

LIZ NIELSEN

TIGER TEETH: RED LIGHT



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BENRIMON CONTEMPORARY

Seeing in the Dark: Liz Nielsen’s Wondrous Photograms

by Jason Foumberg

Your eyes, accustomed to semi-darkness, will soon open to more radiant visions of light.

–Umberto Boccioni, 1910

You could see the back of your head, theorized Einstein, if traveling in outer space through a wormhole. That’s because, within a wormhole, light curves and loops, and it travels faster than matter. You could pursue an image of your own body composed totally of light particles. This perplexing proposition is exactly the type of mind flip that appeals to Liz Nielsen. Her photo-based artworks are the product of passionate investigations into the behavior of light and energy, the perception of their existence, and their influence on human nature. These are not slight topics, yet Nielsen neatly captures and communicates them as minimal, geometric motifs, thereby clarifying heady enigmas as heartfelt renderings that leave the window open for wonder.

Nielsen creates her chromogenic prints using photographic techniques, but without the use of a camera or film. Atop a postcard-sized glass plate Nielsen composes a collage of layered transparent colored filters. In the darkroom she exposes the plates, which act as negatives, and increases their size by printing them with an enlarger onto photosensitive paper. The exposure process reverses the composition and inverts the colors according to the principle of subtractive light mixing. So, a magenta gel prints as green, transparent areas of the glass plate print as black, and stacks of brightly colored gels produce faint pastels. Unlike paint pigments, which muddy and darken when mixed, light mixtures glow unpredictably brighter in seemingly infinite combinations.

Technically, Nielsen’s light collages are photograms, a method popularized by Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy as they laid odds-and-ends on photosensitive paper and exposed it to light, producing ghostly, abstract compositions. The tradition of cameraless photography, however, has its roots not in the experimental formalism of the early twentieth-century but as a tool for biological documentation. Botanical photograms of the Victorian era were produced in the same way but with leaves, feathers, and butterfly wings, in order to permanently record the morphology of things that die and fade. Nielsen’s colorful photograms are a synthesis of these parallel methods. While she is formally playful, like Man Ray and his peers, she is also in search of capturing nature’s residues—not the seashells that preoccupied the Victorians, but something much more fleeting and mysterious: electromagnetic wavelengths, dark matter, stardust, and the winds of Jupiter.¹

The history of artistic innovation often mirrors developments in scientific technology. Just as one cannot imagine Renaissance perspective without Euclid, or Cubism without crystallography, Nielsen’s space landscapes are highly informed by quantum optics. This science of perceiving the imperceptible is, at heart, a search for comprehending reality. For instance, there are more colors than our eyes can physically perceive. This fact instills a yearning in artists and scientists alike to explore the chasms that exist between atoms. Nielsen creates her images because she is compelled by the desire to map and measure infinity, to travel at the speed of color, and transcend the stricture that organisms must be bound by matter. Like a mathematician, she uses geometry to make sense of the ineffable. Unlike those who see faces and gods in the constellations, Nielsen is willing to let the structure of her images— a flower pot, a rooster, a castle—be accidentally symbolic, just as the universe is an accident, too.

Nielsen’s darkroom is completely pitch black while she exposes her negatives. “No one has a body in the dark,” she says, and one can imagine her hands feeling their way among the printing materials and methods, taking the place of her eyes. Nielsen’s disembodied self-awareness recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson’s masterful phrase from his 1836 essay, *Nature*: “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all.” Emerson’s theory of optics depends on all things being visibly transparent, like the vibrant colored gels in Nielsen’s images. We can use our physical, innate, empirical instruments—vision and touch—in search of the supernatural.

Nielsen’s photo-based images exist in a continuum of the human need to direct the eye beyond its physical bounds: upon stained glass and kaleidoscope beads, and to ever-complicating photographic technologies: X-rays, thermographic cameras, photomicrography, spectroscopy, and the Hubble telescope’s images hand-colored by astrophysicists. Photomicrography of crystal patterns is an important reference for Nielsen’s artwork. If we spend too much time pondering outer space, we may forget that we can access the specimens of the universe on our own planet. Minerals and crystals, as residues of the Big Bang deposited on Earth, are the microcosmic proof of the molecular multiverse, and they significantly inform the structure of Nielsen’s imagery. Just as a photogram is a record of a past event, we too are residue of ancient light and rock. Granite is the concretization of liquid fire, ice is the crystallization of water, and our bodies are collages of energetic light bouncing off atoms.

All’s well that begins well and has no end—the world will perish but there is no end to us!

–from the Russian Futurist opera Victory Over the Sun, 1913

¹ In this regard Nielsen is the artistic inheritor of Berenice Abbott, who was Man Ray’s pupil. From 1958–61, Abbott created photograms of the wave patterns in water at MIT. The abstract geometric photograms of James Welling and the color-field photograms of Walead Beshty are also interesting points of reference.

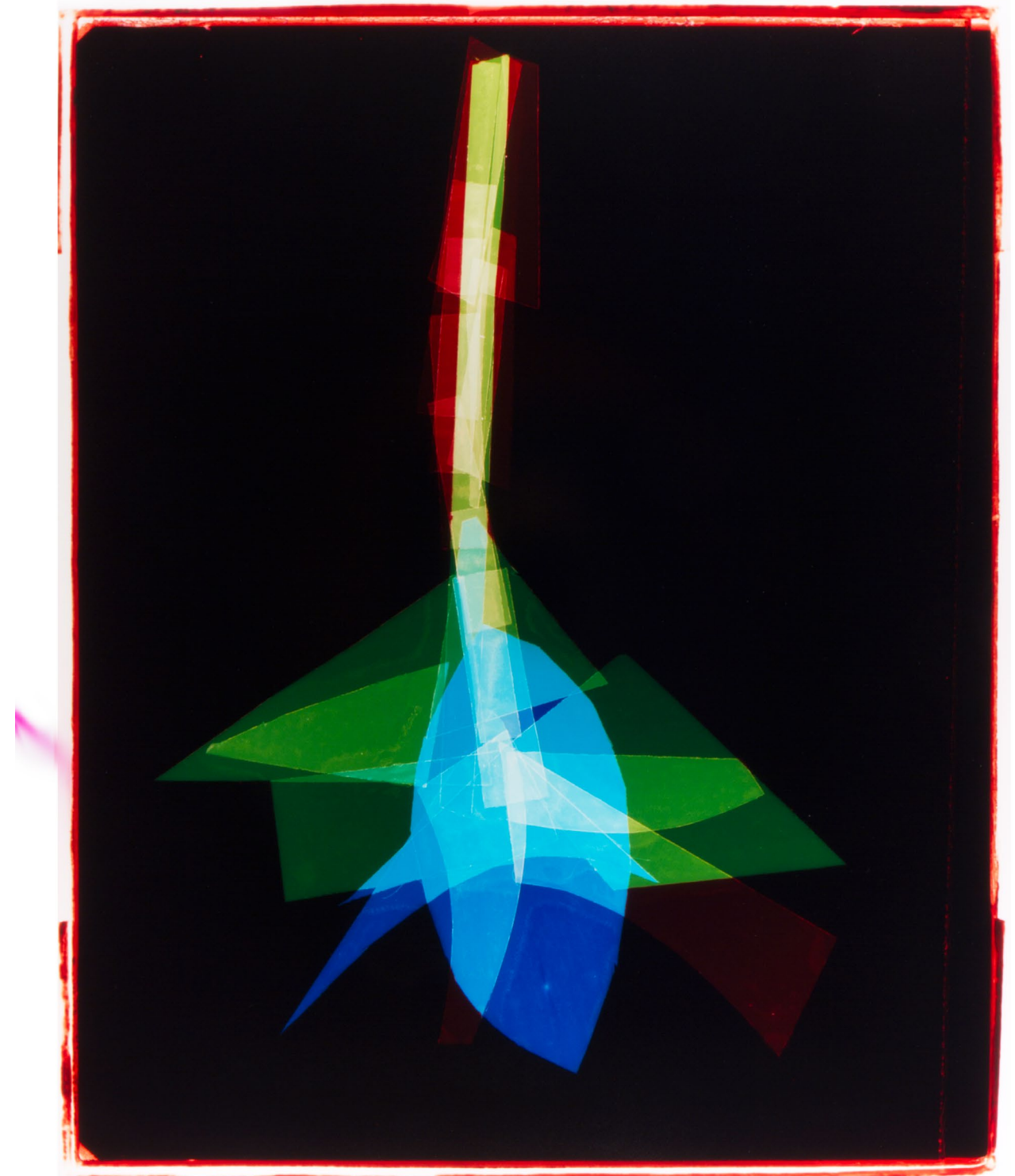
Composition: Tiger Teeth, 2013

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
50 x 40 inches
127 x 101.6 cm



Composition: Eiffel Tower, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
50 x 40 inches
127 x 101.6 cm



