

The online magazine for landscape photographers

on landscape

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on



Michéla Griffith

FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHER REVISITED

Michéla Griffith



Michéla Griffith

In 2012 I paused by my local river and everything changed. I've moved away from what many expect photographs to be: my images deconstruct the literal and reimagine the subjective, reflecting the curiosity that water has inspired in my practice. Water has been my conduit: it has sharpened my vision, given me permission to experiment and continues to introduce me to new ways of seeing.

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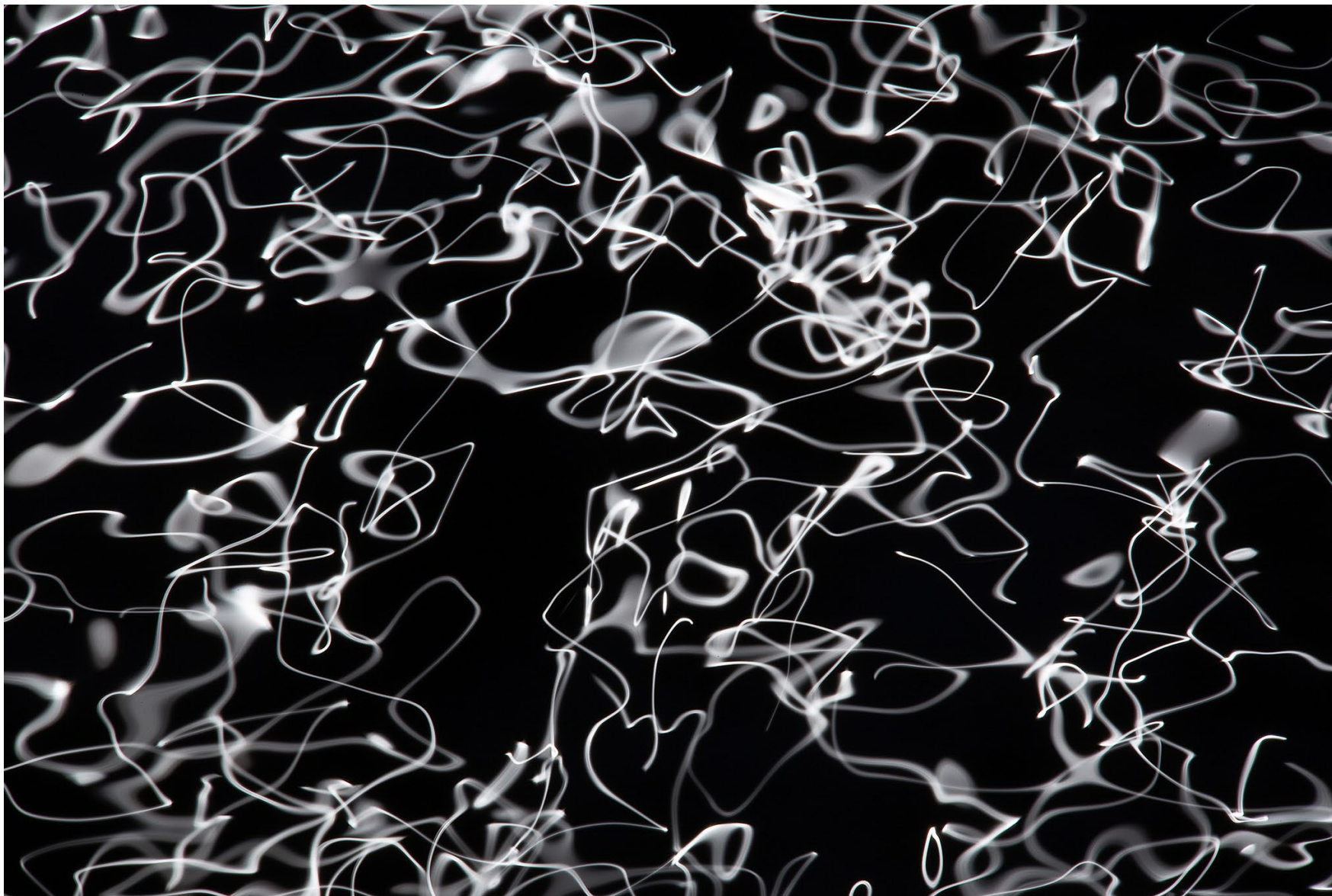
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This has been something I've been meaning to write for a while, but usually I'm busy with other things, like interviews (sometimes it feels a bit like playing keepy uppy). Now seems like the right time to take stock both before it is too late, and because it may just help inform where I go next. In late October 2021 we moved home after 14 years, returning to Scotland. As we all know, the ball never really stops rolling and it's easy to just keep on 'doing'. I know previously that hitting pause and reflecting on where I am, photographically speaking, has helped me immeasurably.

I was asked at the last On Landscape conference when my interview with myself might appear. And while Tim has previously been interviewed by, er, Tim it did give me an idea - to write a piece about 'Revisited' as a theme, a way of working. And yes, an update along the way.

I can't believe it's been 4 years since I wrote my last article 'Successful Definitions'. I never expected it to prompt the reaction that it did, but I was very happy that so many people found that it resonated. In writing this I thought that I'd better re-read it.

Otherwise, it's a bit like all the strategies that are commissioned and written, filed on a bookshelf, and then rewritten again. I'm never sure that we're very good at strategy in the UK. Slightly depressingly, much of what I wrote remains true for me and I haven't made the inroads that I'd hoped for at the time. Including writing more! There's no point beating myself up about it; quite a bit has happened to deflect my attention and energies. We are where we are. It's a reminder that progress isn't linear. "A line is a dot that went for a walk," Paul Klee. I'm walking, slowly.



