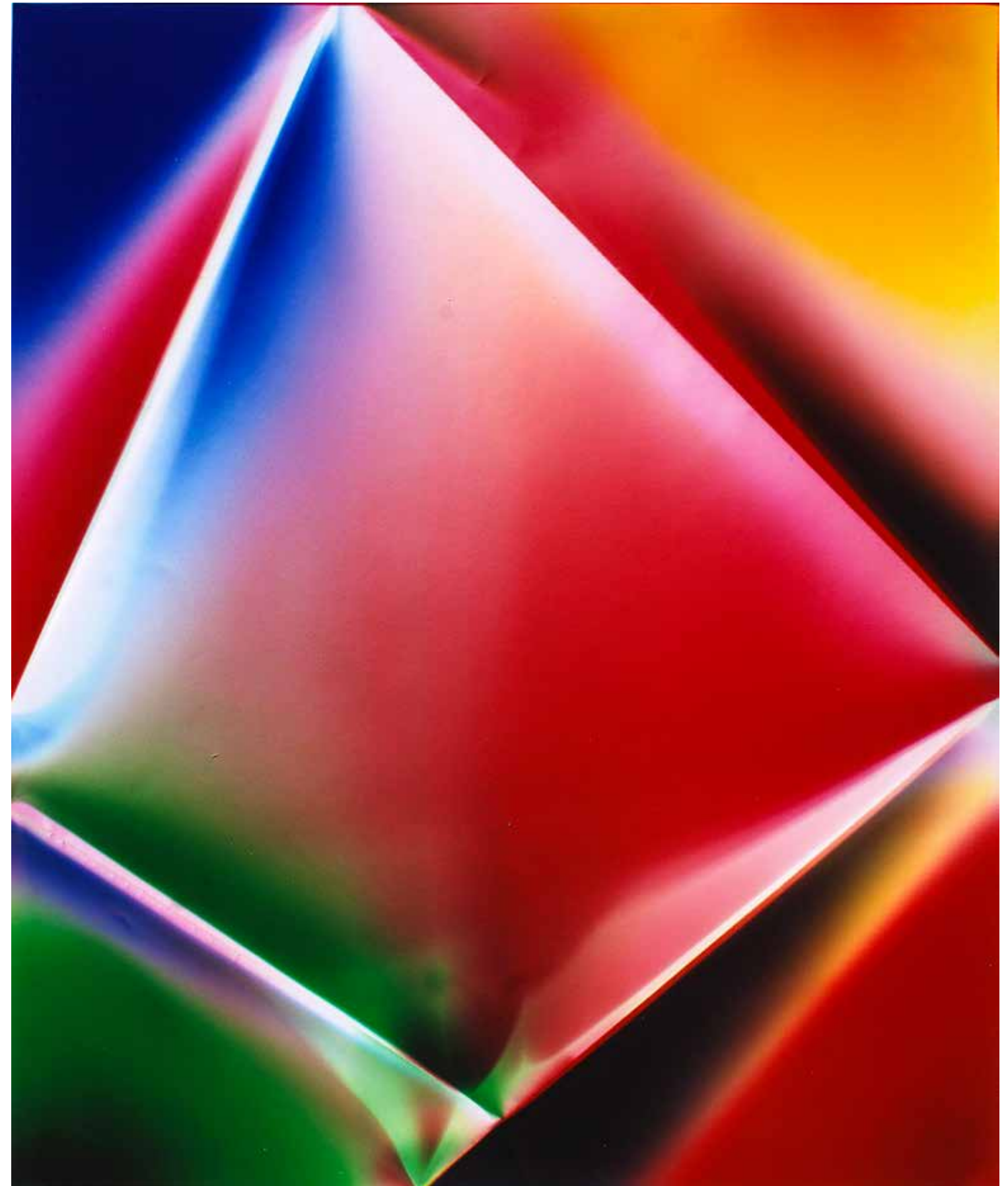
