

WHAT THE WATER SAYS AS IT RUNS

A thesis by Jeanette Cosentini presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Digital + Media of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

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*Dedicated to my teachers
throughout the years, I never would
have made it without you all.*

*And to my sister Mia, you're the
ultimate and everything.*

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“‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that; remembering where we were, that valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory— what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our flooding.”

Toni Morrison, *The Site of Memory*

“You once told me that memory is a choice. But if you were God you’d know it’s a flood.”

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

“The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue. They summon meaning from events that have long been dormant. They braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat. They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves, and others, into necessary context.”

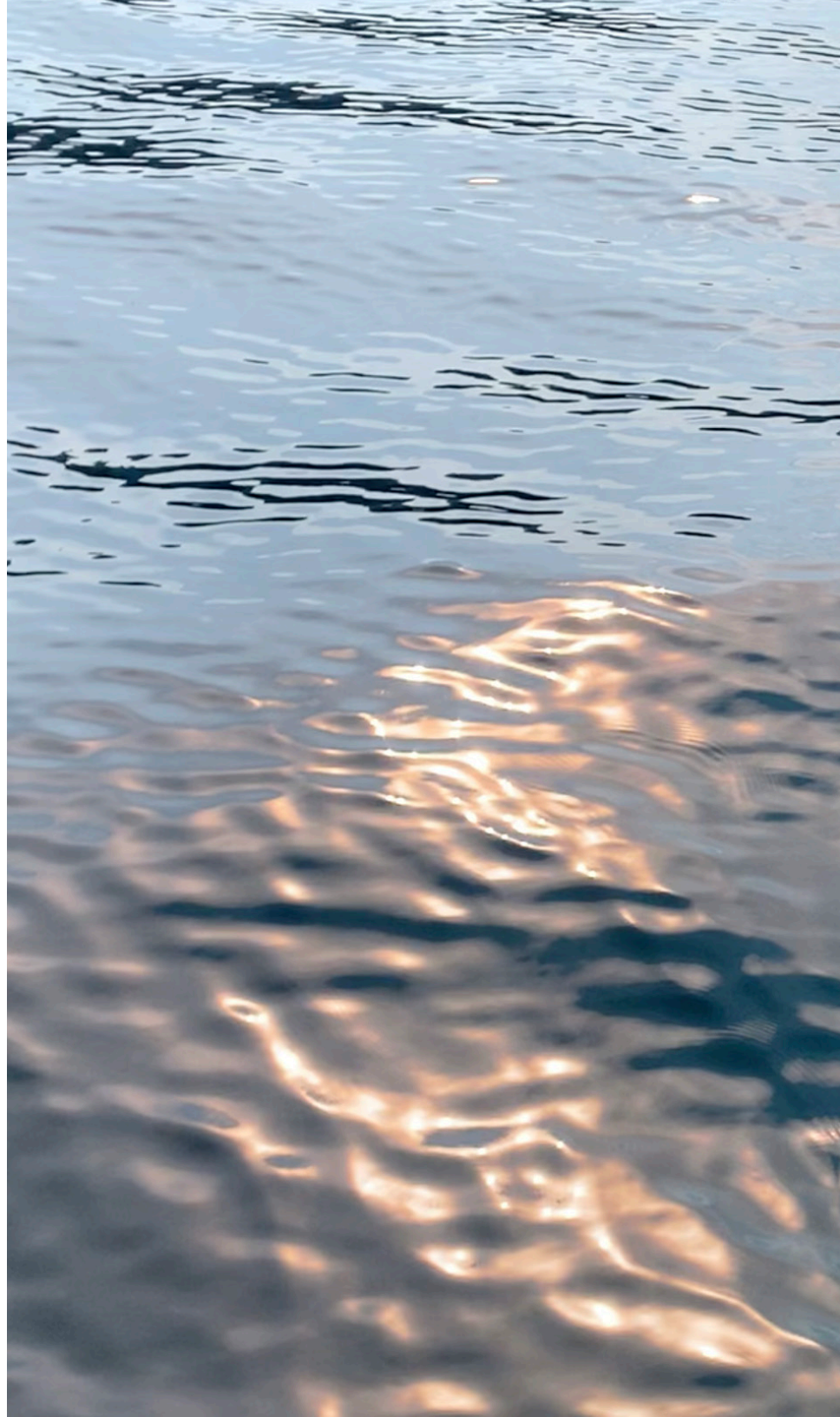
Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*

“Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence.... When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present.”

José Esteban Muñoz

“Whether we remember a particular event at all and how accurate our memories of it are, largely depends on how personally meaningful it was and how emotional we felt about it at the time.”

Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*



Abstract

During the last two years, I have been examining the importance of vulnerability, memory and empowerment within my work as it relates to archival silence. The archive is presumed to be an objective record but what is chosen and discarded is an inherently political act. When there is archival silence, what then becomes missing from our collective histories? My exploration has spread across many forms of media, including sound, video, textiles, sculpture and writing . I have sought to understand the ways that these different mediums embody sentiment and concept, while establishing an open-ended record within which others can explore their own personal context.

Archival silence is often perpetuated by discrimination and untold traumatic narratives. What then happens when we create records of these excluded or unspoken narratives, when we express vulnerability? Might we reach a point of collective empowerment?

Through this work, I have found that negotiating between different mediums has allowed me to create a context for myself and explore deeply personal subjects, while simultaneously creating work and records that will resonate with those who pay close enough attention. I have done this by using video and sound recordings of places that are the architectures of my memory, building an installation that replicates a location very formative to me and my memory, and – perhaps most importantly – writing that presents my memory fragments as they are retrieved. These architectures are intentionally abstracted through a spectrum of mediums, creating a container into which the audience is enabled to project their own memories and identities. My personal record reaches towards justice by presenting vulnerable stories with which others may be able to identify. If this work does anything, I hope that it prompts my viewers to reflect on their own experiences, and to orient themselves to a future in which they don't feel as though sharing a difficult experience is impossible. Through that process, I believe that we can move our record keeping towards justice.



Dear Reader,

Welcome. It's good to have you. I invite you to stay for a while. How does this letter find you right now? I wonder where I am while you are reading this. It's comforting to me to know that for just a moment we are sharing some distant space with the other.

I'd like to share a few things with you. What follows is a collection of my incomplete memories. Memory recollection is inherently fallible, thus you'll find a distinct sense of fragmentation and incompleteness.

Sometimes these stories are too difficult to tell, and thus it becomes easier to abstract these experiences through language. This is what I have attempted to do. While removing it from myself I reinforce my personal boundaries while inviting you in to the memories. This is an open invitation for you to read these experiences and feel apart of them. We're both apart of this. Perhaps it will trigger your own memory, or you're content to come along for the ride. Whatever you feel most comfortable with, I invite you to do. What I would like for you to know is that if you need this, then it is for you dear reader.

I.

Ever so slightly, the boat lists to the port side with the collective weight of your 3rd grade class. You're peering over the edge of this research boat that feels much larger than it actually is. The researcher/guide to your field trip has taken you to the deepest portion of the Lake. Below you is a water depth of over 1600 meters. Below you, you're watching a new and shiny nickel slowly shimmer further and further into the depths before disappearing entirely. Just moments before that nickel was poised on the fingertip precipice of your guide's thumb. She had instructed you and your entire class to count in Mississippi's how long you could count until you couldn't see it anymore. How many digits divided you and the distance below. Then with a deft flick, the nickel arched up high before gently splashing into the water. With the prompt to count Mississippi's, you and all of your classmates had a new competitive game to launch into. Whoever could see the coin for the longest. You remember the relative quiet of your group as all of you fixed your gazes on the slowly shimmering away coin. You stared at the coin with an unblinking gaze. You wanted to be the one who had seen the coin the longest. Without looking at anything else, you stared at the silver metal so hard. You convinced yourself that you saw it the furthest down. You proudly proclaimed that you had seen it at it's deepest. But was that really true?

II.

The house thundered and shook. Glass shattered against the wall, followed by percussive slam of a fist breaking through the drywall. We were well practiced in moments like this. My sister and I gathered ourselves and waited for the slam of a door below us before we snuck out. Stepping over the shattered glass, we closed the door as quietly as possible. We learned silence and stealth. We disappeared into the folds of the forest. Spring snowmelt had created a small creek where we would congregate. Time passed differently in the woods. In the woods, silence unraveled as velvet. Not an anticipatory middle ground. Not of fleeting clemency. There was a particular predictability within our woods. Certainly it was dangerous to have children freely roaming a vast forest without parental supervision. We were familiar with the woods. Within this expansive space, we knew how to adapt. Here, predictability was something that was accessible. When all of the forest chatter fell away, when all of the birds and squirrels and other small animals ceased to make noise, we knew to be cautious. We knew that silence and stillness in the woods often precluded a predator. In those moments, we knew how to deal with a predator. Largely though, the expanse of the space was our own. Only when it became too cold did we return back to our home, our absence unnoticed.

