Hampstead Heath, 2016

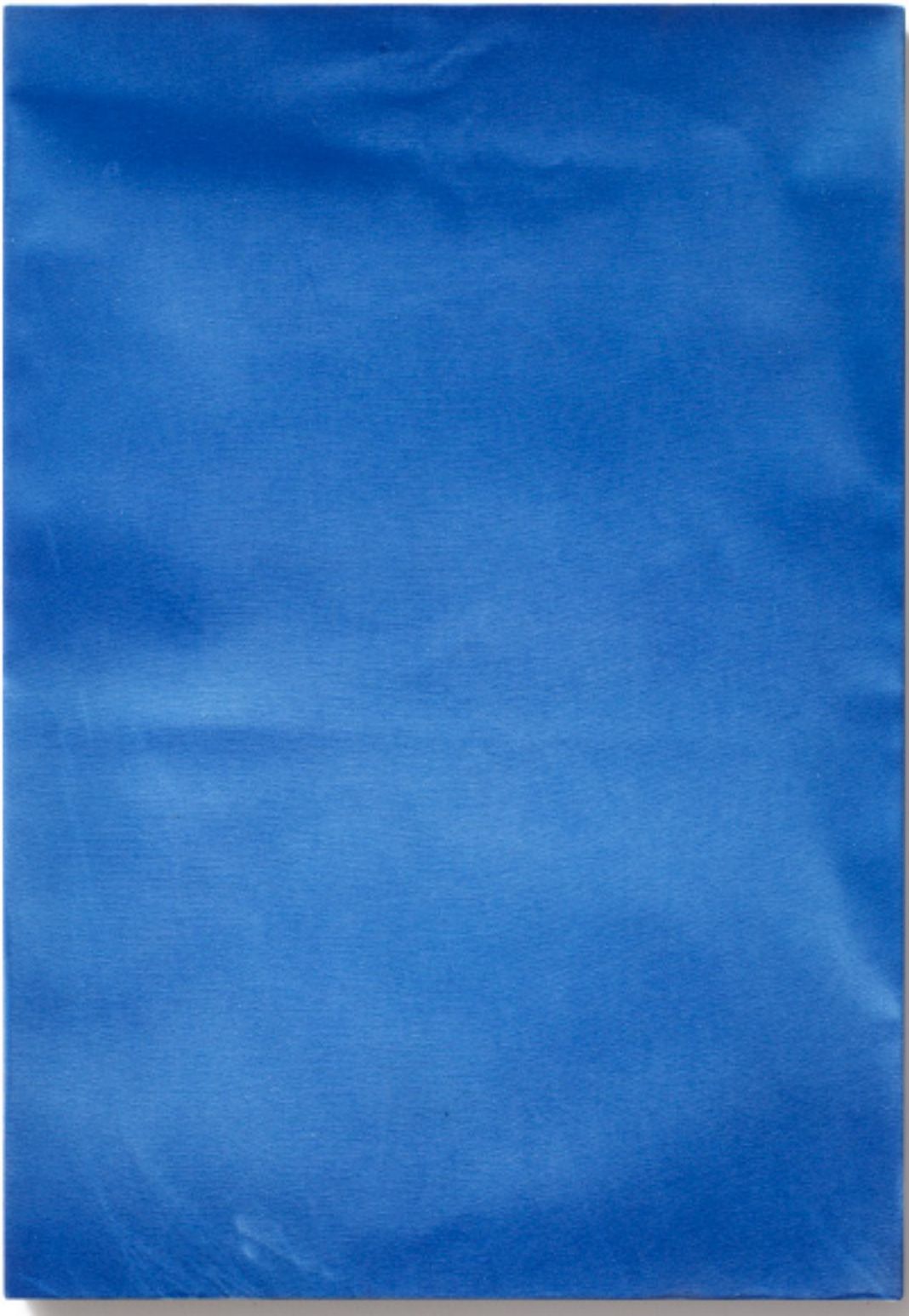
Each work is a photographic record of an hour's sunlight on Hampstead Heath. Some are also traces of rain, resting insects, or blown grass. Each work was level with the horizon when exposed, facing upwards rather than directed towards the sun. In some the fabric was taut [S], in others it was loose [L]. The time, date, and occasionally the precise location in which each was exposed was determined by the oil sketches that John Constable painted on the Heath in 1821.