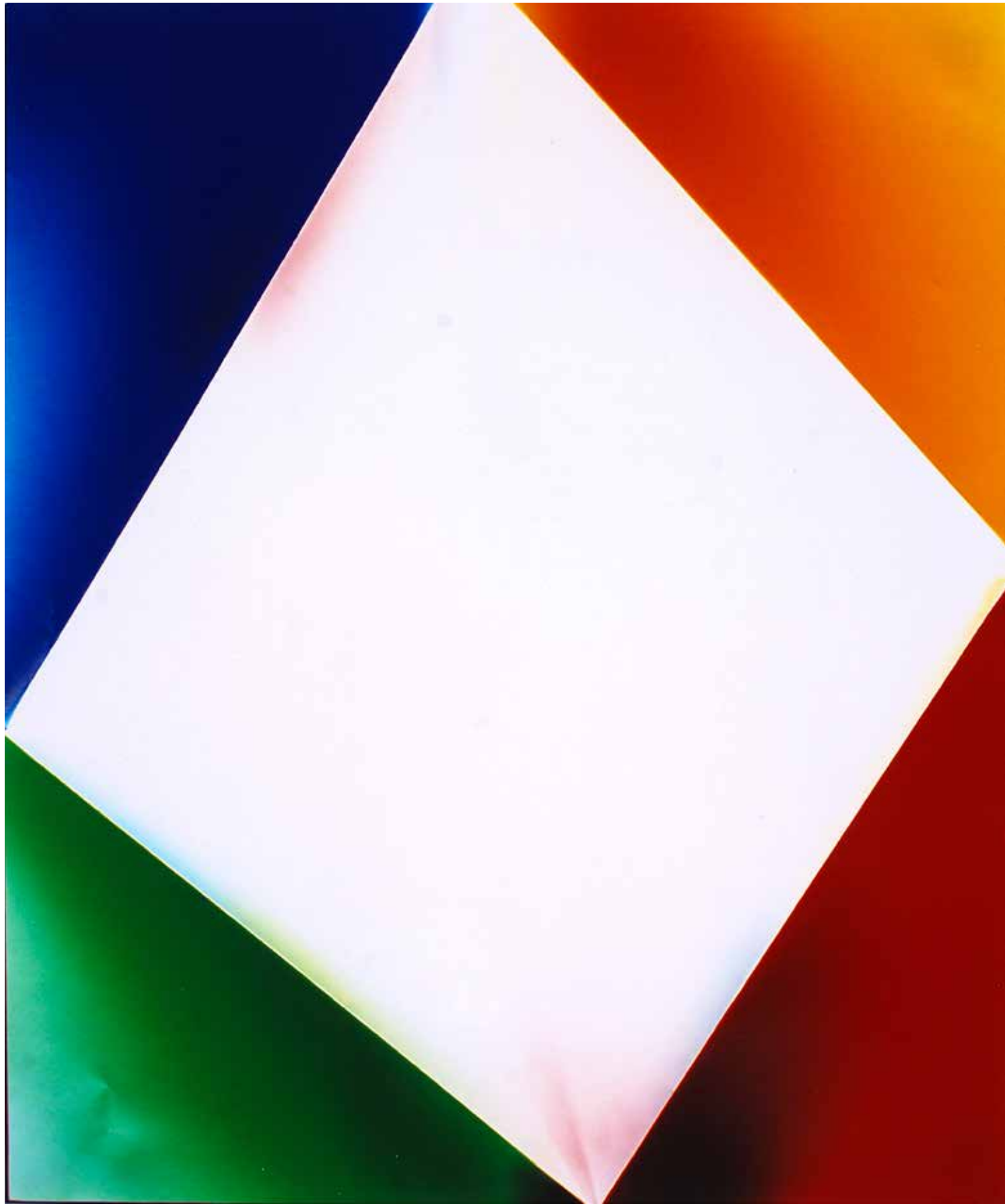




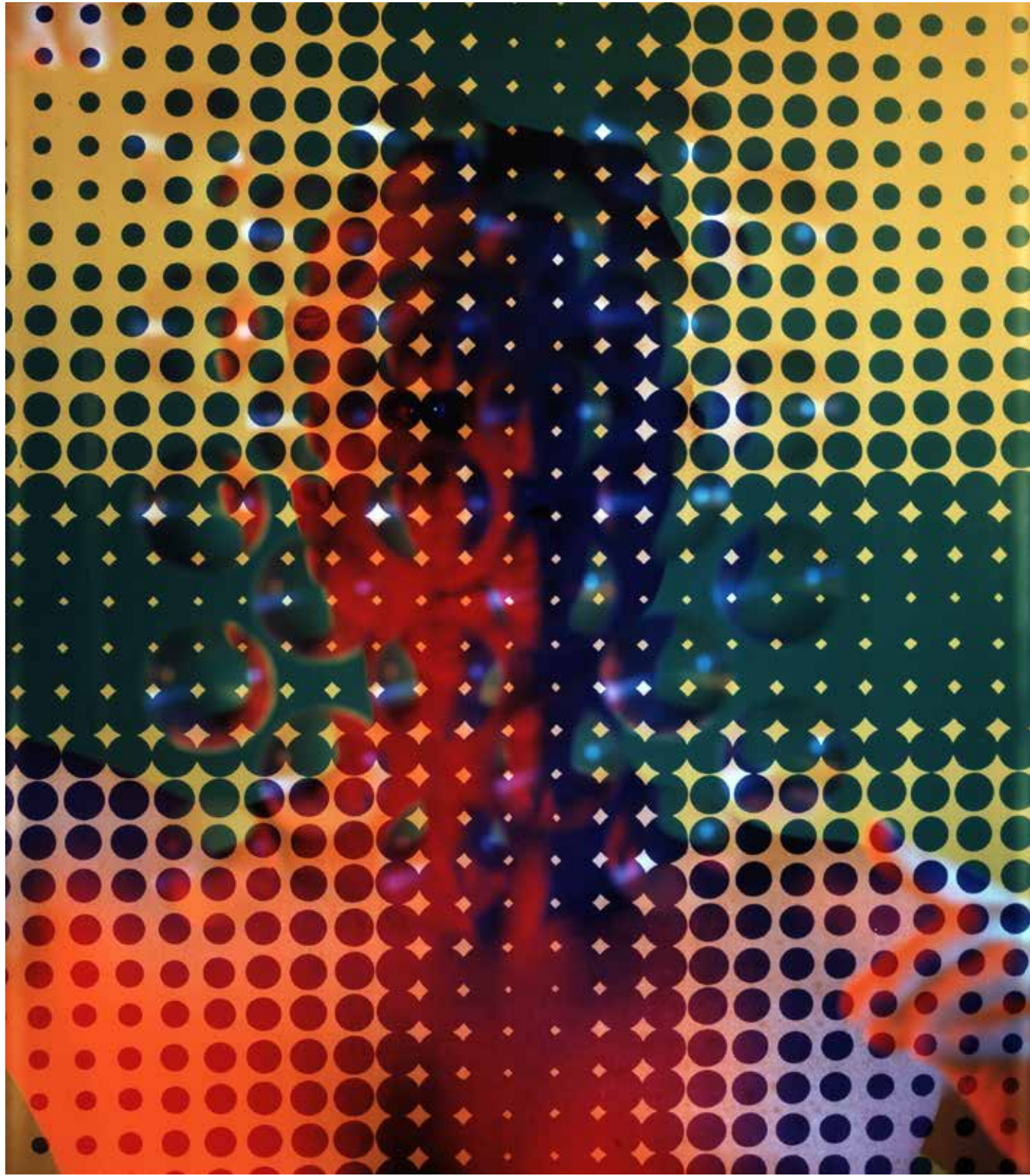