III.

Fear keeps a palpable odor surrounding you, though no one has noticed save for the dogs and the cat, who can smell the fear rolling off of you in thick rivulets. Silence. All that is palpable is the growth of quiet and the scent of fear. From the outburst the only thing left is the fist-sized punctured drywall, it's corresponding dust, and the weighted reprieve of silence. There is nothing left of the yelling, the clenched jaw and closed fists. Nothing of the empty accusations.

IV.

Noises abound in the house. Wooden and heavy. The sounds inside of this house mostly consist of loud yells and screams, crumbling drywall as a fist collides into it, glass shattering, dishes colliding roughly against the countertops, and blasting surround sound music on occasion. All of this is often followed by deep, paradoxical silence. But more often than not it's broken up by the distant sound of the television. When the noise happens, you have learned to stay far, far away from the source. Better to leave it untouched. Better to escape the fire. Today though a sharp scream cuts through the noise/silence like a diamond cutting through glass. It was a sound that felt like it was ripping through the skin on your back. Your sister tears up the staircase to where you both share a bedroom. You're already outside of your room, watching her ascent from the top of the staircase. Her face is a pool of tears and she's clutching onto her bright red hand. When she sees you, she clings onto you as though you actually were twins and you were becoming one again. You fall into the bathroom doorway, trying to unreel yourself from your sister as you search for that first aid kit. On the bottom of the steps you can hear your father's heavy footfalls. At the sound of the ascent, you pivot and scream as loud as you can. The sheer volume of your voice stuns him. Who knew that something so loud could come out of a body so small. Under that gaze you feel a great sinkhole of danger opening up before you. You aren't pulled into the chasm before you. Instead your father retreats back down the stairs, muttering under his breath. Then the chamber of silence re-appears. Your sister is still crying, taking huge hiccuping breaths. You look at her hand that is so red and so hurt that it is glowing. Amongst the red is a deep blue that's blooming under her skin. You're ten and you're not sure how to tell if someone has a broken hand. Instead you do everything that you've seen on TV. You find an ace bandage that's been buried in the bathroom closet. Gingerly you take your sister's hand in your own and gently prod around, asking her if it hurts and how much it hurts. She nods. Of course it all hurts. She has calmed enough though to speak. How her hand was caught in between the threshold of the door as your father slammed it closed. The threshold closed on her hand. Each word is almost syncopated to a hiccuping sob. Carefully you take her hand and wrap the bandage around it again and again. You're ten and you know that this isn't going to be the worst thing to happen.

V.

Affection has tumbled off of you ever since you were young. You find yourself abstractly attempting to define a perfect moment to the first girl you ever kissed. Reaching into the din of sensations you have no language for. Yet. You're trying to explain how great it feels to kiss a girl. Not a boy who has given you attention. Cliches are contextualized when you're experiencing something for the first time. Your mouth tastes of her Burts Bee's chapstick. Both of your lips are pleasantly cool and warm simultaneously. All of the light is soft. Outside the clouds have blanketed heavily over the city. Inside the lights are warm and orange. The glow matches her bedspread that you're both currently laying on. Language often doesn't suffice first times. What you do know is how great it feels to lay on the same bed as a girl you have a crush on. How great it feels when she looks at your lips and then quickly away. How great it feels when she reaches across the short distance separating you both to touch your hand. To look at the contours and crevices. How great it feels to be pulled against her. A looping Beach House song seems to be ever-present on her small dorm room speaker. She smells of Vera Wang's Princess and Gain laundry detergent. You try again to describe what a perfect moment is. Each time you try to describe the moment separate from what's currently happening. Really the only reason you know what a perfect moment is, is because she introduced the idea to you.

Inside your pocket her hand is clay against your own. On the street people still shout at you two for holding hands. Somehow this small concealment feels like protection. On the street in 2015 it still doesn't feel safe to walk hand-in-hand with your girlfriend.

Amongst the thrum of students pouring out of the university buildings, you see her face in the crowd. Even though you had walked to meet her after her class, you're still surprised to find her amongst everyone. A bloom of excitement opens in your chest as you weave your way together. Her arms wrap around your shoulders and you brush against a tiny perfect moment. As you walk back up the street to your dorm building, she tells you that she loves when your face finds hers in a crowd. The way that you light up when you see her. The way that it makes her feel distinct and special.

The first night you went to her dorm, you did nothing except for sit in her bed, side by side, and hold hands. It felt like everything. It's still difficult for you to remember the plot of the movie *Her*, because all you can remember was the distinct feeling of intimate exhilaration and faint embarrassment.

From your seat in Film History II, you can feel her gaze drifting to the profile of your face. You politely ignore the staring, while internally frantic, wondering if you have something on your face. Throughout the class you can feel her gaze returning to you and occasionally to your own gaze. You recognize this girl. Not only because she's in your very limited major, but because you happen to live in the same apartment building, on the same floor.

As you wait in the elevator bank for the lift, out of your peripherals you can see someone approaching you. Taking out your headphones, you turn to this person approaching you. "Hey," she says, smiling, "You're in my film history class." Her voice is sweet. Friendly. Each end of sentence is a warm invitation to keep talking. You nod and the elevator comes. In the silent ride down, you can feel her looking at you. Together you walk the same path to class. You keep thinking about how it felt to have her look at you.

She taught you how to drive a stick shift in the church parking lot by your mother's house. Parked on a slight incline, you struggled to find the proper gear. It's the sounds of the car starting and stopping. It's the bubbling of tension as she worries you'll ruin the stick shift in her car by all of your miss-starts. You inevitably defensive at the tension and your own confusion.

When you're both driving back up to college, traversing states through the snow, you wish that you had tried a little harder to learn the stick shift in her car. She drives from central California to Portland, Oregon. A 14 hour trip in the snow with a two-wheel drive, manual car. Your job is to select songs to listen to, to read to her in the quiet moments in which you lose reception, and to hold steady through the treacherous journey interstate in the middle of a snowstorm. Together you have traversed over a thousand miles. You feel comfort in the car. A certain familiarity that has remained even years after the end of your relationship. She remembers the way that the red lights looked on your face, the way that the rain on the windshield reflected onto you. In the car you could talk about anything and nothing. In a parked car you had your most formidable arguments and make-ups. You had the most significant conversations in this small enclosed space. To this day, you still haven't been able to ride in cars with anyone like you were able to with her.

In the high desert the clouds expand into huge, bulbous figures in the sky. They mean it when they say the west has big skies. From her bedroom you watch the sunset over the graveyard she lives across the street from. She makes you tea and brings it to you as you watch the sky change colors. The clouds build higher and higher into the sky.

When you were younger, you used to imagine sleeping in the clouds. How comfortable they would be. The softest material in the world. You realize as you watch the sun disappear behind the mountains that this is the most comfortable place. Sitting with her in her bedroom. A Herb Alpert song loops in your head as you hope this moment doesn't end.

VI.

Before you lies a vast expanse of crashing blue, white and gray. You are accustomed to seeing land at the horizon. Mountains rising up in the distance where the water was intercepted from meeting the sky. Here the water and the sky were seemed to be variations of one. Or perhaps two entities which created the affect of one sublime unit. It smells of salt and green. All forward motion, you tear away from your family and sprint directly into the water. It's so warm, shockingly warm. It's not unlike your bath water. You are accustomed to snowmelt. To frigid waters. It's you and seemingly infinite warmth and gentle waters. From the shore your family is calling you back. Your cousins waving at you with irritation as you've disrupted the sandcastle construction plan. It's when you are trying to swim back that you notice the pull. An invisible force is pulling you further and further away from your family. Pulling and pulling but still gentle. So gentle in fact that it takes your family several more moments before they realize. Your small arms are not accustomed to swimming so hard for so long for no progress to be made. For just the briefest moment, you pause but your head is pulled under the water. Surfacing, you begin to panic. A roaring begins to build in your ears and it seems to come from everywhere at once. So much so that you don't notice your father, who has ripped into the water and is swimming towards you with broad breath strokes. Again you feel the pulling and the water comes past your ears. You jut your chin to the sky and suck in air. Underneath the water you see absolution and oblivion. Your body is pulled back to the surface. A different pulling. Your father has you in his arms and is fighting against the rip tide to get back to the beach. You are slack and let yourself be fought back to safety. Breaking through the rip is breaking through an invisible wall. Once free though, you are reacquainted with that first gentleness. That first warm envelopment of the ocean. Your father drags you to the shore and loudly begins lecturing you on the dangers of the ocean, of rip tides. You watch him yell at you with a distant look, still thinking about the weightlessness and then persistent pull. Why hadn't you been warned about this dangerous, invisible force before? Why hadn't your parents prepared you for this unknown danger?