Hampstead Heath, 14th July 2016, 6–7pm,
broken cloud, warm [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
30 × 21 cm

'Hampstead July 14 1821 6 to 7 p.m. N.W.
breeze strong'

Hampstead Heath, 19th, July 2016, 5.30–6.30am bright hot dawn, cloudless, colours beautiful [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
69 × 48 cm

'1/2p 5 am 19th July looking East./The day beautiful at noon plain blue sky.'

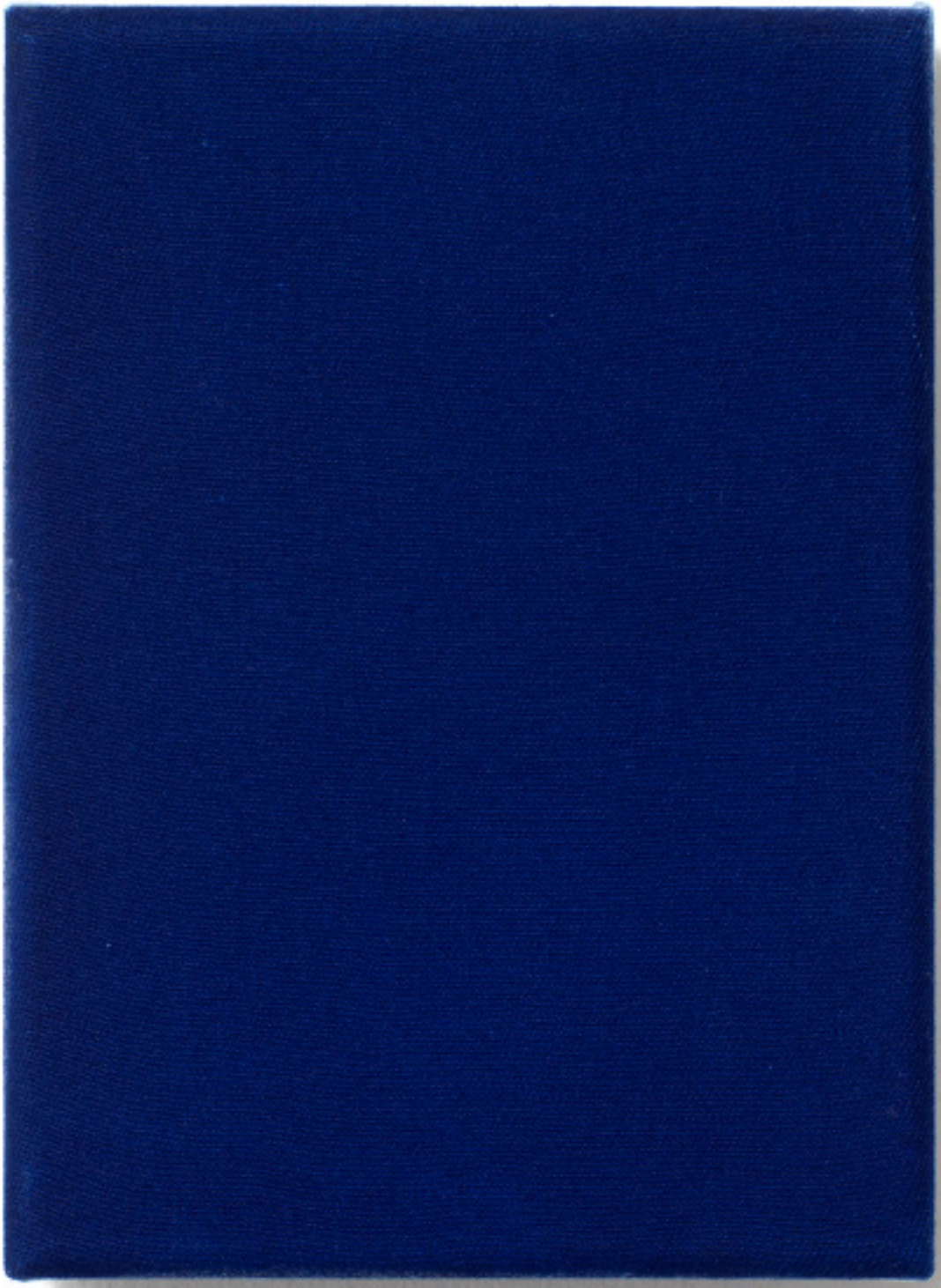


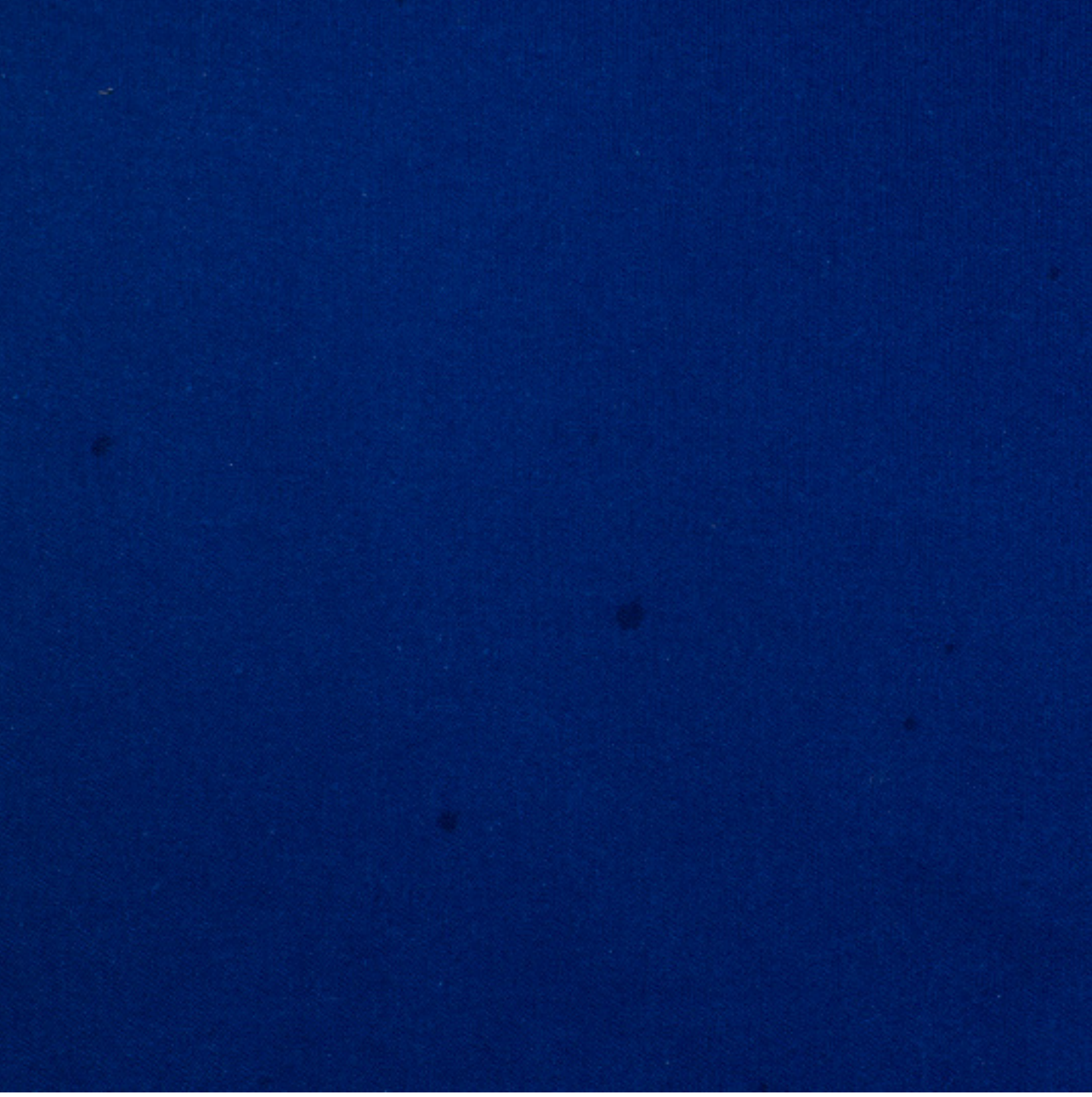
Hampstead Heath, 19th, July 2016, 7.30–8.30pm, still, hottest day of the year. [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
69 × 48 cm

'Evening of Coronation July 19. 1821. Westward by North—cloudy and tempestuous looking but did not turn out so.'