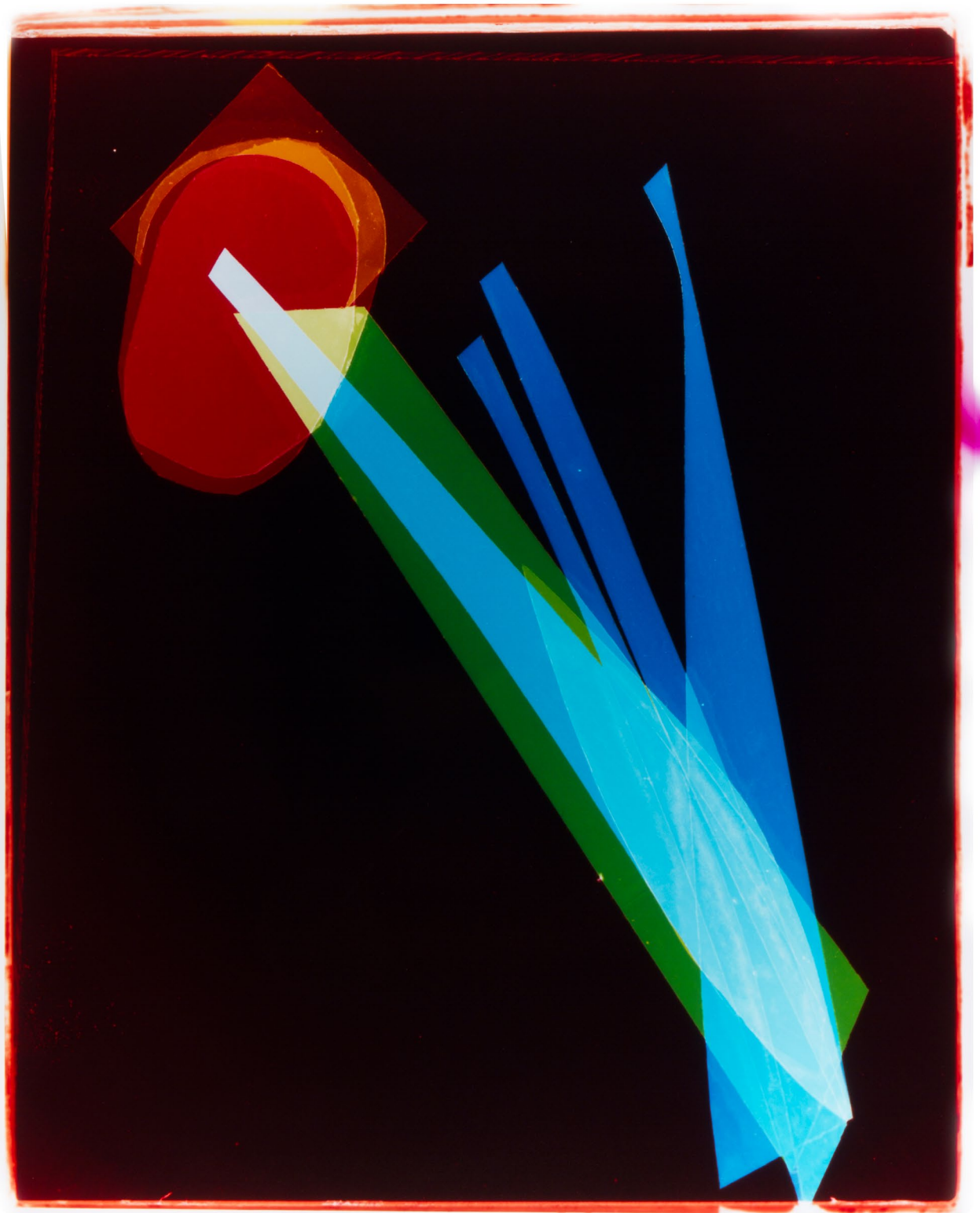


Composition: Pineapple, 2013

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
50 x 40 inches
127 x 101.6 cm

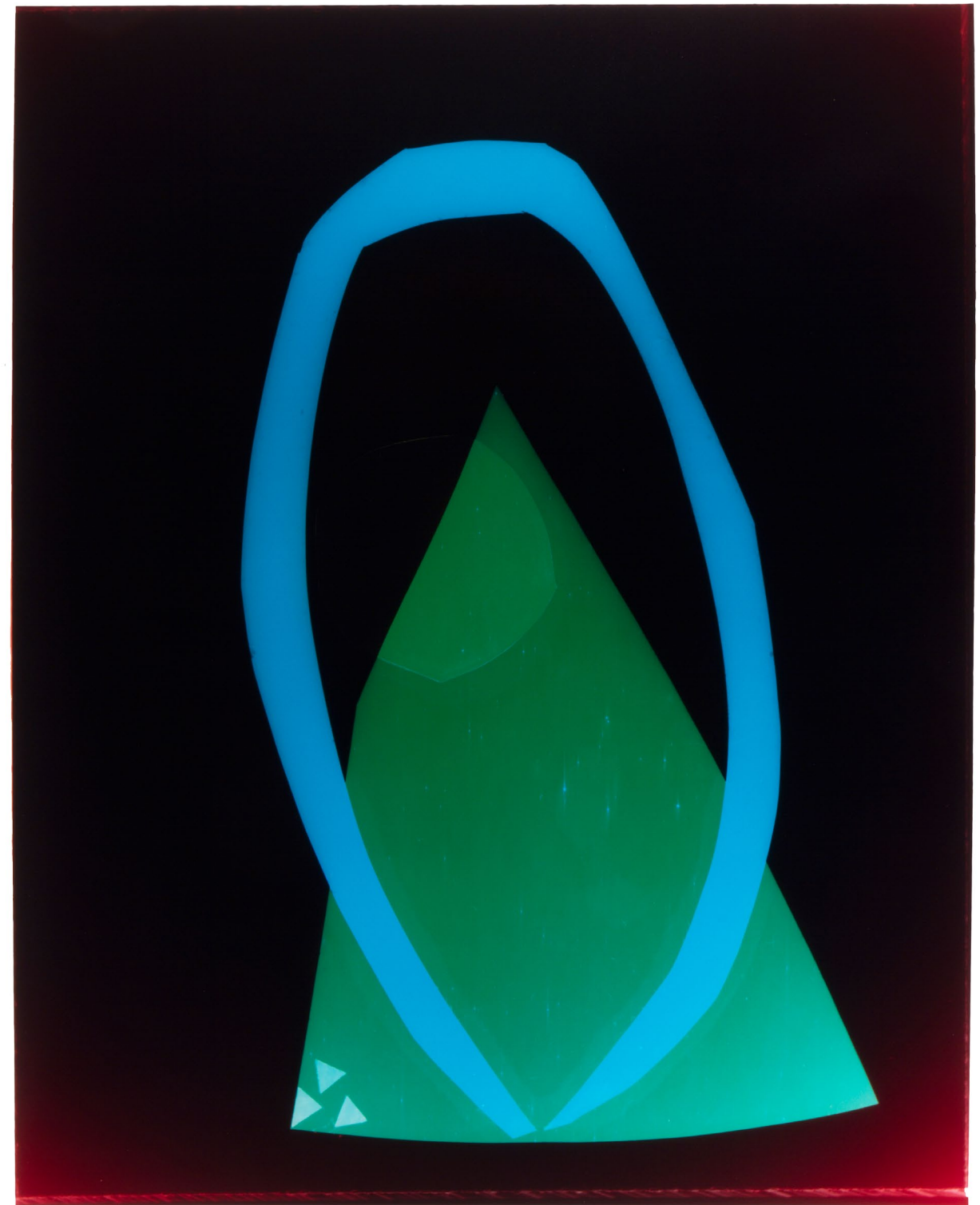
Composition: Rooster Flower, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
50 x 40 inches
127 x 101.6 cm



Composition: Angel, 2013

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
50 x 40 inches
127 x 101.6 cm



Composition: Castle Rocket, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
50 x 40 inches
127 x 101.6 cm



Composition: Flower Pot, 2013

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
50 x 40 inches
127 x 101.6 cm



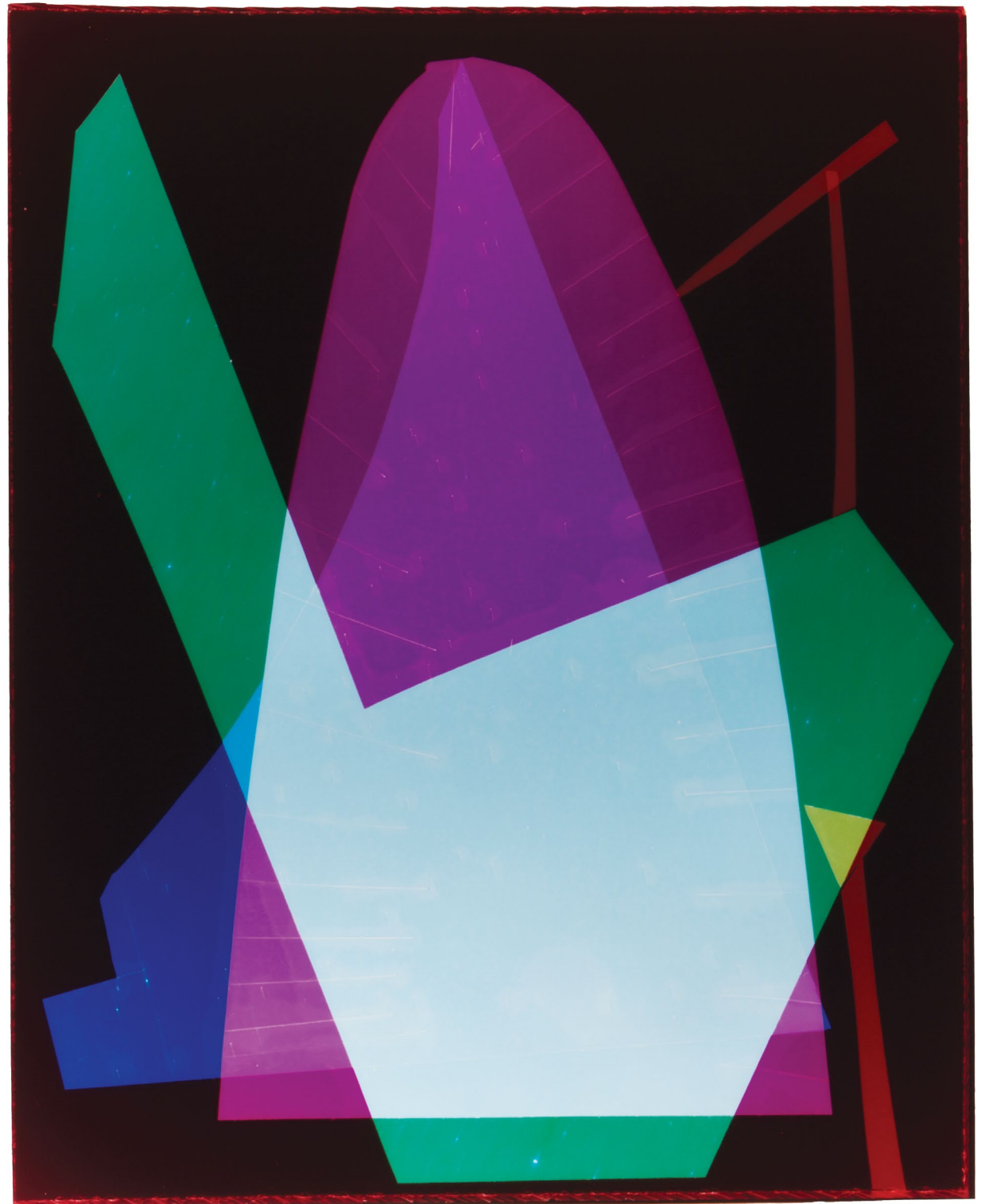
Composition: Diamond Dimension, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 50 inches
101,6 x 127 cm