VII.

A swell of crashing and flashes echoed across the vast expanse of water and echoed against the mountain faces. Five different fireworks shows presenting their grandest finale. Each rivaling the other from across their position on the lake. Water is as black as the night sky. When the fireworks explode the water reflects back like inky glass. From where you sit on the dock, you hear the spectators behind you all exclaim and proclaim which show is the best. Knowing what is to come after the show ends, you turn your focus instead to the tempo of the fireworks. How quickly they all shoot off, BANGbangbangBANG-banG! It's as if you hear them releasing from their casings, as if you were right there on the barges beside them. Then a gradual decrescendo, the last delayed fireworks shooting off like runaways. Silence settles on the lake, and that begins the anticipation.

You see the lights approach in the distance. Starting small and then becoming bigger and bigger as the boats all approach the dock at once. You wait, hoping that none of the boats crash into each other in the darkness. Hope that they safely make it to the dock. Two of your co-workers land the boats while you leap onto them. You take the boats back into the darkness of the buoy field. You know the organization of the field by memory. Knowing which boat goes where even in near-complete darkness. Navigating the 35 foot boat, you run to the bow and hang off the side, hooking the buoy line in the darkness, first try. The satisfying click of the clip as it fastens to the buoy eyelet. A thrum of a small motor as your other co-worker comes to pick you up off of your boat so that you can leap onto another and repeat the process.

Across the water, you see the clouds come over the mountain. Dark and looming you know that a thunderstorm is imminent. In the far distance, the other side of the lake quickly becomes consumed by the slate gray clouds. Occasionally there is a stab of illumination as lightning strikes in the distance. You count in 1000s, figuring out how far the lightning is from you. All of the boats start to come back at once. You see them from their respective points on the lake, swarming back like frantic flies. On the dock you begin to cover everything up, to prepare for the onslaught of boats coming back and the impending weather. A wind line begins to approach just as all 40 plus boats reach the end of the buoy field. All of the owners are frantic, terrified of the weather and desperate to get off the boats. In a flurry you ride on the buoy boat, leaping onto the larger boats to help the boat owners safely get to the dock. You and your co-workers shout at each other, communicating who needs to go where just as the lightning is in the distance. Somehow you put all 40 boats away just as the storm hits the north

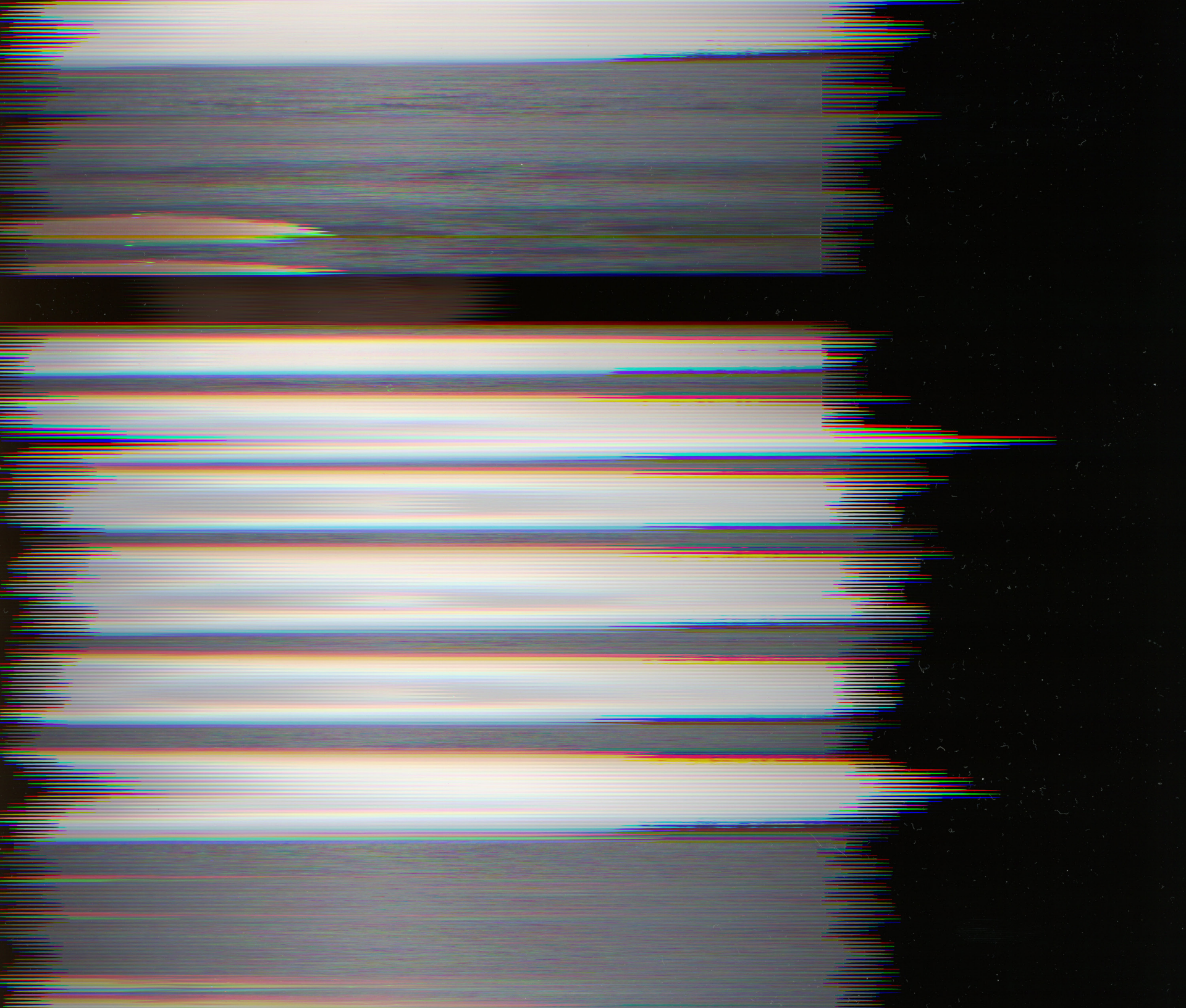
shore. Everyone is forced to evacuate the dock. The lightning is so close everyone is worried that it will strike the steel facade and ignite the gas pumps. Everyone clusters in the safety of the office, watching the storm hammer everything outside. This show is bigger than the fireworks.