Patterns of Flow, from the series 'A Memory of Water'
A reminder that progress isn't linear.

At the time Tim interviewed me for the **Featured Photographer** series way (way) back in 2011 we had been living in the Peak District for 4 years and this had allowed me to build on my preference for exploring and going out on foot with my camera. Initially, I got a little sidetracked by the broad views and spent a couple

of years working with a Hasselblad Xpan. I remember being a little disappointed that Tim didn't choose any of my panoramics. I'd also bought a Mamiya 7II as I loved working with film. Now I hardly recognise myself in the images that are featured. They're not as good as I hoped they were at the time, but I now see them very

differently.

Little did I know it but things would change massively for me the following year, in 2012. My preference for sticking to my local patch and walking to make images was just beginning to feel like a constraint when I was told that the fatigue that had been haunting me was probably post viral fatigue. At times it was difficult to find the energy for anything but whenever I could, I forced myself to go for short walks. During these slow ambles my constraints became opportunity and opened up a new avenue to explore that I could not have previously anticipated. I've written about this for On Landscape before (**Finding the Individual** and **Take Me to the River**) so I won't duplicate it. But the river - and water specifically - gave me a focus and encouraged me to experiment. I guess looking back, it had the energy that I lacked, and I borrowed of it. Due to the inherent unpredictability of photographing moving subject matter, digital finally made sense. I valued the flexibility it gave me over shutter speed and ISO, as well as the instant feedback of the LCD screen. Suddenly, there seemed to be so many possibilities. None of this would have happened without familiarity with an area - or the fatigue - and the ability to keep going back. Time after time.

Online

Water has also shaped my view of the land



I spent nine years happily returning to the same, small, place. The constraint of this and the blinkers it forged for me gave me freedom from what others were doing, the chance to follow my curiosity, and to 'play'. I wouldn't have it any other way. 'Revisited' became my way of working. I still enjoy views of the landscape, but they aren't what I want to make. As I continued my dialogue with the river, I found that it also shaped my view of the land and the lines between the two softened. My interpretations stopped being just intimate and became increasingly abstract.

Water has been a good teacher; through it, I have learned:

- To 'see' more; everything from the smallest, most ephemeral, details to the way that different shutter speeds render the movement of the water and all that it reflects (flow and sometimes breeze introduce both possibility and uncertainty) to the spots of sunlight that dance and elongate magically with time.
- That we learn more by getting it wrong than by getting it right. So all that effort at emulation - the right spot, the right time, the right weather etc. - can actually be counterproductive. Experimentation is important, nay vital - 'what if I?' 'TO 'SEE'
- To let go (mostly) of the reins that everything needs to be sharp and in focus. I wonder how much this empathy for the soft is the product of my own myopia, my natural way of seeing.

- That I don't need to travel; there is potential in the smallest of spaces. Although mine happened to be within a National Park, my chosen spot was not conventionally pretty, and I wasn't making a representative record but interpreting things that provoked a response in me. My self-imposed constraints made me work harder and served to liberate my imagination.

- That it's important to find something that makes you curious, and see where it goes (the [Helsinki Bus Station theory](#) again). Note that I didn't say 'find something that inspires you'. I'm looking for creative growth, not high impact.

- That it is easier to create individual work by following this stumbling path than by looking at what others have done. Occasional overlaps happen coincidentally and it can be hard at times to come across parallels when you think you've embarked on something very different and personal. I've been looking through some pins I'd saved and came across a word - "Sillage". I kept it for the reference to water - the wake left after the thing that caused it has gone - but in writing this its connection with perfume gains the upper hand and 'scent trail' seems even more apt. We're all looking for something that we can find and follow.

It ticks a few other boxes for me - ephemeral, unpredictable, dynamic - and shows just how much there is that we don't ordinarily notice. It led to a handmade Japanese stab bound book and some

prints, and had some success in the Px3 Prix de la Photographie Awards 2020, but it still feels like there is unfinished business for me. Other things got in the way and I wasn't able to spend the time creating - evolving - the outputs that I'd wanted to. There's always a temptation too to keep going back, and make more images, and doubtless that got in the way too.