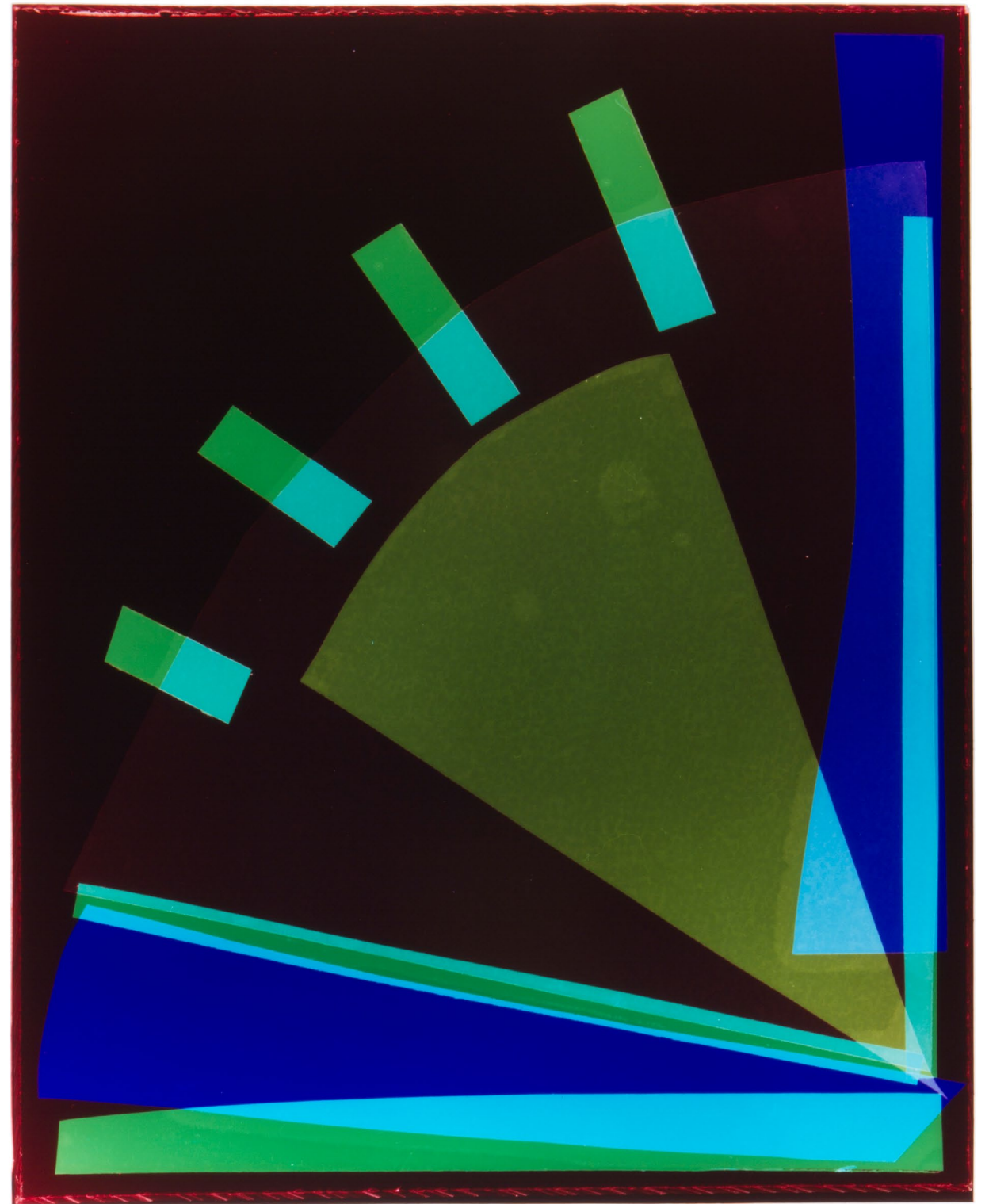
Composition: Cactus, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 30 inches
101.6 x 76.2 cm



Composition: Fan, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 30 inches
101.6 x 76.2 cm



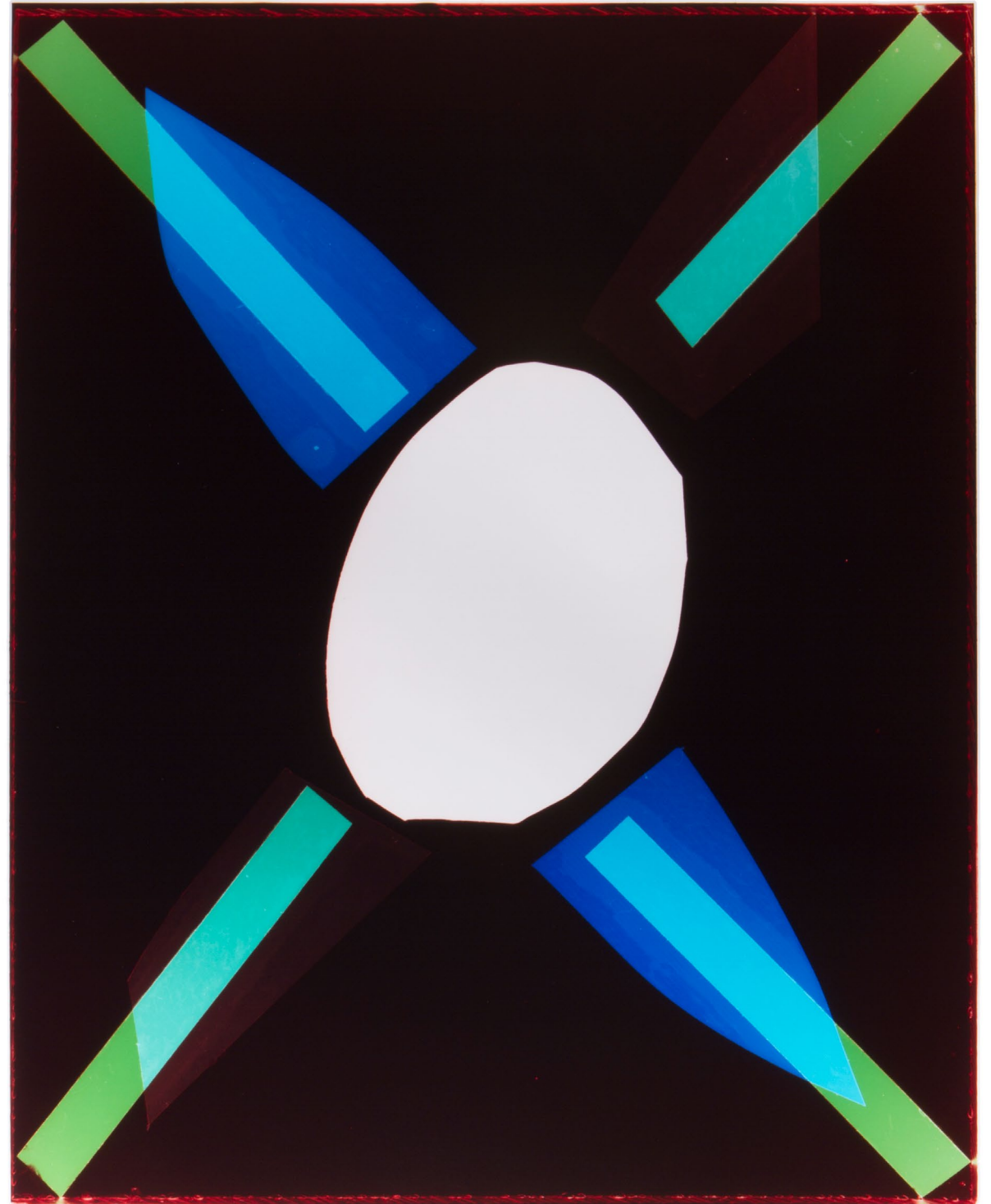
Composition: Pink Mountains, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 30 inches
101.6 x 76.2 cm