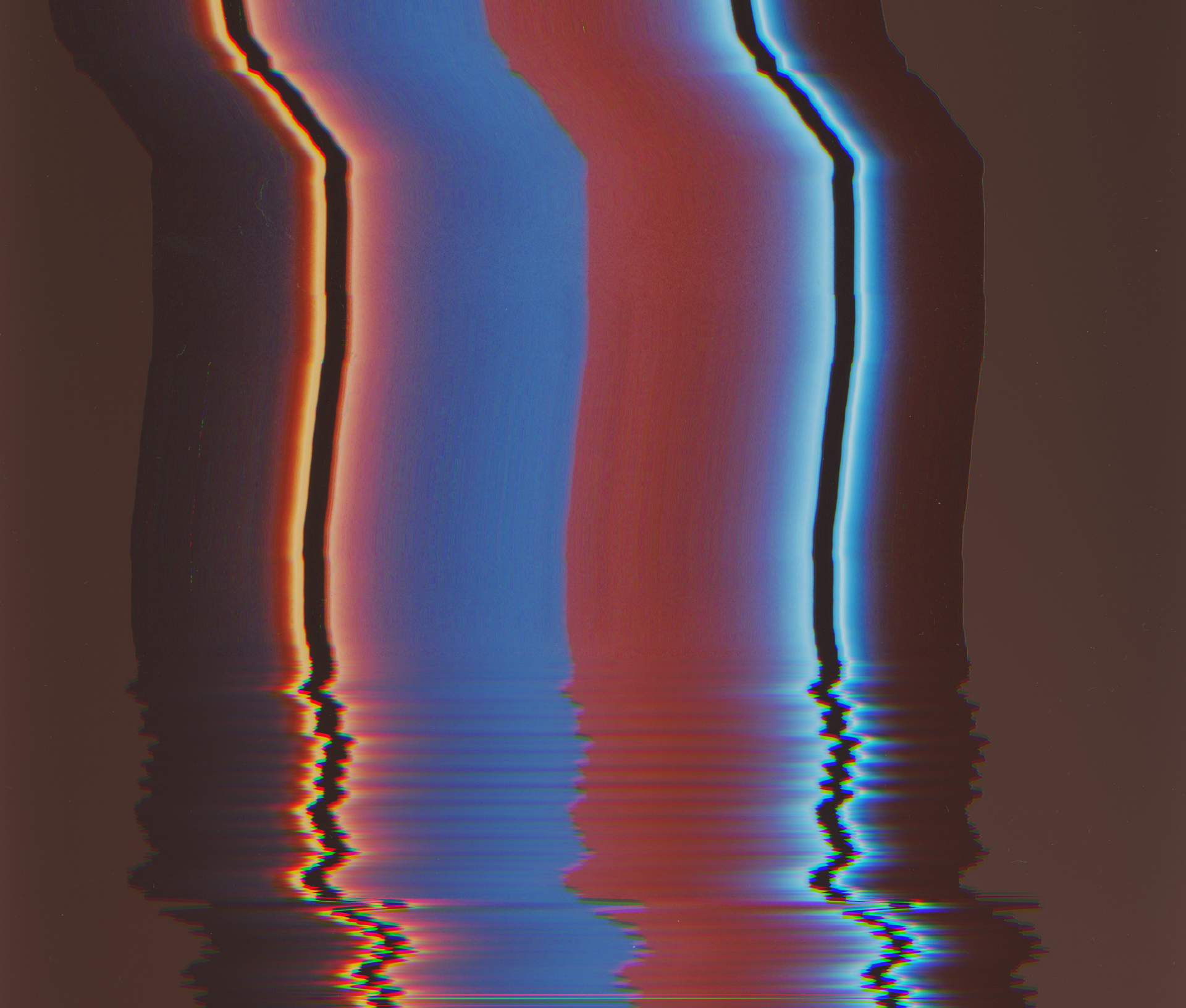
Dear Reader,

It was the quality of the sunlight that I remember first. Of light coming through the tops of the pine trees and bathing our living room in warmth. Gauzy and consuming. Stillness. Quiet.

Dearest reader, what was your first memory? What of it has stayed with you, imprinted on you?



