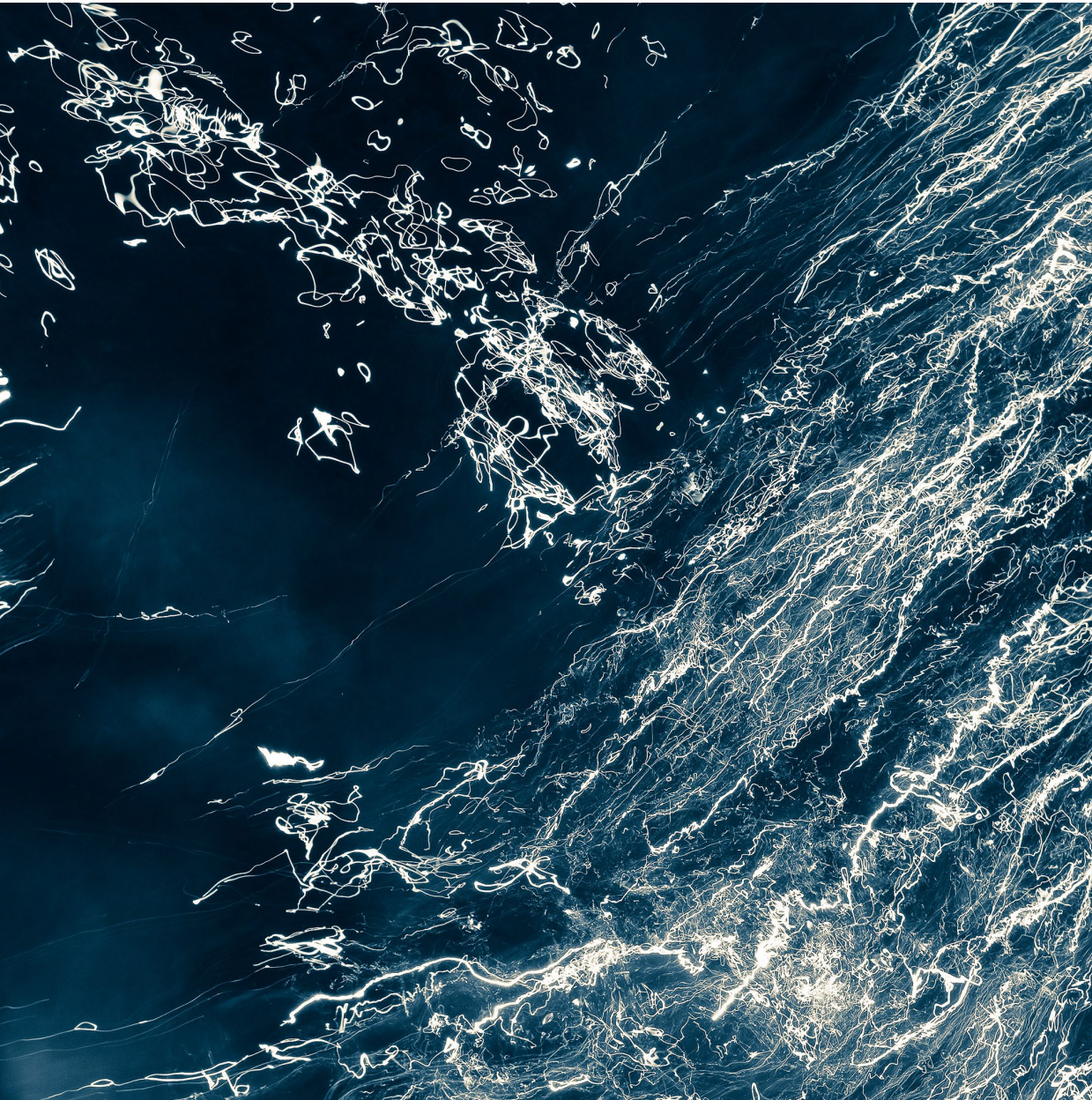
In 2020's first lockdown I guess I could have argued that taking my camera to the river could be part of my essential exercise, but I didn't. It didn't feel right. In theory, the situation should have given me the distance and time that I needed to progress the presentation, and it was my intention to chase down the idea of looking into what I could do to make these more individual. But it took a while to get to the point mentally where I felt able to be creative and the tentative start I'd made at the beginning of the year pre-pandemic ground to a halt. I also got sidetracked.

I signed up for an artist friend's online workshop on the basis that the sessions on 'texture' and 'finishing' would help me with this but my inner child got a little carried away, having not picked up a paintbrush for over 30 years. A love of drawing and painting took me to my profession (landscape architecture) but when computers took over and advancement meant less time doing the creative bits, photography became my escape. With no events to direct my output, and galleries closed, the freedom to just make in 2020 was liberating. I had no expectations of producing anything for view, or even anything much at all.



A new audience

I've already spent many happy hours on the edge of the moss. Someday I may get further! As my pools have dried out, I'm back to the trees which, in May, are finally leafing out. The softness of the water is travelling with me.



I could also go back to making books: they were a comfort zone; a natural end, EPs of images and thoughts, and I began to collect images, observations, on my daily walk with this in mind. The work that went into these and their theme was inevitably a response to our situation and the new vocabulary we learned.

In 2021 I added more to my palette of choices with courses on e-publishing and artists' sketchbooks. Nothing like approaching it from both ends!