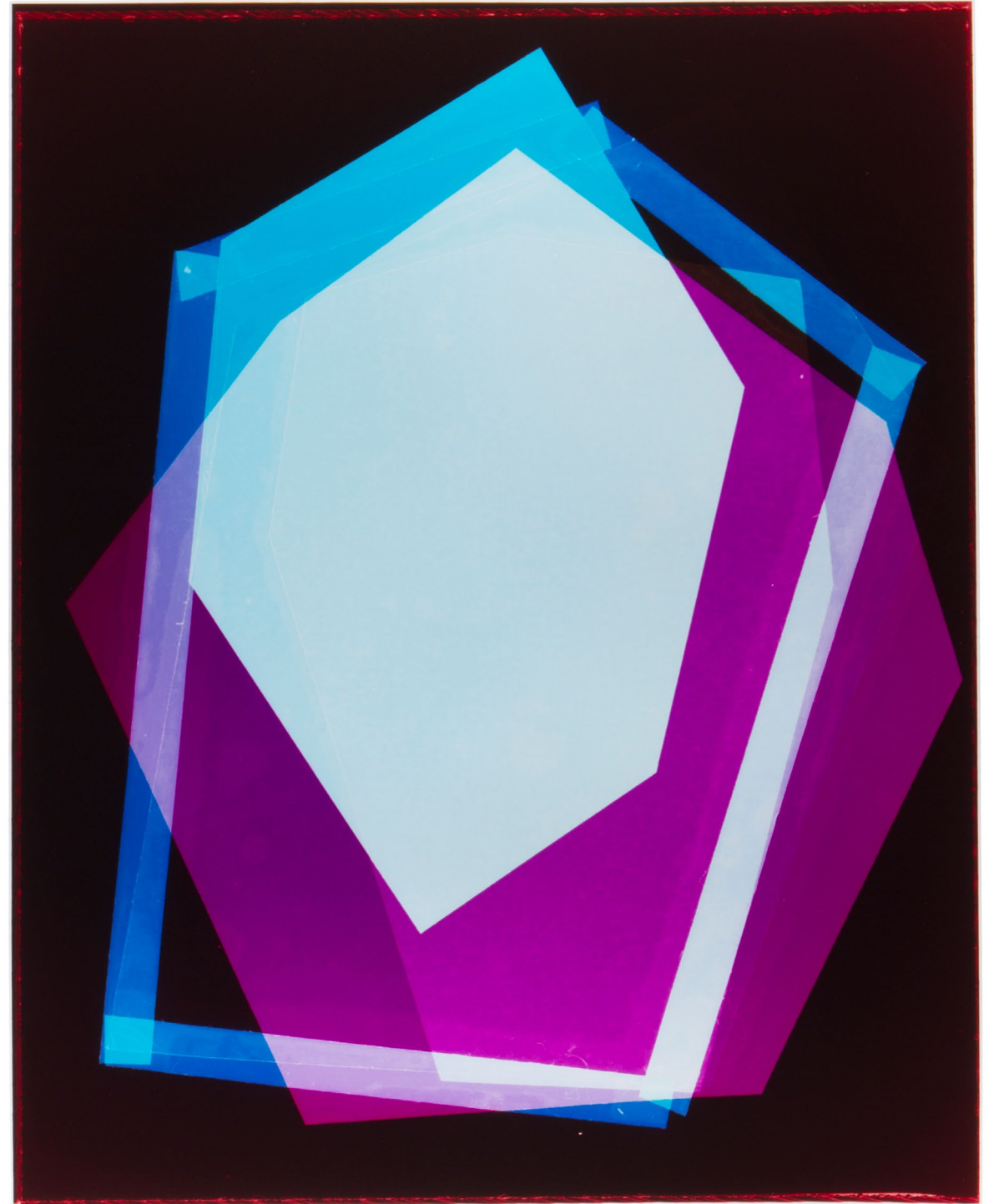
Composition: Pirate, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 30 inches
101.6 x 76.2 cm