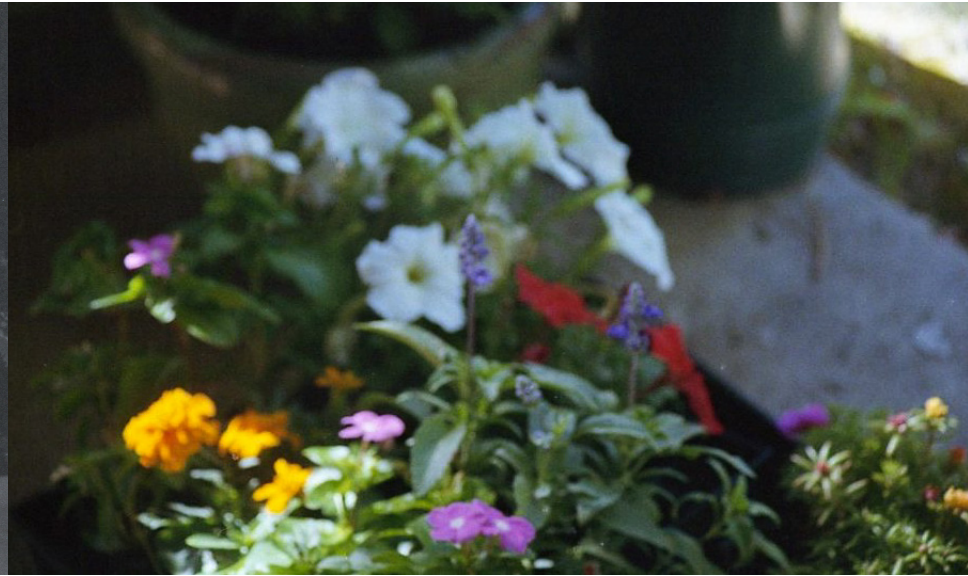


































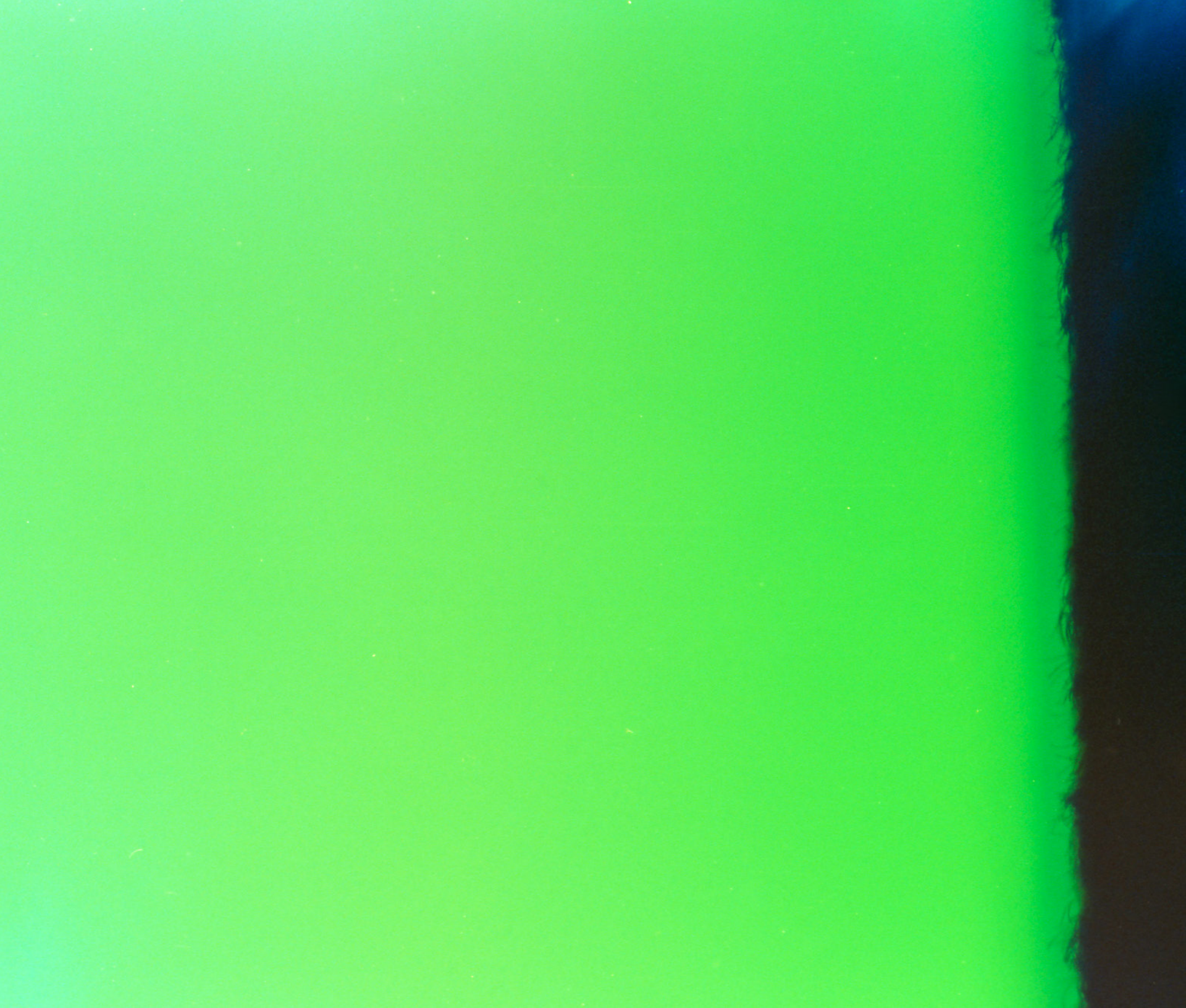


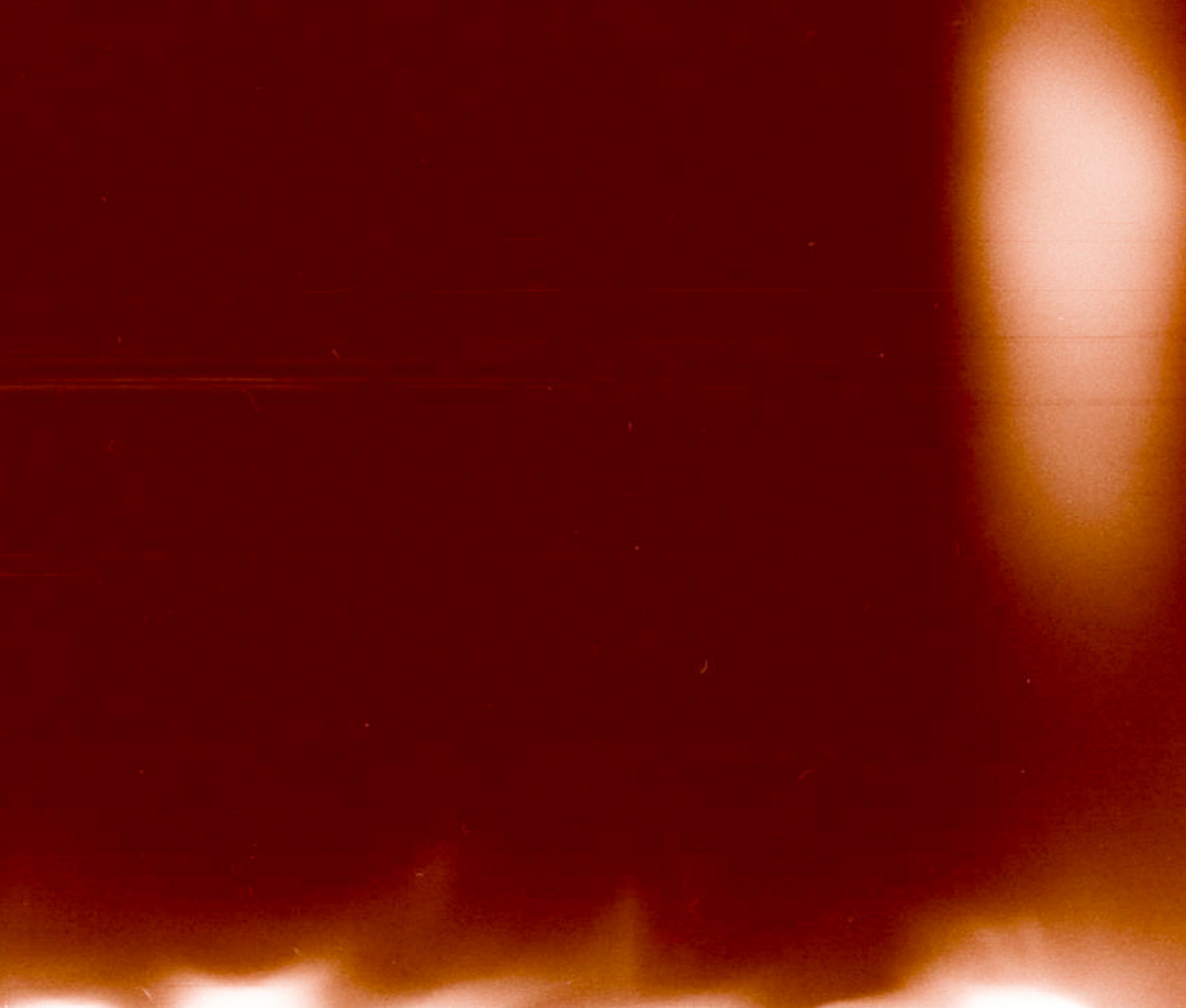






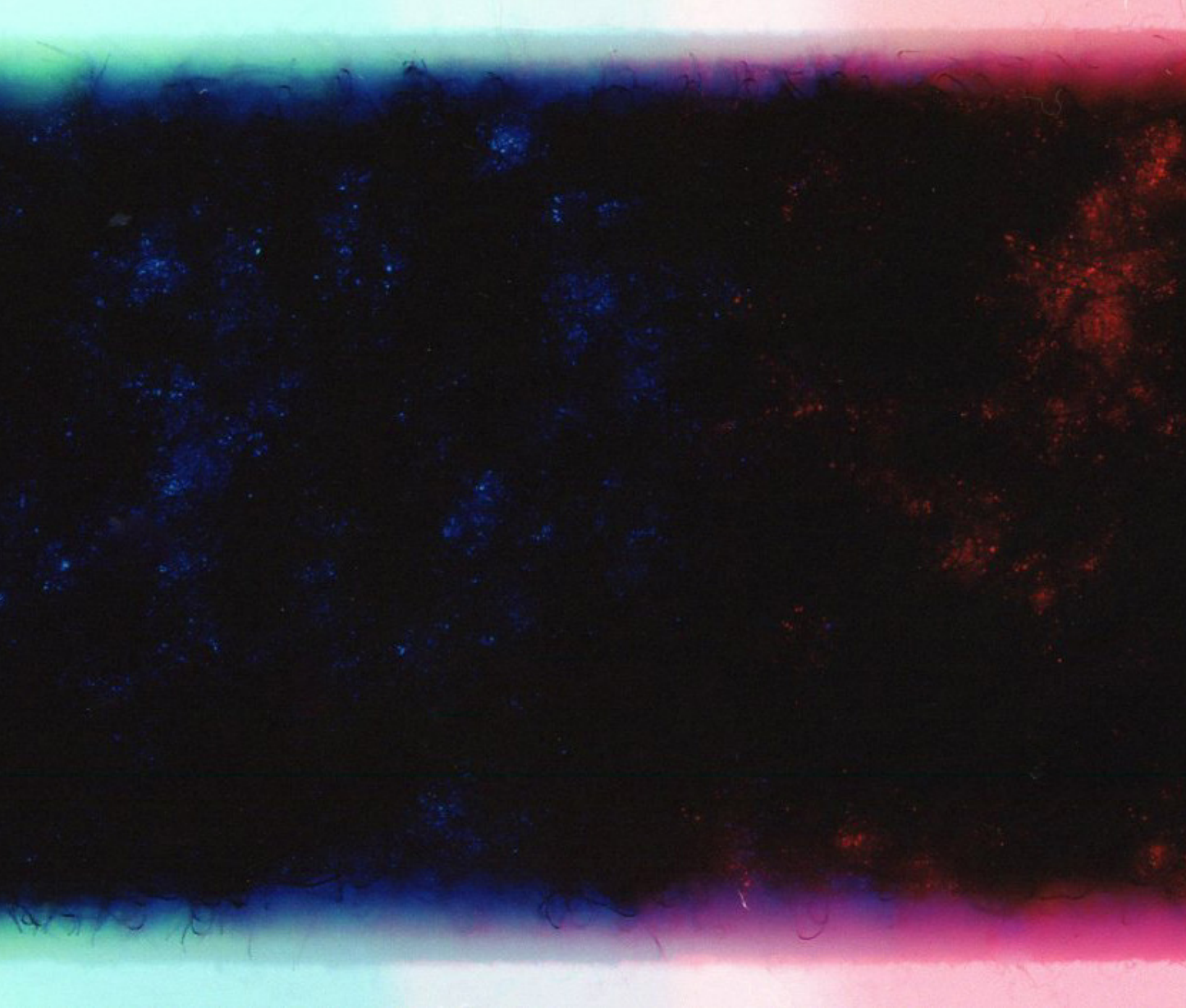


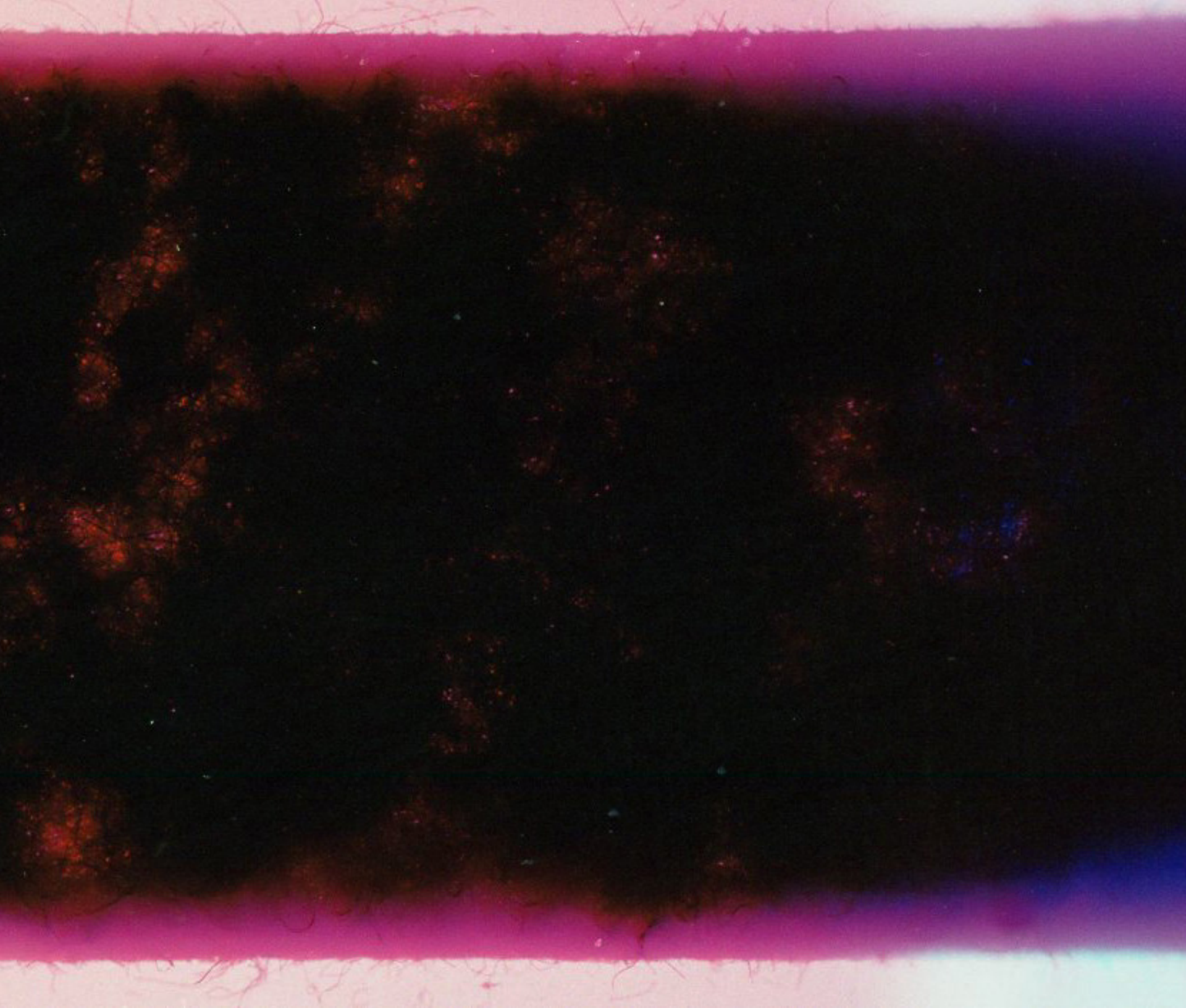


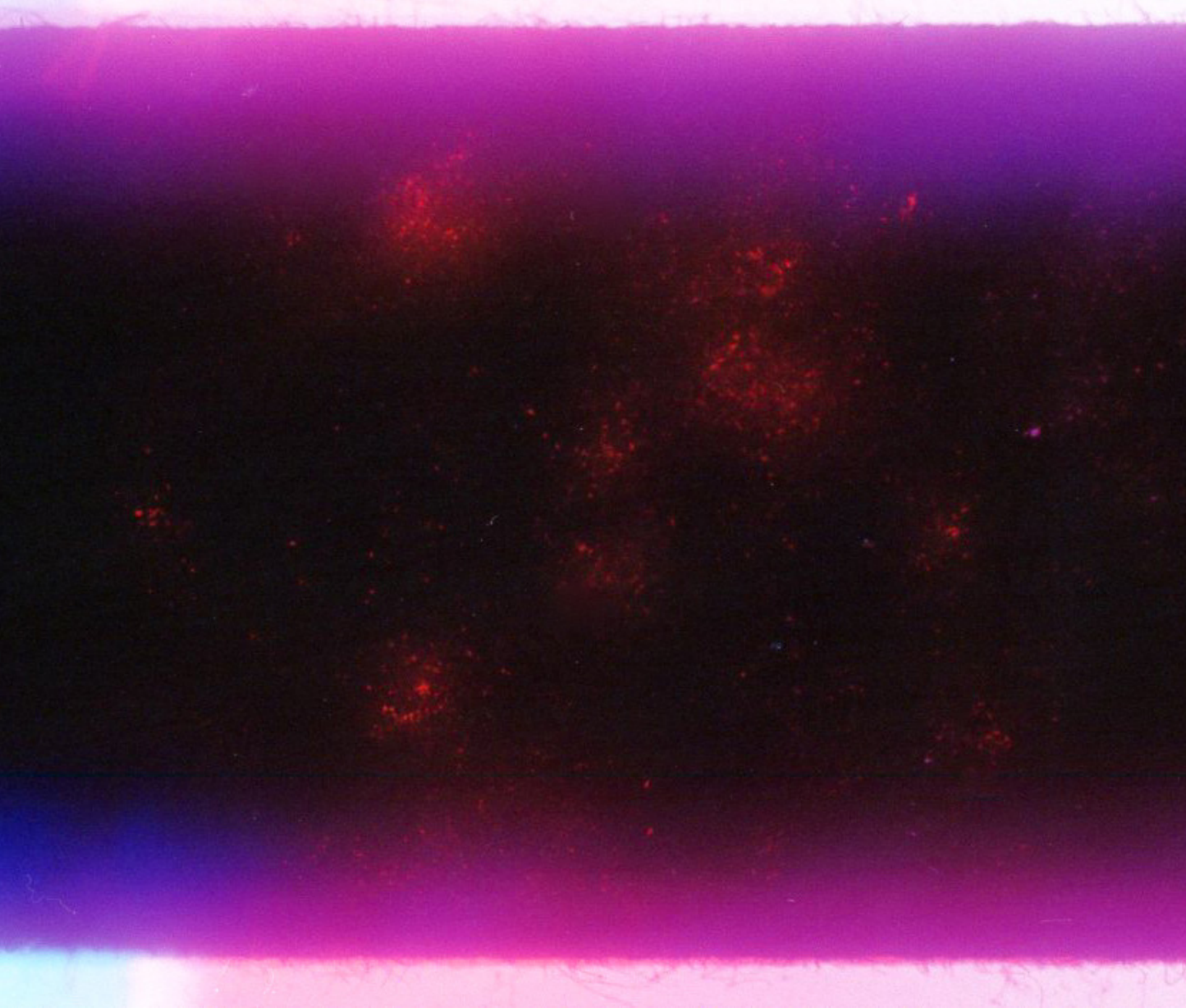


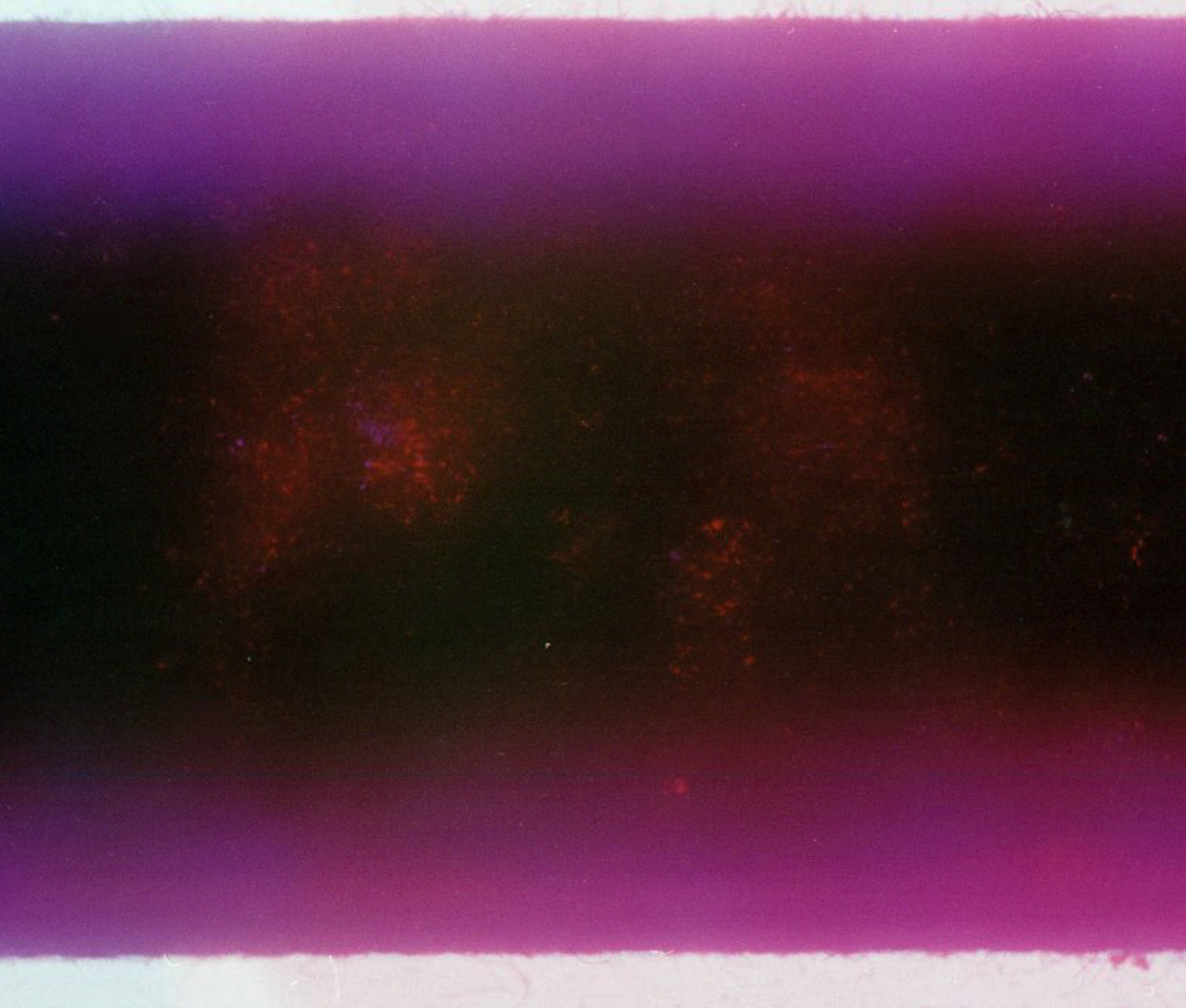




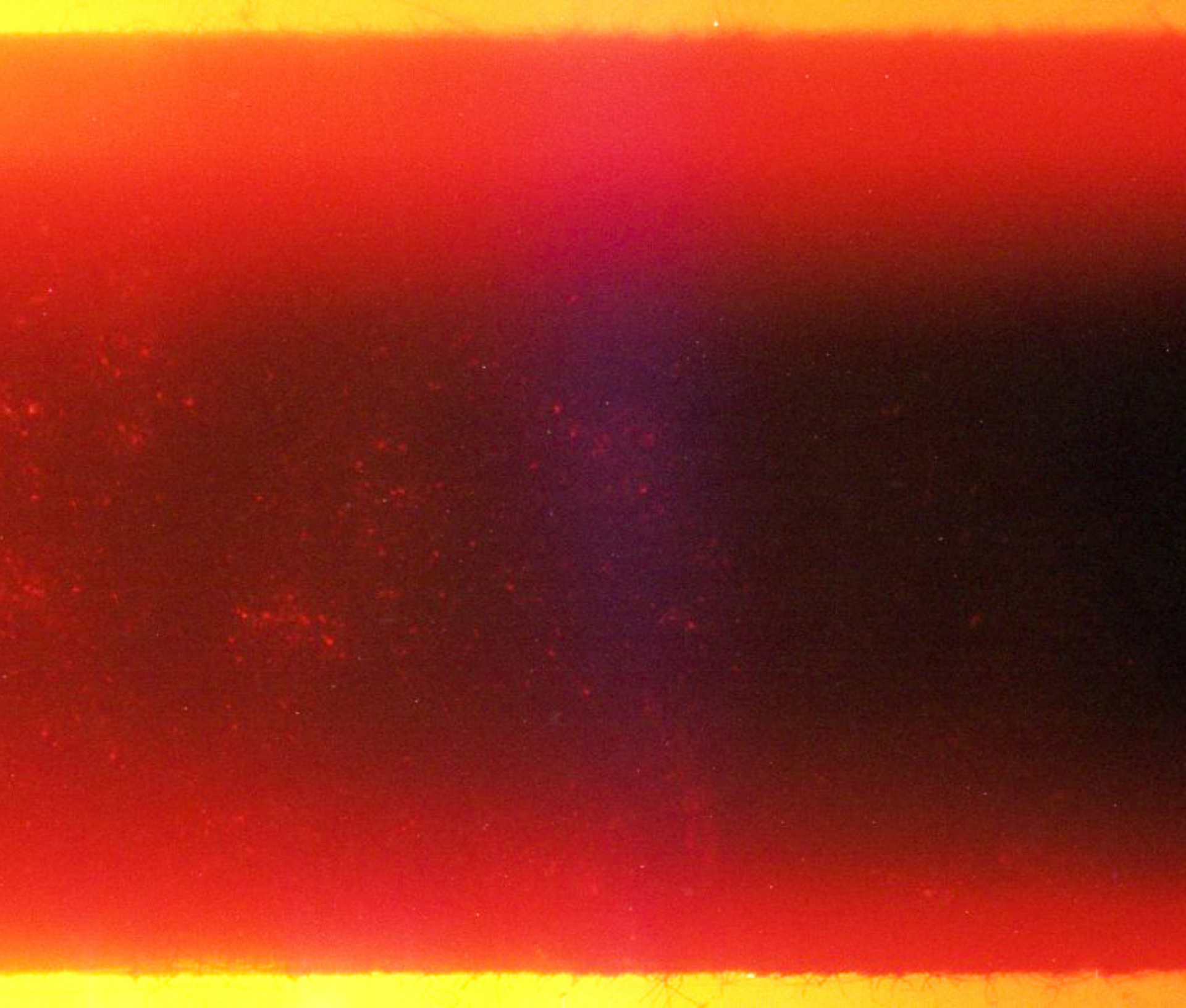


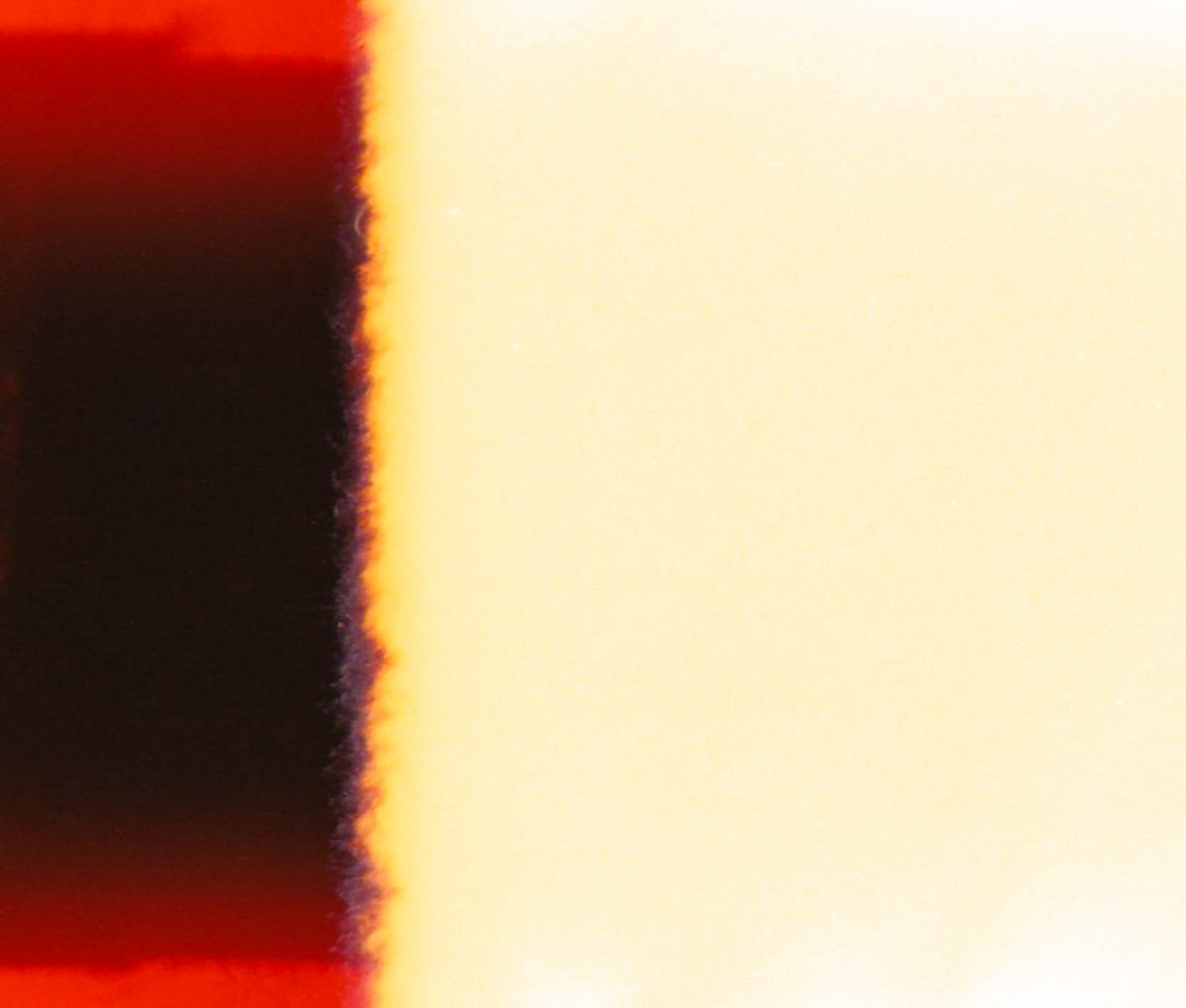




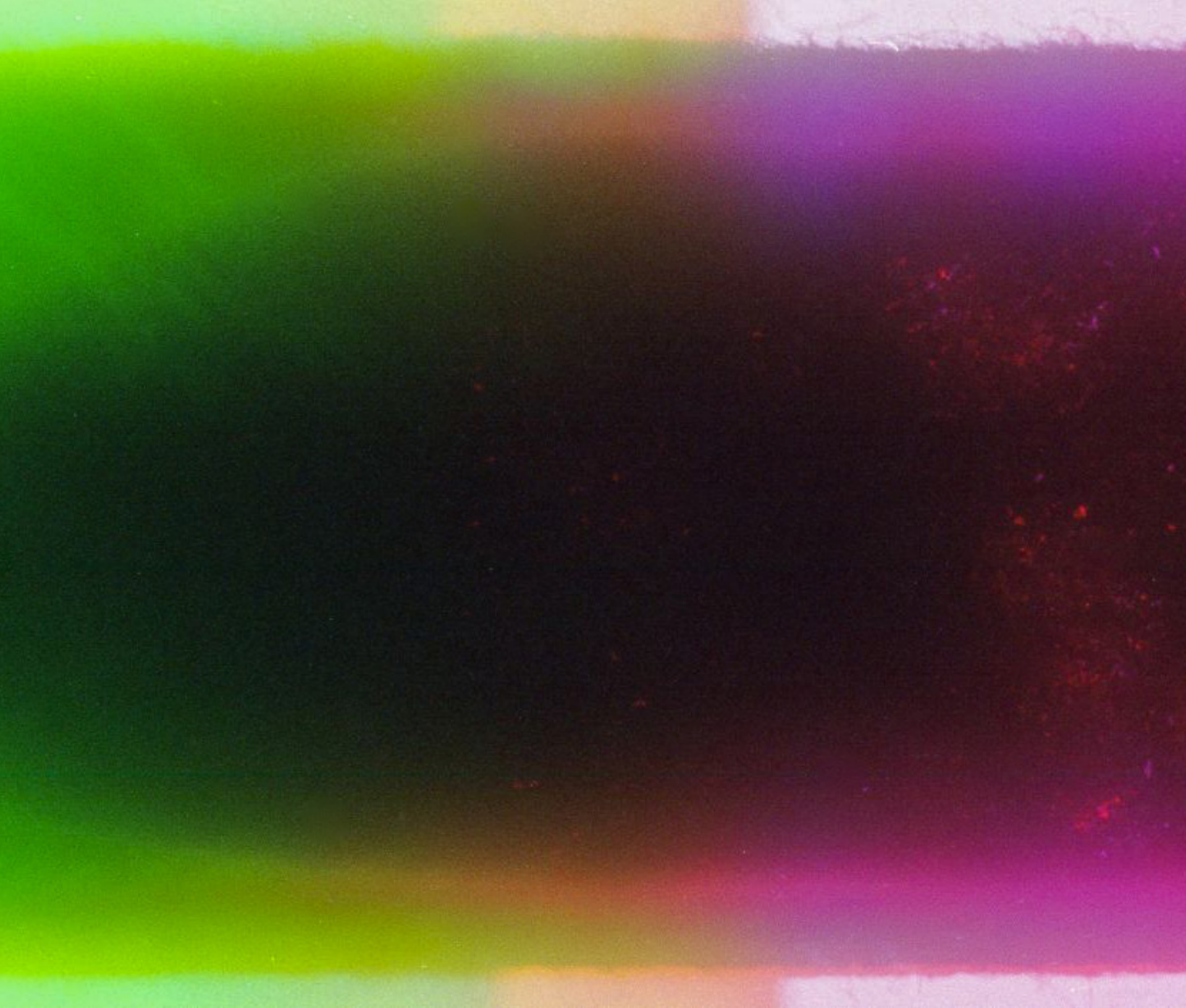


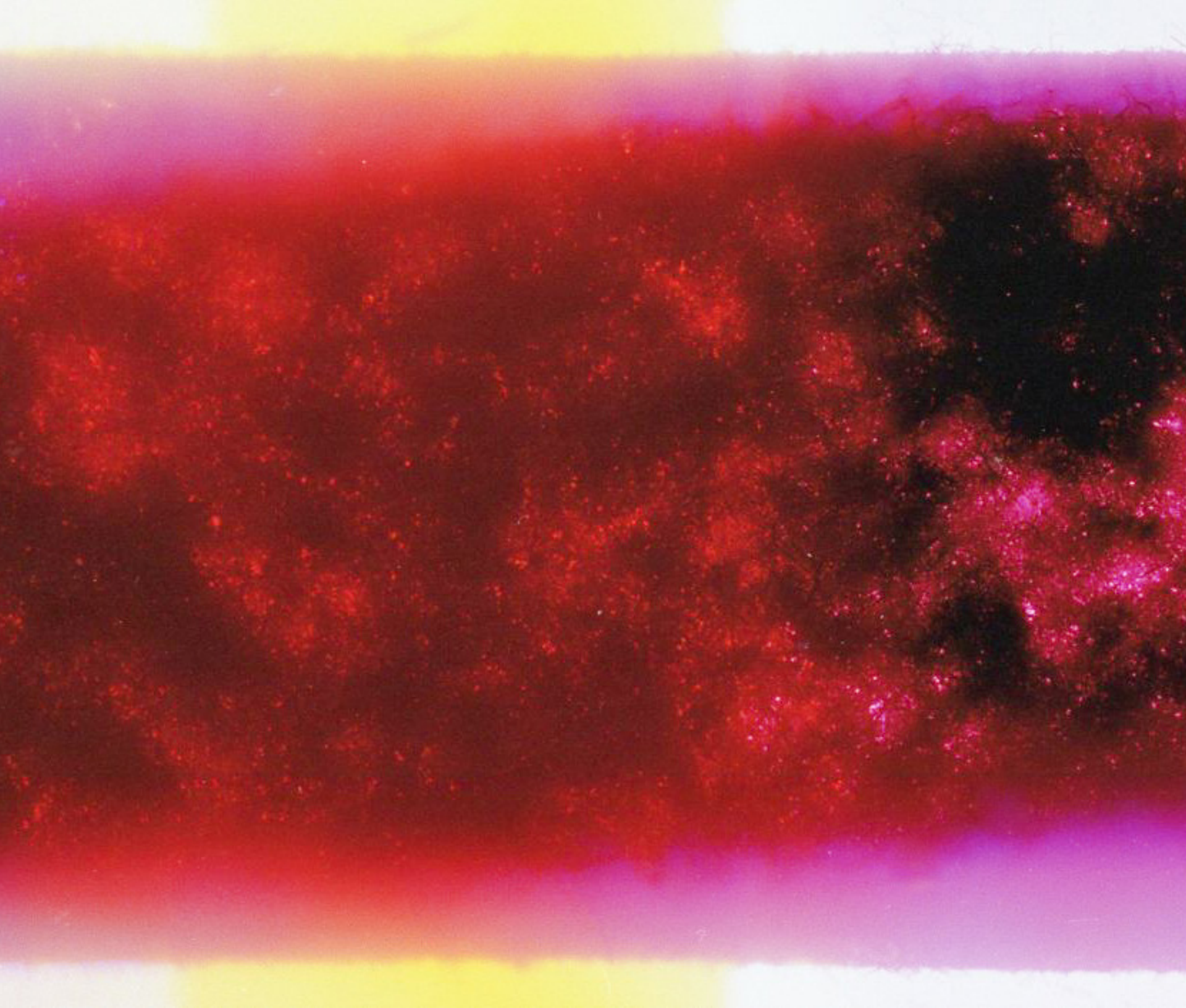












ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to my teachers and professors throughout