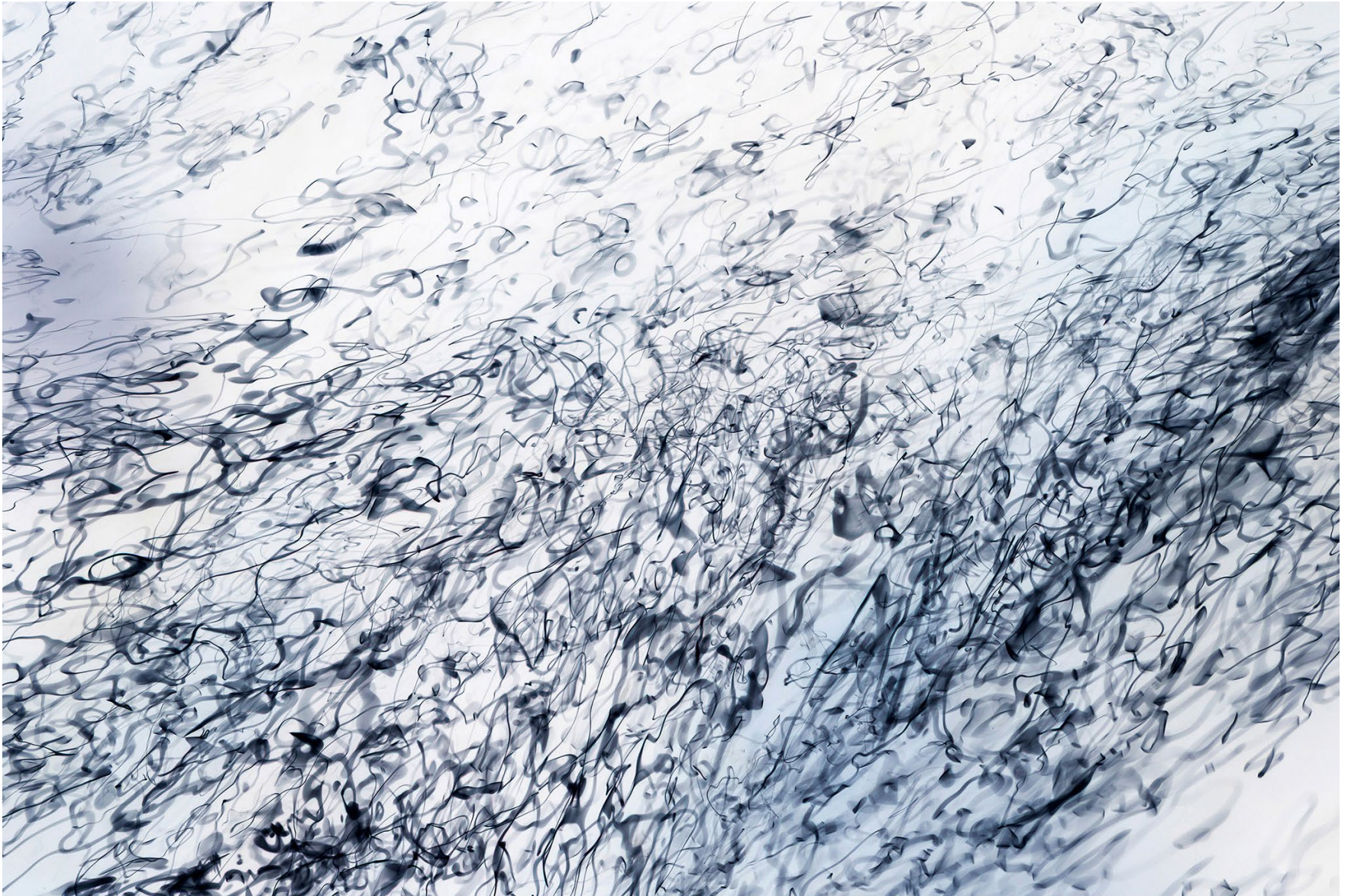
I started to tie myself in knots by reinstating expectation. Somehow I went from "this is interesting and enjoyable" to "I should be improving to the point of producing something".

When the time came around to select images for display again, I found myself not enjoying the experience. It feels a bit like trying to pick out a potential hit single when I really want to share an album. In isolation I felt that the images lacked context. I like building collections - connections - and series.

With the galleries opening up 'ought to' again raised its head. I'm not comfortable with it, and I again went on 'sabbatical' from my local artists' group before 'live' events returned (my notes from the time show I wrote that 'it might become permanent'). The simple fact is I'm happiest behind the camera, or doing other 'creative' things.

From Waterfalls to Waves

The river gave me a focus, encouraged me to experiment, and finally digital made sense



Pellucid

*The title draws on the transparency of the water and the reflection of light from its surface.
The images I ended up choosing for galleries were mostly blue. I wonder what that says.*

I intended to resurrect my plan for 2020 - print development. And with the art courses, this meant working with other media too and trying to work out if I could integrate the different strands. And then we threw a big spanner in the works and moved 400 miles north to Scotland. It's a big change to process, and a couple of months in I realised that after so many years it wasn't just a case of unpacking, getting the house straight, and off you go...

Sometimes, when I'm working up questions for interviews, I find threads that are relevant to the interviewee but are also things that I realise I want to ask of myself. "Did you find that you needed to allow yourself time to absorb the landscape, to listen, and to understand what story you wanted to tell and how to do so?" I've learned that after the dust settles, you don't necessarily pick up from where you were; you need to learn to breathe (in) again and decide how to exhale. And only then does what has gone before feed into it.

For many years, I couldn't imagine photographing anything other than water and would have been very reluctant to leave that little place by the river, such was the effect that it had on me. There will be threads that continue and I do have the opportunity to tackle that unfinished business - but inevitably we react to new stimuli, and these are more plentiful here. Initially it was trees that whispered most loudly; these come a close second to water for me and at times have appeared in

my images of the river. It's been hard to ignore them 'doing their thing'. I have much more diversity to choose from on my doorstep, a tempting outlook from the window, and last winter gave me better light than I've experienced for the past 10 years. It was a little like being let loose in a sweetie shop.

I found that post-move, I didn't have the energy for social media, and took a break. And then, I found the habit broken. It took me three months and a nudge to begin again, just at the time when events again shook us out of any complacency that might we have accumulated. Photography and art felt like a frivolity, but after a while again they offered me sanctuary.

I began to see connections in the things that talk to me here: patterns, textures, layers, nature's mark making. Movement. Differentials of focus from sharp to blur. From working almost exclusively with a 100mm macro lens I've been looking at things using the long end of a 24-200mm zoom lens. A new compact camera gave me a lighter, freer, way of working. So far it's been about the response, the reaction to what I see, rather than what I might do with the images. A lot of time can be spent looking for the 'perfect' landscape but I learn more from the imperfect and the ephemeral; a slow burn, rather than fast love, coming to know a place and what of it prompts a response in me.

From (attempting to) exercise control of self, of work,

of practice (timing of visit and technique - tripod, depth of field, shutter speed) I've shifted to a looser way of working (subject movement, largely hand held, experimental). It feels more comfortable, more representative of who I am now rather than anything that I may see. In the past it was easy to say whose work inspired me. Now there are photographers whose work I admire, and images that I enjoy, but inspiration is more likely to come from other sources. That doesn't mean that I actively seek it; I'm quite happy to stumble along and see what happens. And a lot of the time, I'm simply inspired by what I experience when I'm out walking. The dullest day can bring unexpected colour; the smallest short-lived pool is a story yet to be told - and these are the words that I'm beginning to string together into phrases.