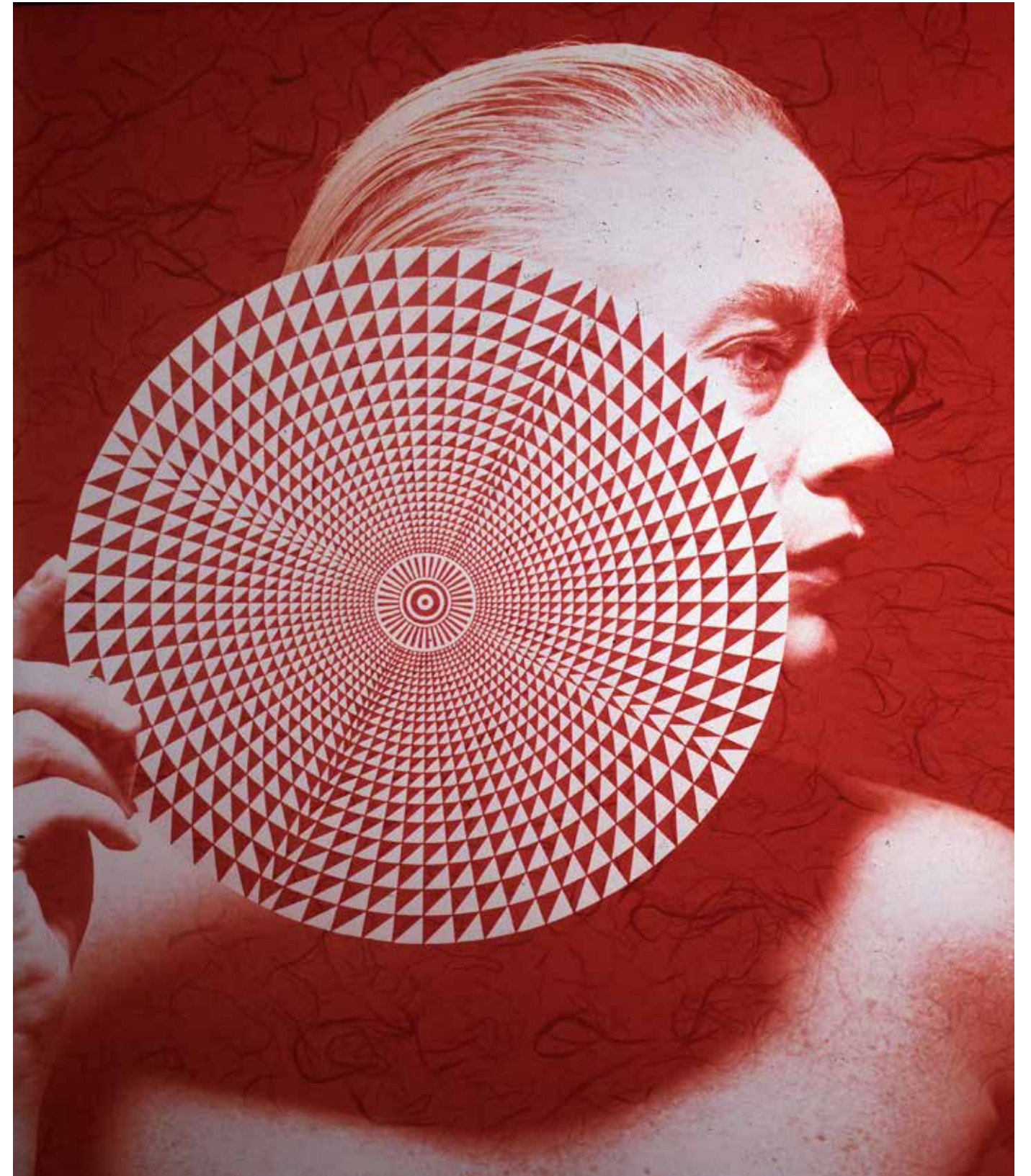