the years. This book is dedicated to all of you. Specifically thank you to Geoff and Sarah Quine, Dan Hurley, Courtney Hermann, Dave Coleangelo, Nora Khan, Stephen Cooke, Leah Beeferman, and Shona Kitchen. Without all of your support, humor, care and knowledge I never would have made it to this point.

To my family. My sister, my Mom and my Aunt. You all collectively keep me humble, grounded, and keep pushing me forward.

To the D+M class of 2021, thank you for holding steady in a terribly difficult time. For preparing us for what is to come and for your incredible talent and knowledge.

To the D+M class of 2022, I have been so lucky and so proud to be constantly surrounded by your genius. We came into school at such a difficult time in history and we held each other up with grace, care, and kindness. You all have not only taught me to be a better artist but a better person.

To the D+M class of 2023, I am so grateful for all of your talent, humor, and willingness to share your intelligence. Especially to those who have hugged me while I am breaking down and who have helped me with all of my projects. You are all beyond what I ever could have hoped for in a cohort. You've challenged me to be a better artist in the most graceful and exciting way. I consider many of you good friends and I will forever be grateful for that. I can't wait to see what you will all do next.

To Margaret, you are one of my best friends. I can't properly explain to you how you came to me in a time I needed it most, and how sweet, smart, and hilarious you are. I hope we get to see each other grow old as friends.

And to Adele Ah Chan.... You were always the sweetest, most caring, most intelligent and strong person I've met. I wish that you could have been here for this, but I did it for you Bah. Rest in Peace.

“I LOVE
EVERY-
BODY
BECAUSE
I LOVE
YOU.”