In art I like looser ways of making marks. Softening the line. Colouring over the edges (which I never did as a child). Surrendering full control.

On Pinterest (I was late to that too, and am still erratic, as with much of social media) I collect images that I associate with water, and sometimes land. Over time they have become more abstract. There are some photos, but it's mostly other media. There's a lot of mark-making and in my messy dabbles this is something that really interests me due to the inherent limits that improvised tools and techniques can place on how a line is made.

I continue to collect other things, adding to a four year old 'Transcriptions' board https://www.pinterest.co.uk/michela_griffith/transcriptions/ that draws on and has fed into 'A Memory of Water'. Visual parallels, and notes to myself: calligraphy and asemic writing, maps, neural networks, and so many other things.

On Twitter I've found art and creativity. It's not the most obvious platform I know, but I've found it a good way to broaden my outlook and find people I would not have otherwise come across. Since I've gone back onto Instagram, I've found too that the algorithm is more generous in showing me things of interest in addition to the accounts I follow.

I think that the key thing here is that the medium is not important, but the message. I've been trying to work out what I like. My list has:

- Water
- Trees
- Movement (energy)
- Abstraction
- Intimate / personal
- Mark-making
- Selective focus, and defocus
- Blue recurs, but I can now identify a number of palettes of colour from the landscape that inspire me
- Inks and paint (water as medium)
- Small pieces - things that encourage you to look more closely
- Detail; pattern and texture; layers
- Playing / experimenting



Transcriptions of Light. A single, timed exposure that is naturally monochromatic

- Sketchbooks, or even better loose sheets (no pressure about spoiling the page or producing a 'finished' piece)
- Things I can't fully control (tools, ways of working). The possibility of something unexpected.
- Evocation, not representation
- Working locally, walking to a place.
- Going back, scratching away at the surface. Revisiting This brings me back to my lines of enquiry, but also to knowing myself. I used to think of myself as a

perfectionist; now I find I'm good at starting things but don't always finish them. I think of new things to do. Sometimes I have too many ideas. I need to write these down and spend time on those that help me progress. Attention to detail matters, but over the last four years my practice has been subject to interruptions and things have at times felt chaotic. My brain is less orderly than it used to be. I'm happiest creating / making / exploring. Finding out what's round the next 'corner'. I like seeing interesting work on social media, but comparisons are unhelpful.



Constellation

The smallest pool is a story yet to be told. It offers me a new sky and on the edges of the moss there are stars to be found.

I've come to realise that you can't force things. It's been a big change, and not all of the reasons that I had for doing things previously are still applicable. I feel like I need to be kind to myself, allow time and that breathing space.

I really enjoyed playing with paint and ink but it all got tidied away when the last house had to be photographed and marketed, and I began to wonder when or even if it would come out again. Winter used to be a good time for trying things inside, but this time it's kept calling me out to play.

I can see a future with prints, books and hopefully more

writing and art. I just have to work out how I get there. The paint and ink finally came out again in February.

But at the end of the day, what's the hurry? It's not for ever, it's just for now, a welcome distraction from a reality that can be hard to contemplate. I wonder if 'normal' will ever return. Perhaps we deluded ourselves that it was ever there, other than in our own little spheres.

It doesn't need to lead somewhere. There doesn't have to be a result - focussing on one strips the joy. If painters can concentrate on the process, why can't photographers? Is it the immediacy of what we do?

One - small - step at a time. What if? What now? And repeat.

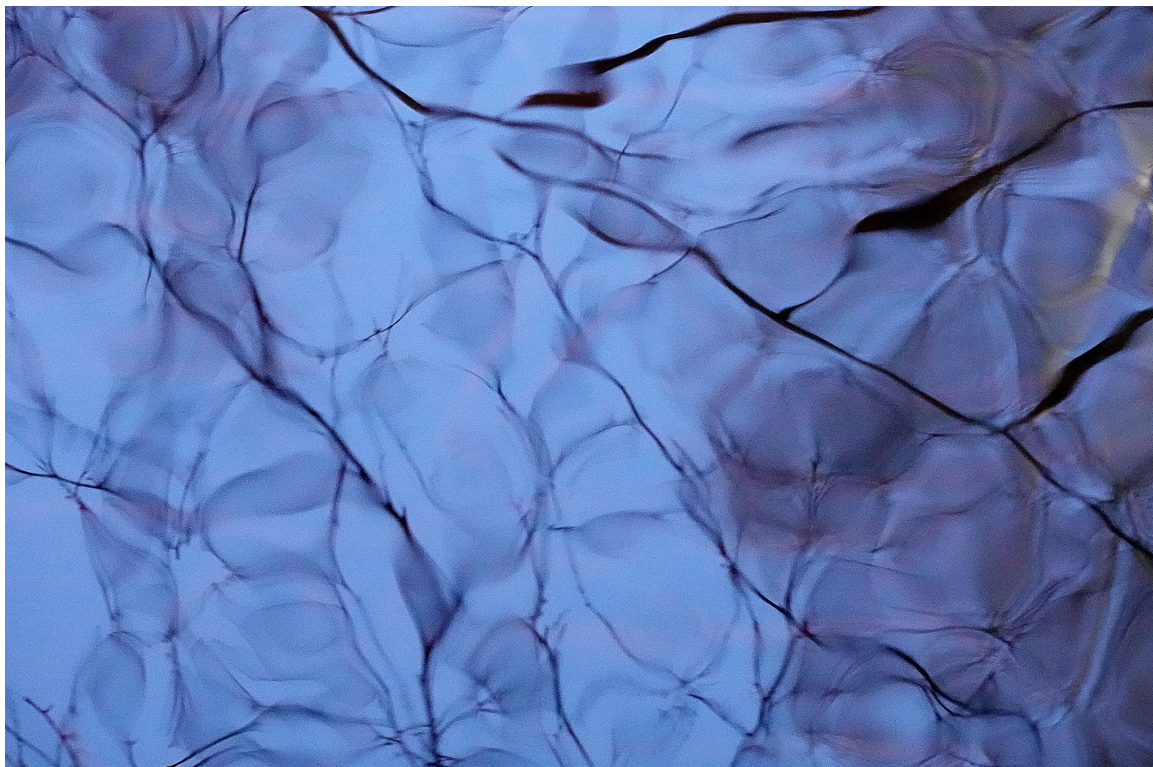
Focus on the process, not the results. If I run out of time, so be it. There's no fame or fortune waiting, no legacy to be left. When I'm gone, no-one will care about what I've made.