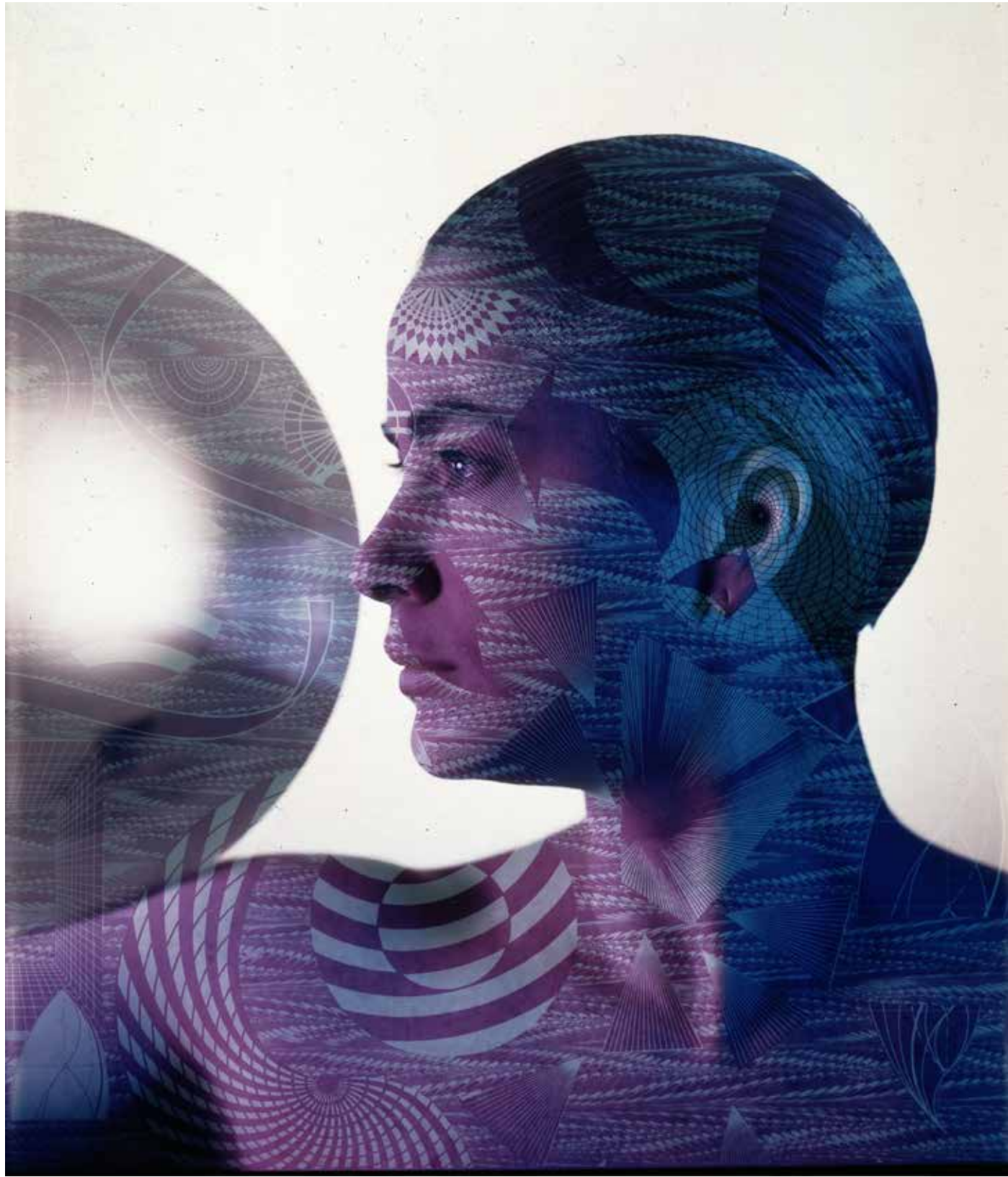












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