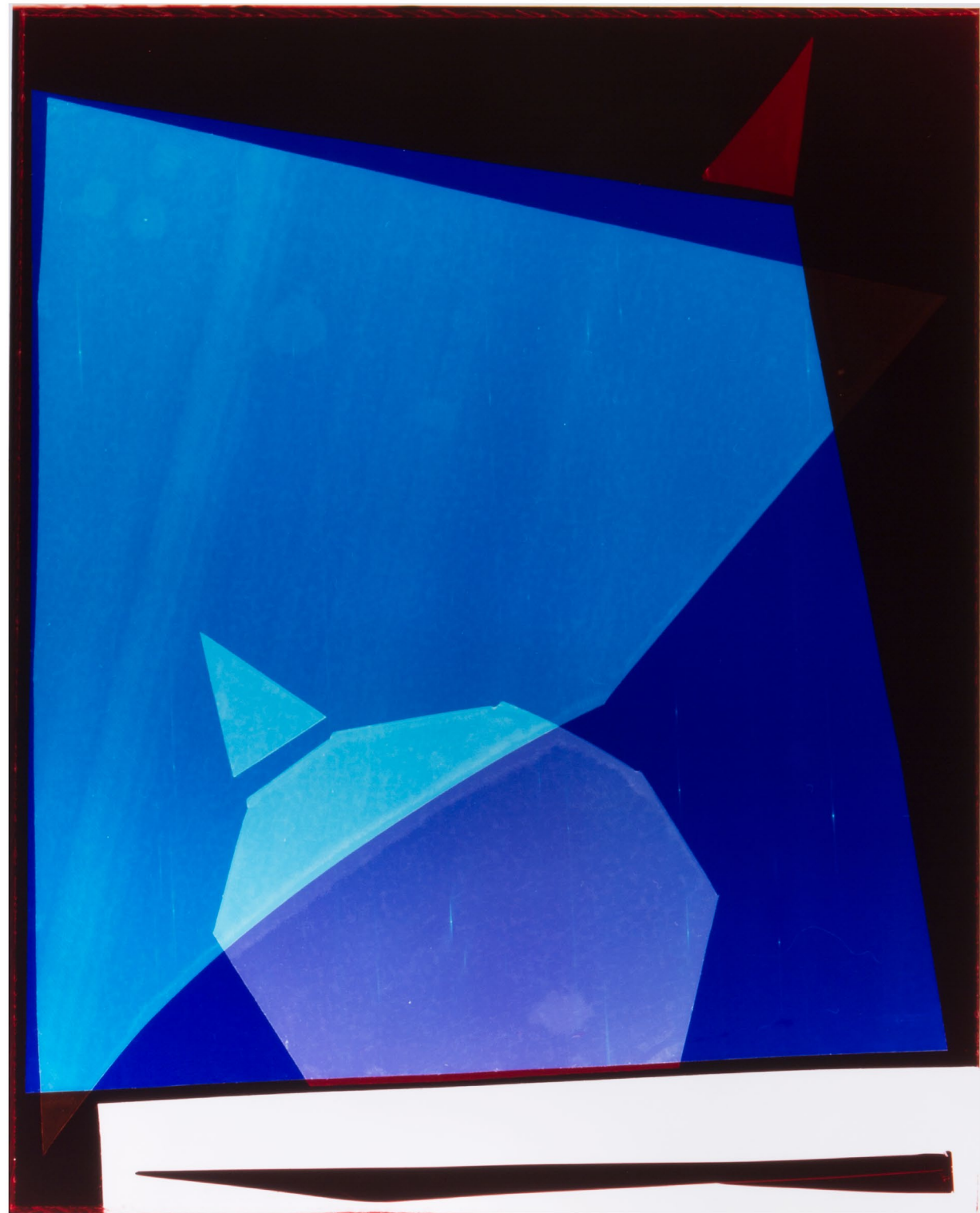
Composition: Supernova, 2012

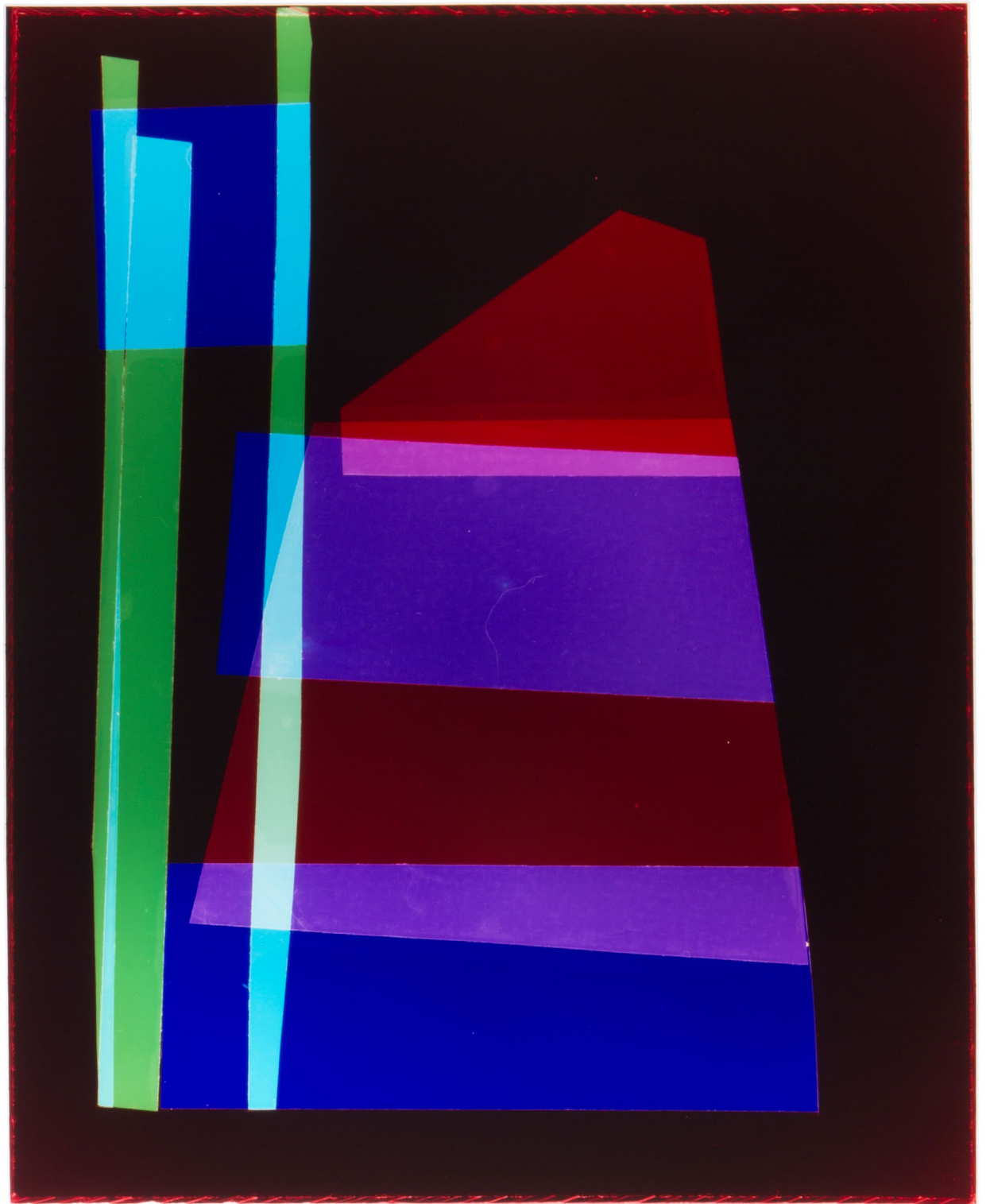
Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 30 inches
101.6 x 76.2 cm



Composition: Window Sill, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 30 inches
101.6 x 76.2 cm



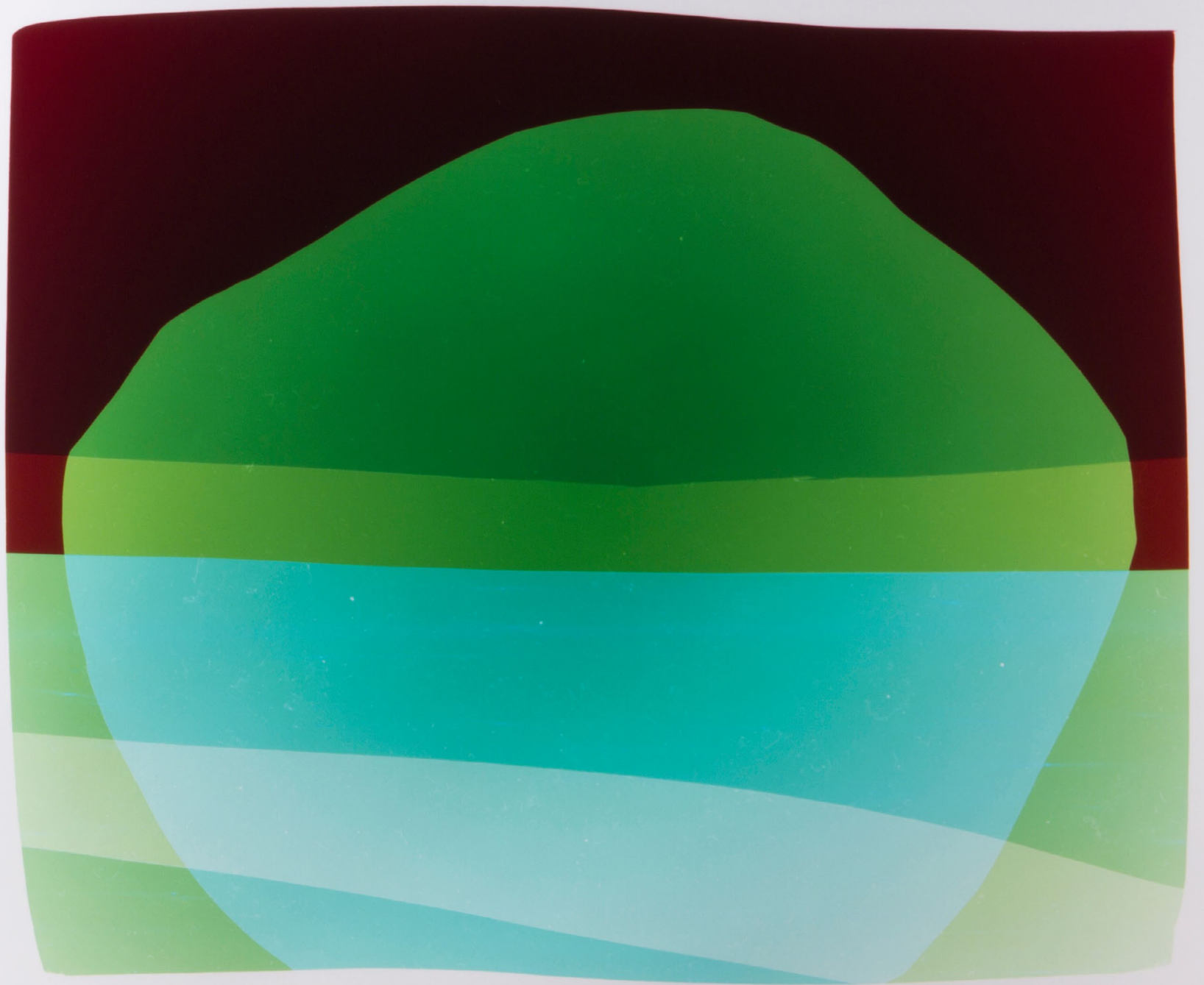


Composition: Beehive, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
40 x 30 inches
101.6 x 76.2 cm

Composition: Orbiter 1, 2013

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
30 x 40 inches
76.2 x 101.6 cm



Composition: Orbiter 2, 2013

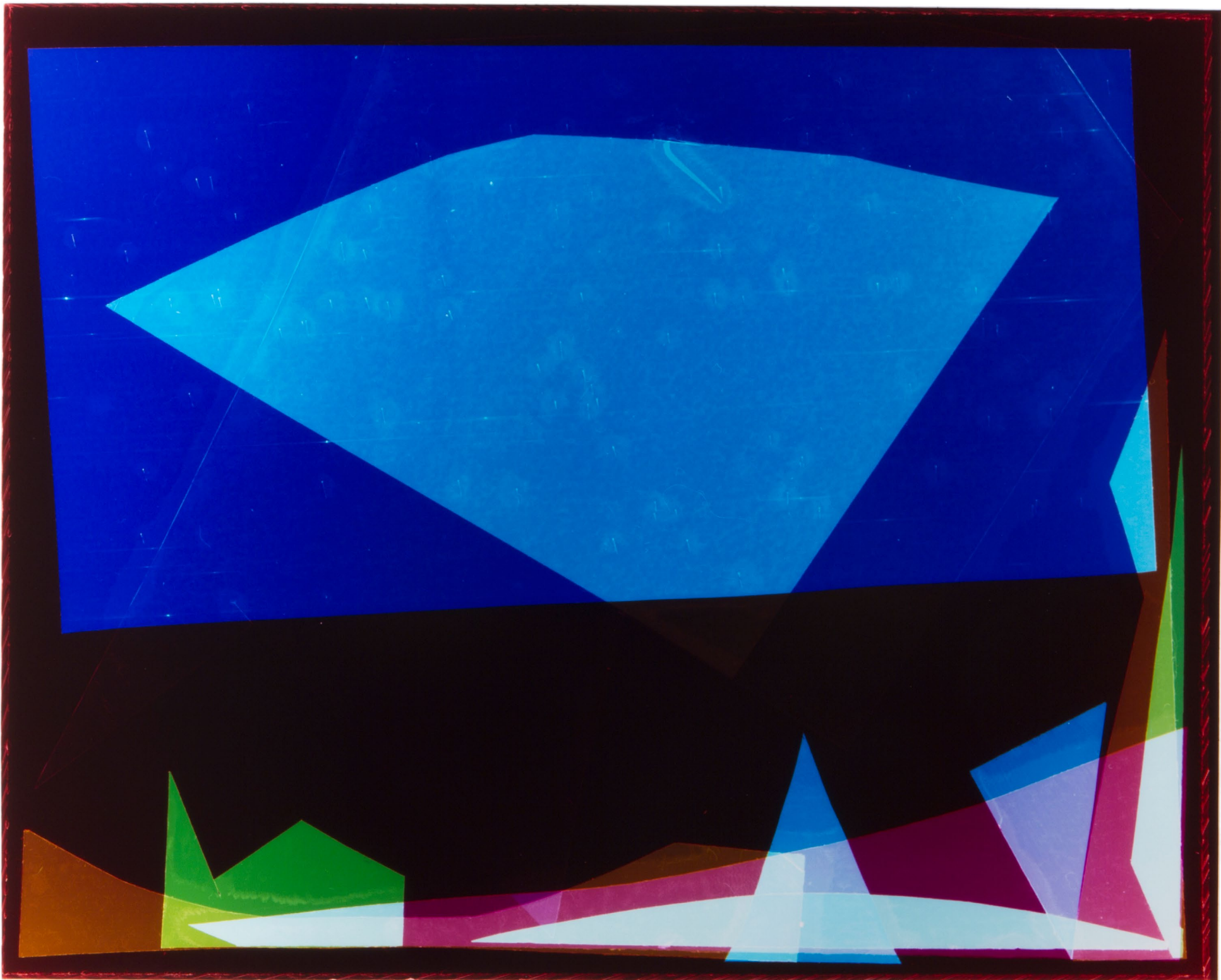
Unique Chromogenic Photograph
30 x 40 inches
76.2 x 101.6 cm