What am I curious about? What appeals to me? Why? What do I want to say about it? What do I want my new mirror to reveal?

To be continued...

Luminous

Water still tops my list, for the many ways it shows me things that I think I know – and some that I don't. It's about evocation, rather than representation.



Featured Comments...

Keith Beven :

Lovely article Michéla. The idea of exploring a stretch of river again and again (or several in my case) chimes with my own feelings about being creative. The images are wonderful - though "From waterfalls to waves" had me really puzzled for a while until I caught on. I particularly like the subtle textures in "Patterns of flow." Really looking forward to hearing more about your response to your Scottish surroundings.

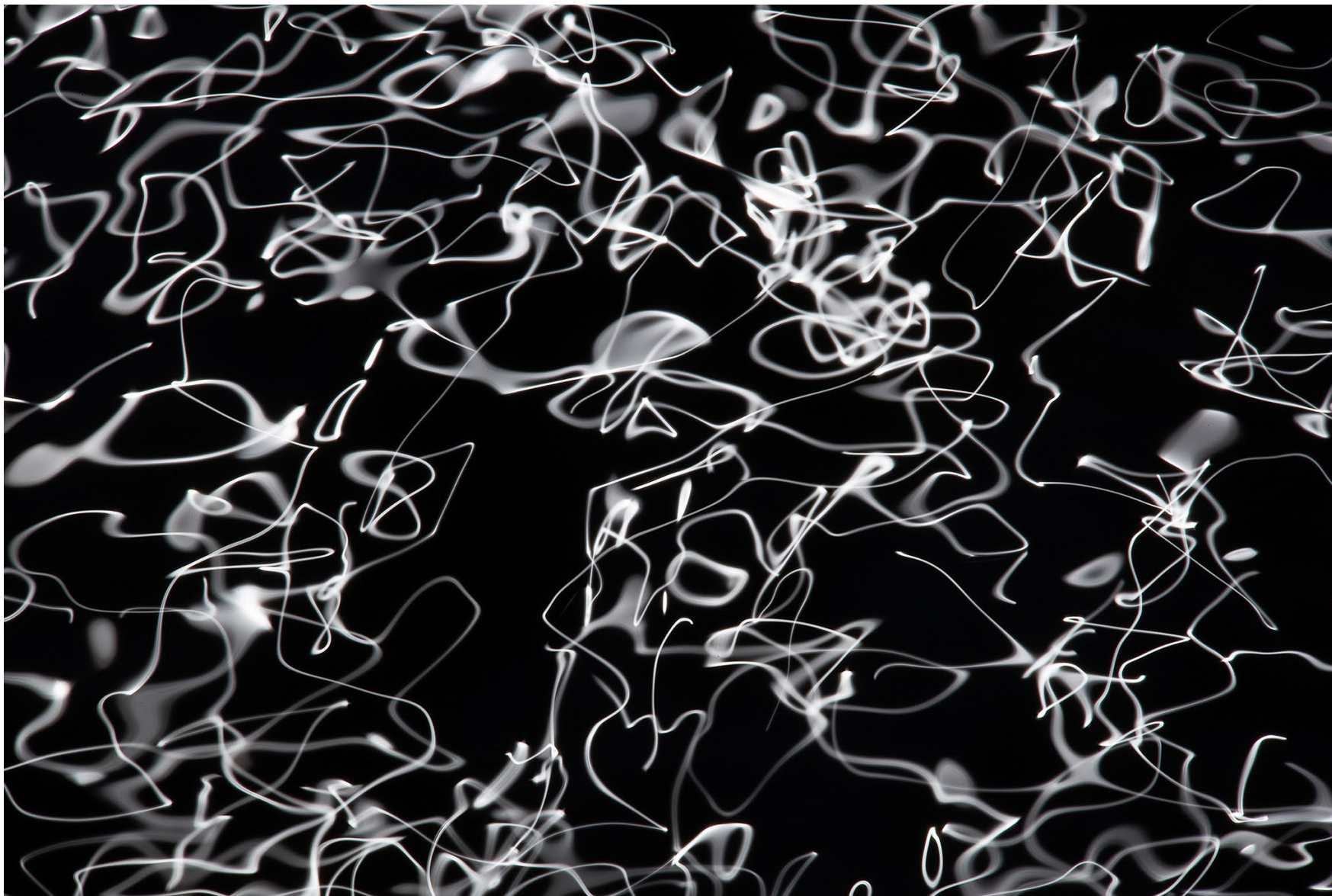
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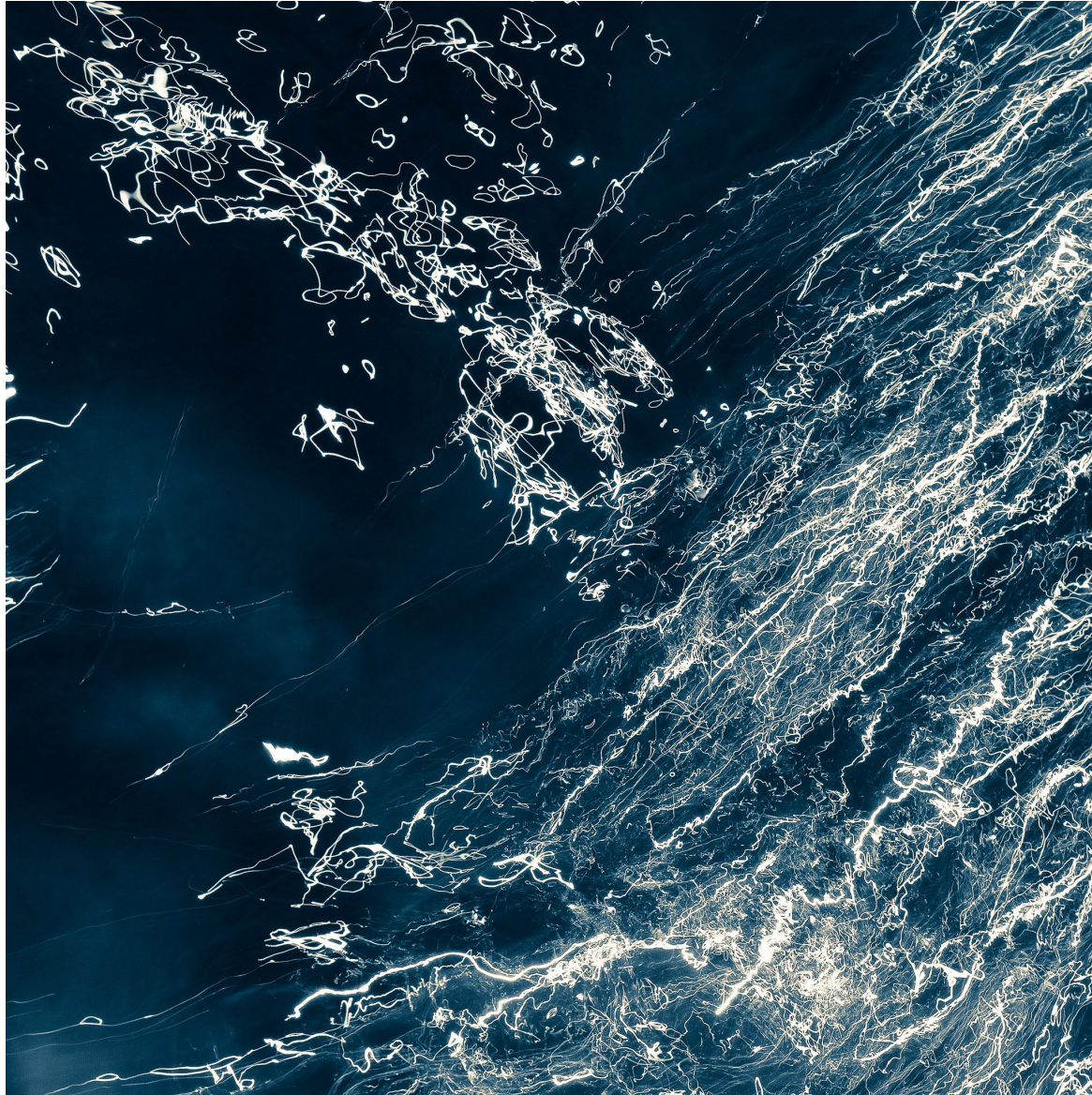
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Michéla Griffith

PORTFOLIO



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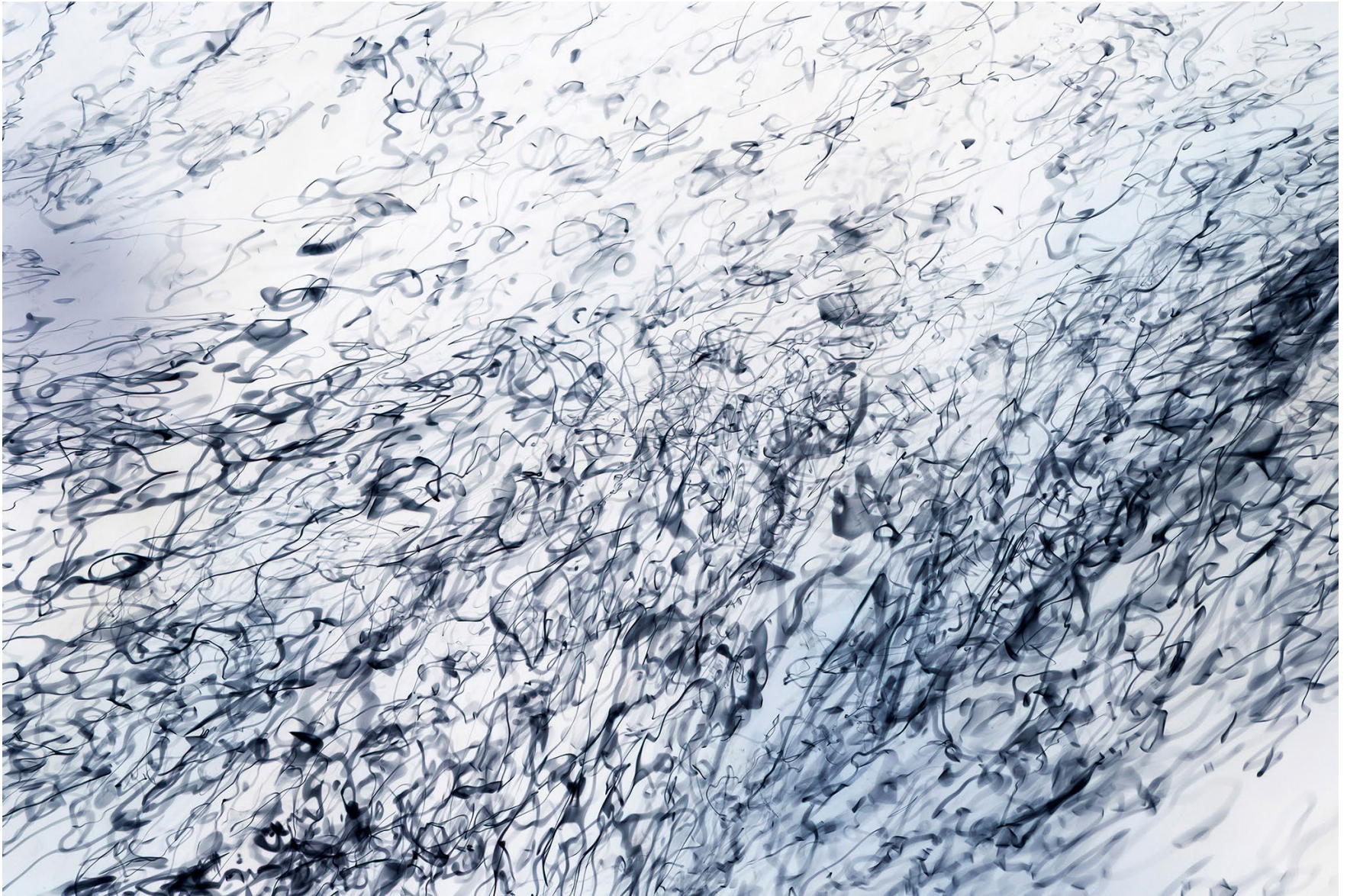