Composition: Orbiter 3, 2013

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
30 x 40 inches
76.2 x 101.6 cm





Composition: Movie Theater, 2013

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
30 x 40 inches
76.2 x 101.6 cm

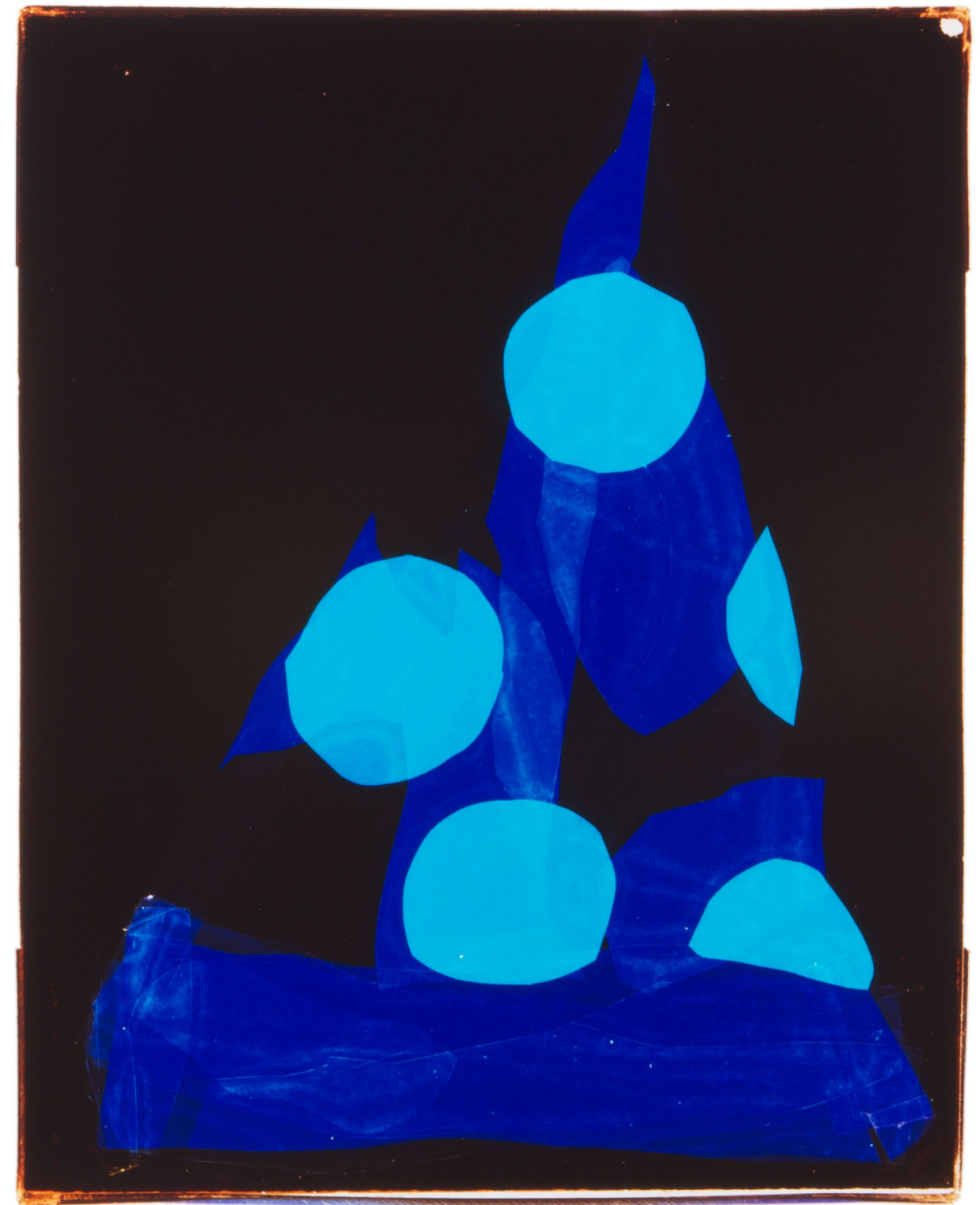
Composition: Triangle Tower, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
24 x 20 inches
60.9 x 50.8 cm



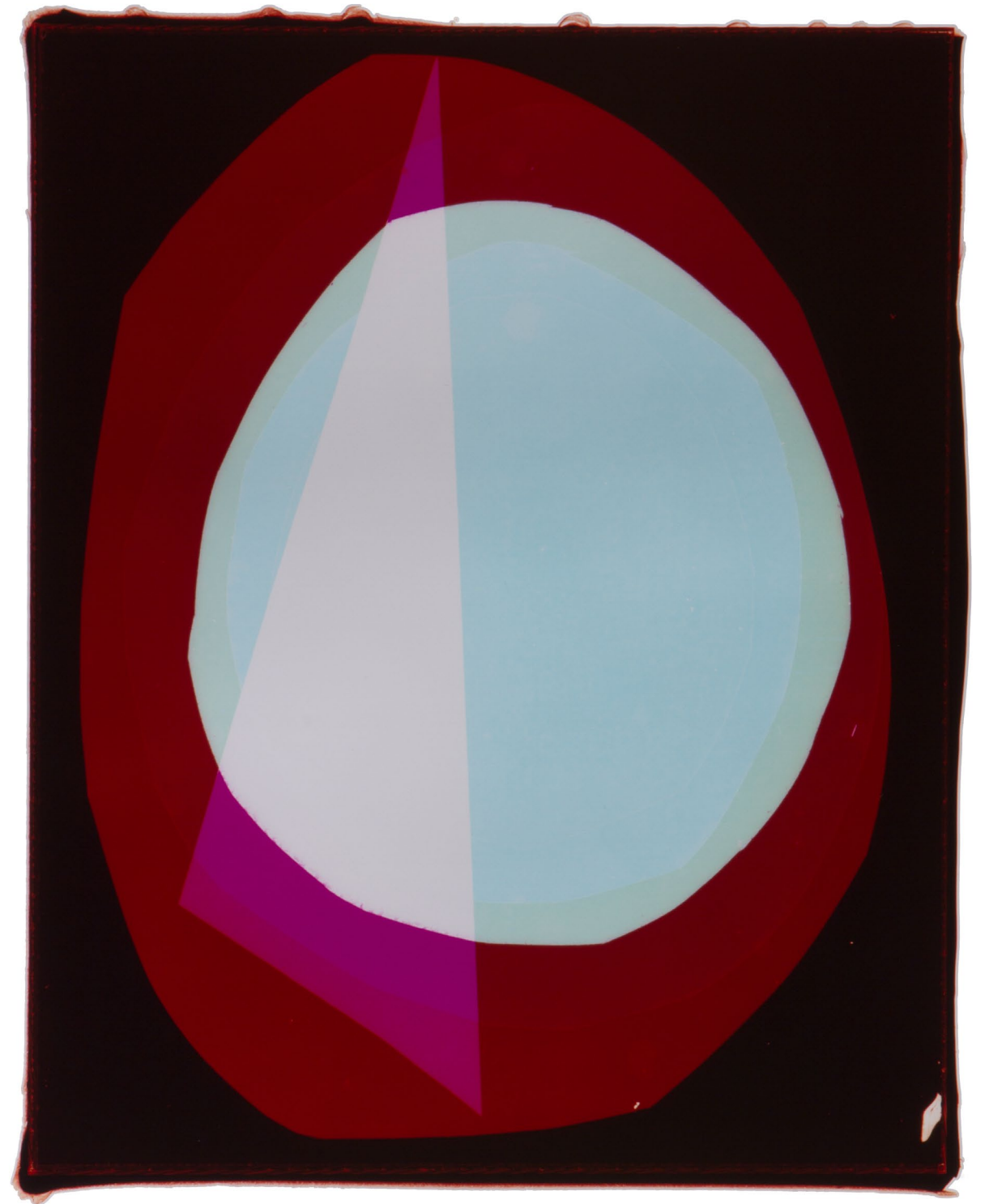
Composition: Moon Pizza, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
24 x 20 inches
60.9 x 50.8 cm