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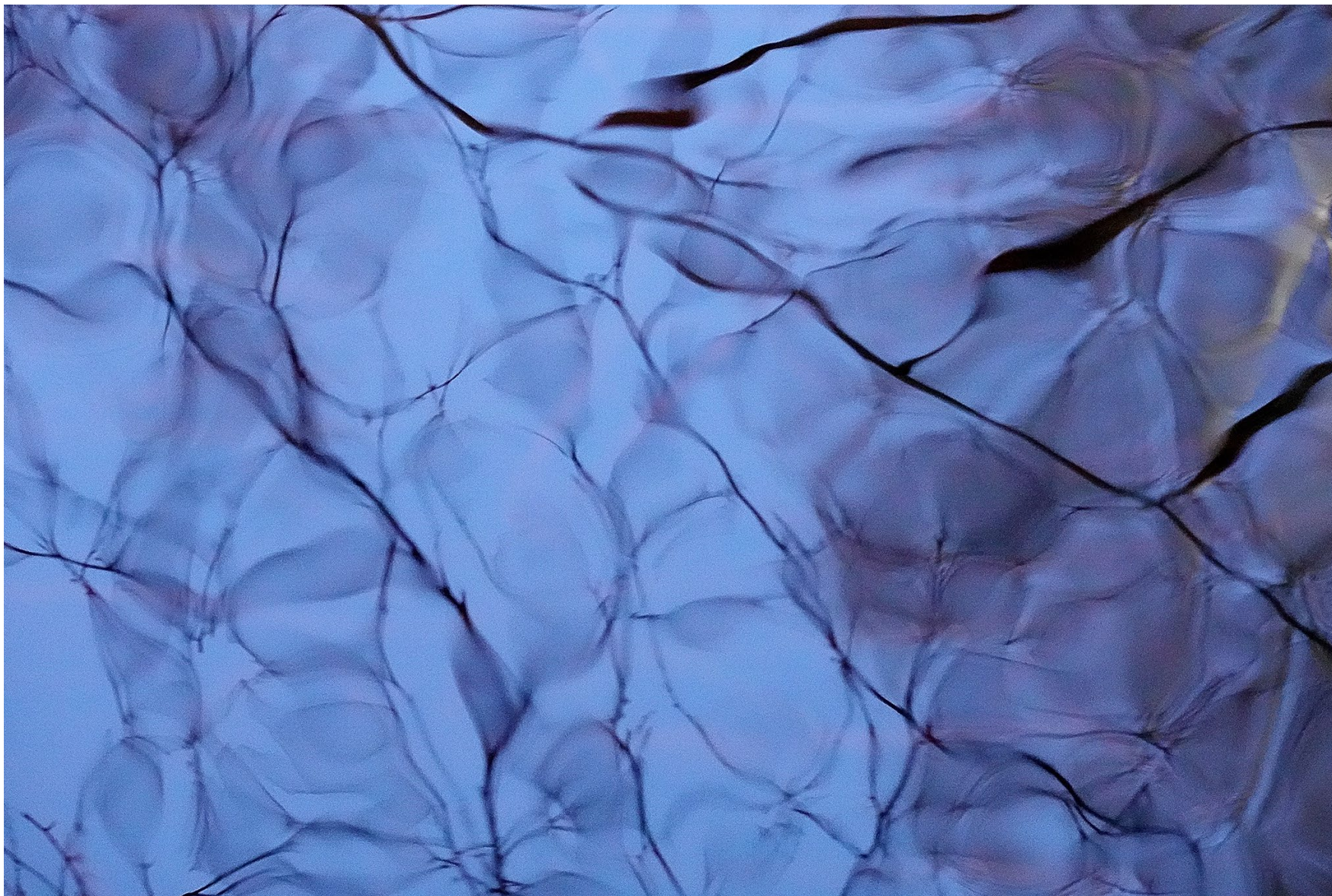
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