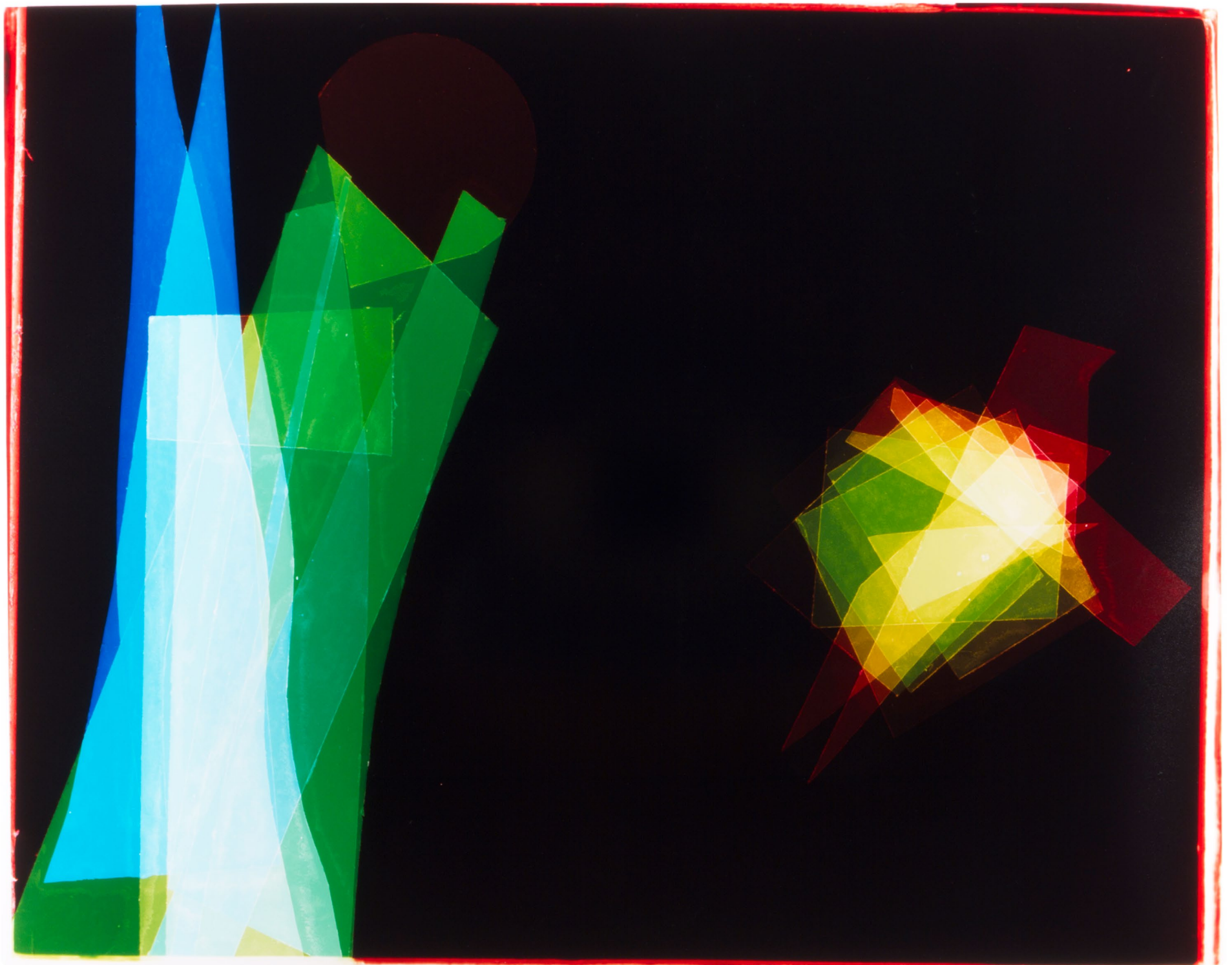
Composition: Lunch, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
24 x 20 inches
60.9 x 50.8 cm



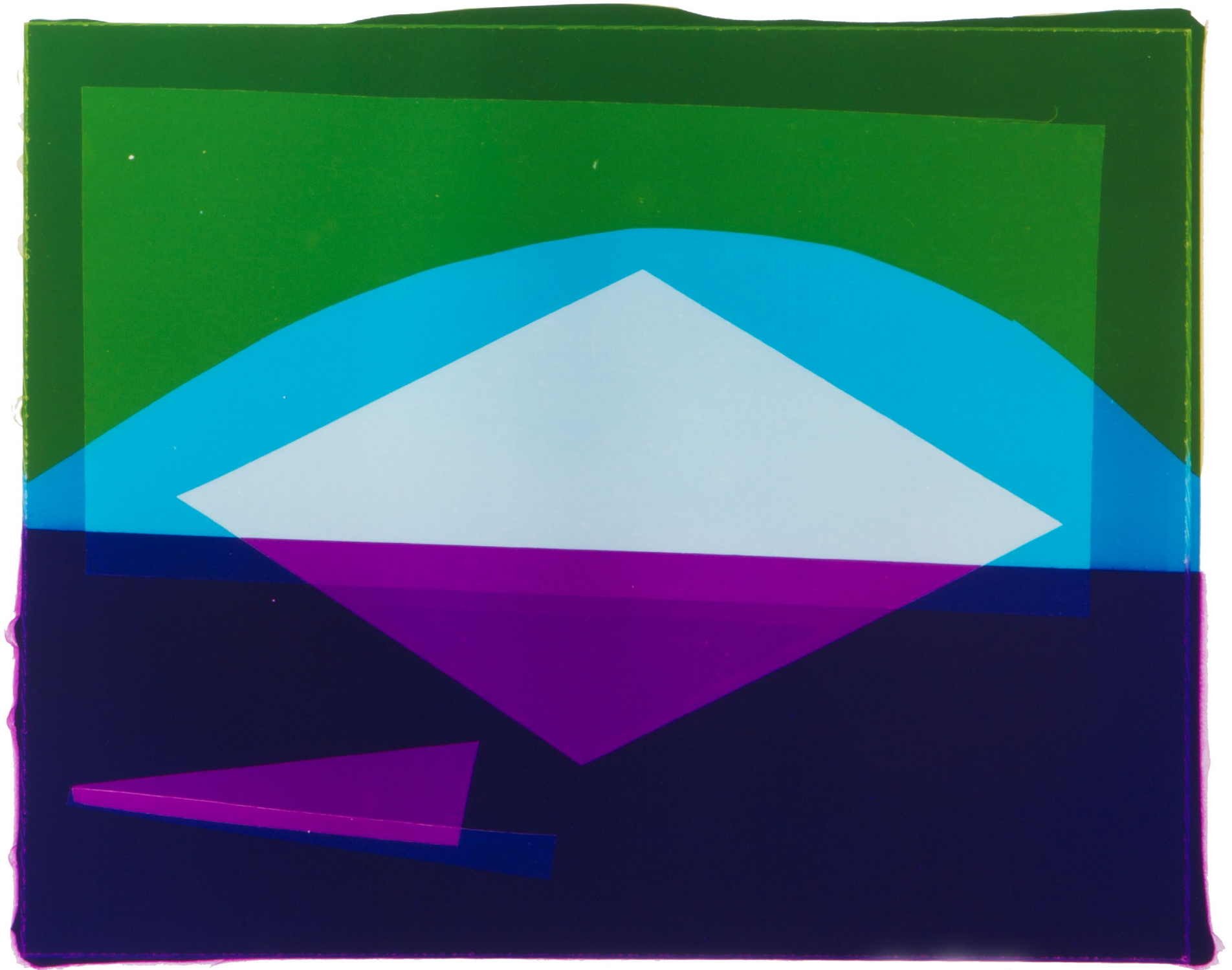
Composition: Two Birds, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
20 x 24 inches
50.8 x 60.9 cm



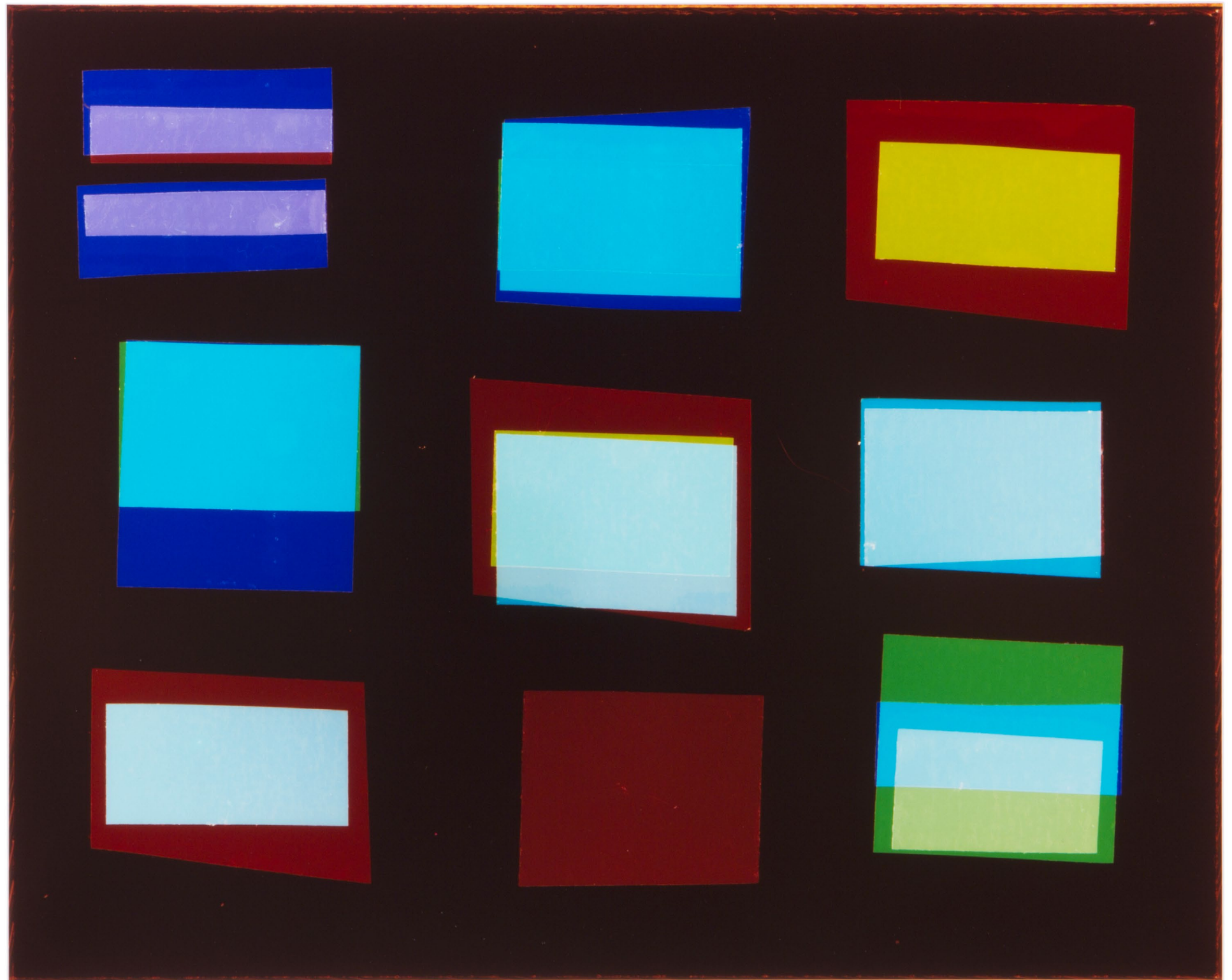
Composition: Diamond Sunset, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
20 x 24 inches
50.8 x 60.9 cm



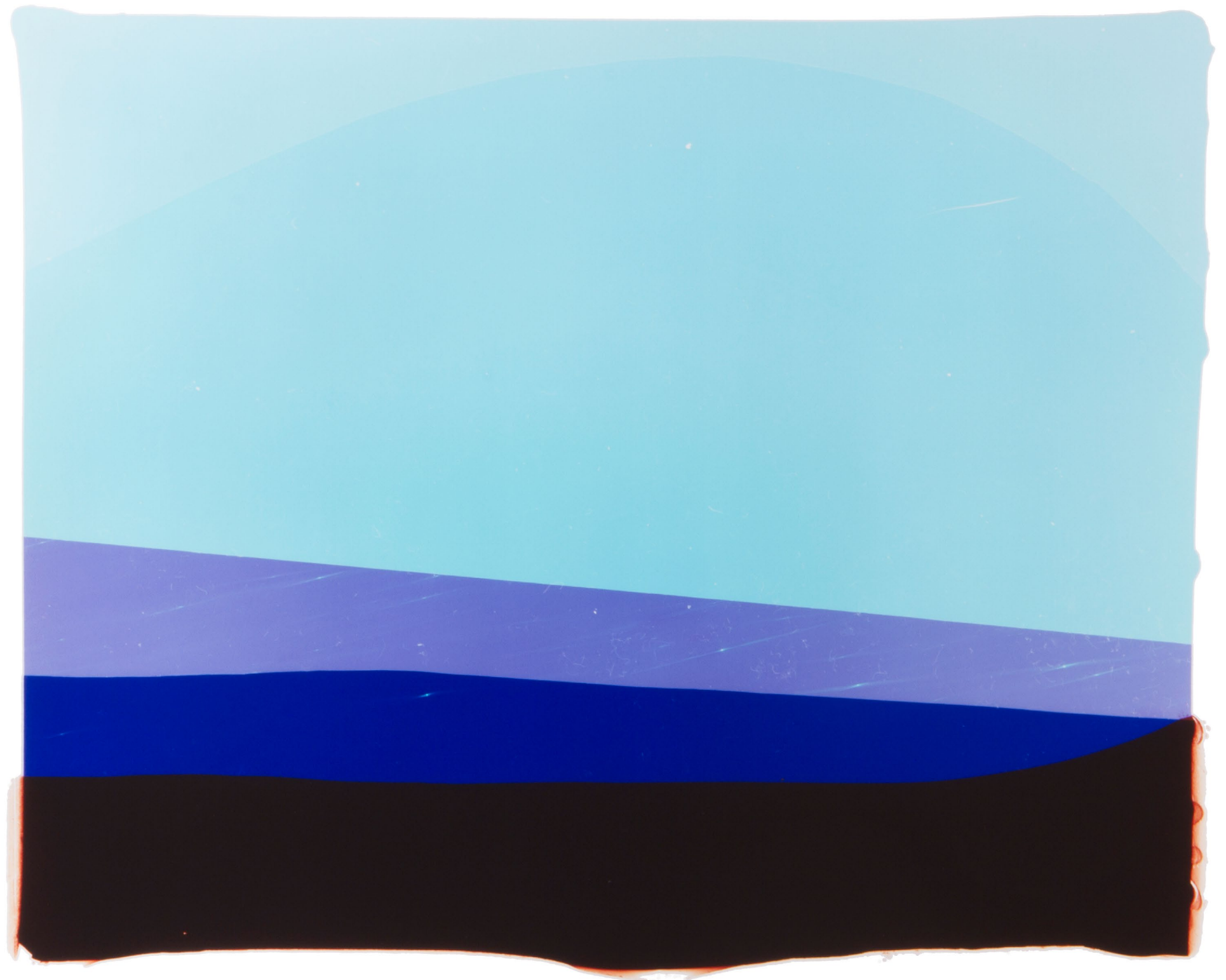
Composition: Horizontal Hotel, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
20 x 24 inches
50.8 x 60.9 cm



Composition: Highway Majesty, 2012

Unique Chromogenic Photograph
20 x 24 inches
50.8 x 60.9 cm



LIZ NIELSEN

Born in Wisconsin, 1975

Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York

EDUCATION

2004 MFA, University of Illinois at Chicago

2002 BFA, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

1998 BA, Seattle University, Philosophy and Spanish

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2013 Tiger Teeth: Red Light, Benrison Contemporary, New York, NY

2011 LIZ by LINA, Schalter Gallery, Berlin, Germany

2005 New Work by Liz Nielsen, Lisa Boyle Gallery, Chicago, IL

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013 Wingding 3rd Anniversary Exhibition, LVL3, Chicago, IL
Fractal Semblance, Roots and Culture, Chicago, IL

2012 NADA Miami, Rawson Projects, Miami, FL
Fictitious Truths curated by Kara Rooney, Rooster Gallery, New York, NY
Anderson, Murphy, Nielsen, New Capital Projects, Chicago, IL
People Who Work Here curated by Rawson Projects, David Zwirner Gallery, New York, NY
First Love, curated by Angela Bryant O'Connor Gallery, Dominican University, River Forest, IL

2011 Color: Fully Engaged, curated by Jamilee Polson, A & D gallery, Columbia College, Chicago, IL
Juried Auction, NURTUREart hosted by the Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY

2010 Feeble Intimacy, LVL3, Chicago, IL
Minimumixam curated by Nicholas Cueva, Dan Gunn, and Heather Mekkelson Twelve Galleries
Quarterly #1 hosted by Pentagon Gallery, Chicago, IL

2009 Ship in a Bottle, Sullivan Galleries, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

2008 Liz Nielsen at Accomplice Projects, Art Basel Miami/Bridge Fair, Miami, FL

2007 Awesome in Giftshop project space, Gescheidle Gallery Chicago, IL
Word of Mouth presented by Diet Gallery, Art Basel Miami/Bridge Fair Miami, FL

2005 Art Chicago, Lisa Boyle Gallery, Chicago, IL
Art Basel Miami/Aqua Art, Lisa Boyle Gallery, Miami, FL
Genderosity, 4-F Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Art Chicago/NOVA Young Art Fair, Project Rooms: (The Mothership Installation), Chicago, IL

2004 Who's doing Self-Portraiture in 2004?, curated by Jason Lazarus, Heaven Gallery, Chicago, IL
Summer Love Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, IL
And now for something completely different Art Chicago/Stray Show, Unit B Gallery, Chicago, IL
Brain/Body, Curated by Susan Sensemann Riverside Arts Center, Riverside, IL

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Progressive Art Collection, Cleveland, OH

SELECTED PRESS

2012 Art Slant, August 13
Die Zeit, No. 32, August 2
Capricious Photo, Photographer of the Week, July 11
New York Times, Shows of Support, July 10
Wall Street Journal, Scaling the Gallery Walls, July 10
Hyperallergic, 9 Artists to Watch from the 2012 Bushwick Open Studios, June 12

2011 LVL3, Artist of the Week, November 14
A + D Catalogue, Fully Engaged, November 5

2009 New City Art, Breakout Artists 2009: Chicago's next generation of image makers, April 28

INTERVIEWS

2012 Break Thru Radio, Art Uncovered, July 3

2011 Chicago Art Magazine, Conversations with Curators: Liz Nielsen, December 23

CREDITS

Photos: Ariana Page Russell

Essay: Jason Foumberg

Design: Joseph Sturges

Gallery: BENRIMON CONTEMPORARY
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Thank you to my family for believing in me, and a special thanks to my loving partner, Carolina.

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