Hampstead Heath, 25th July 2016, 5–6pm, details written in a book, book lent to a woman [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
18 × 13 cm

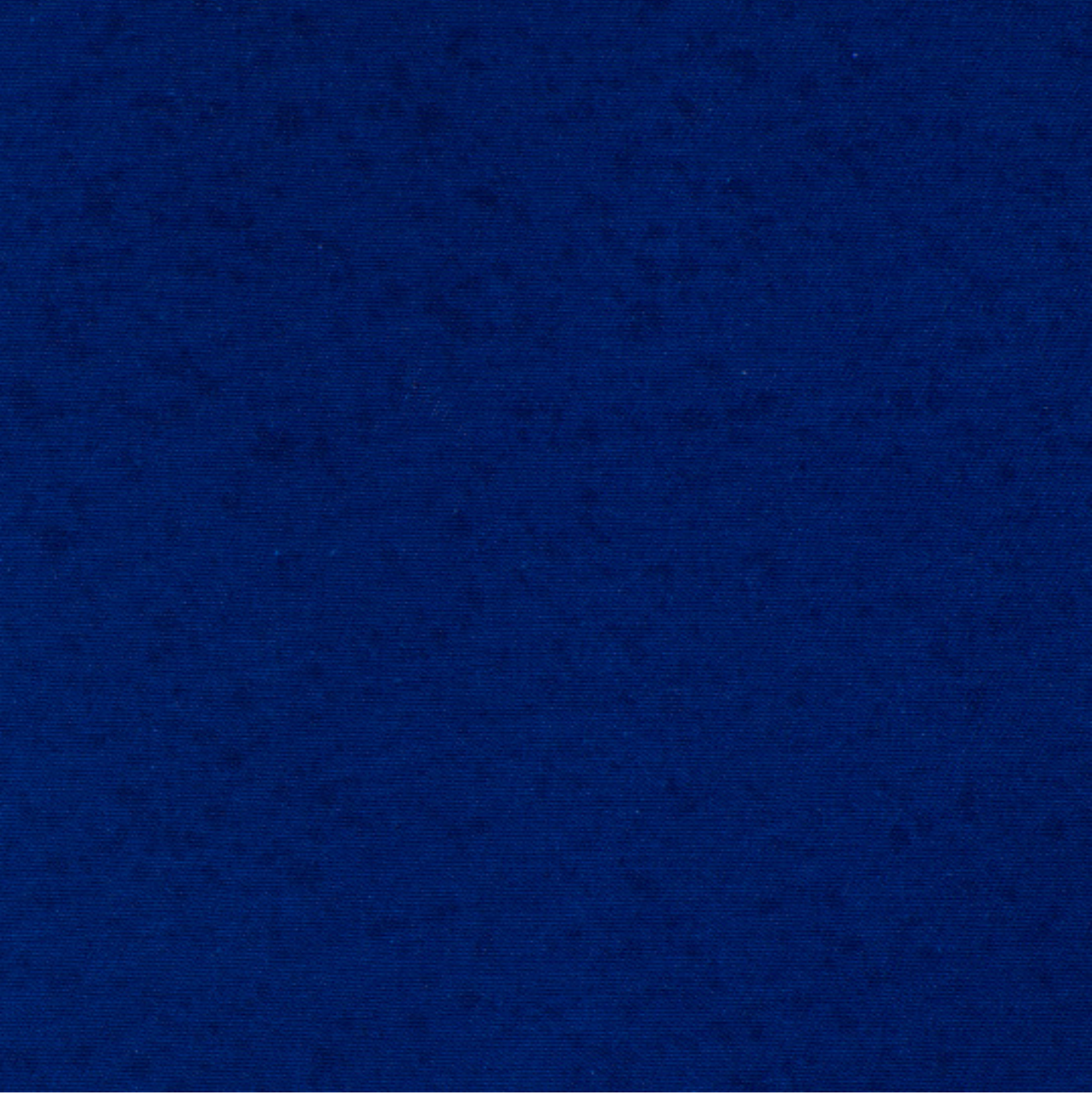
'July 25, 1821, looking due West Wind to W 5 afternoon sun behind a shower'





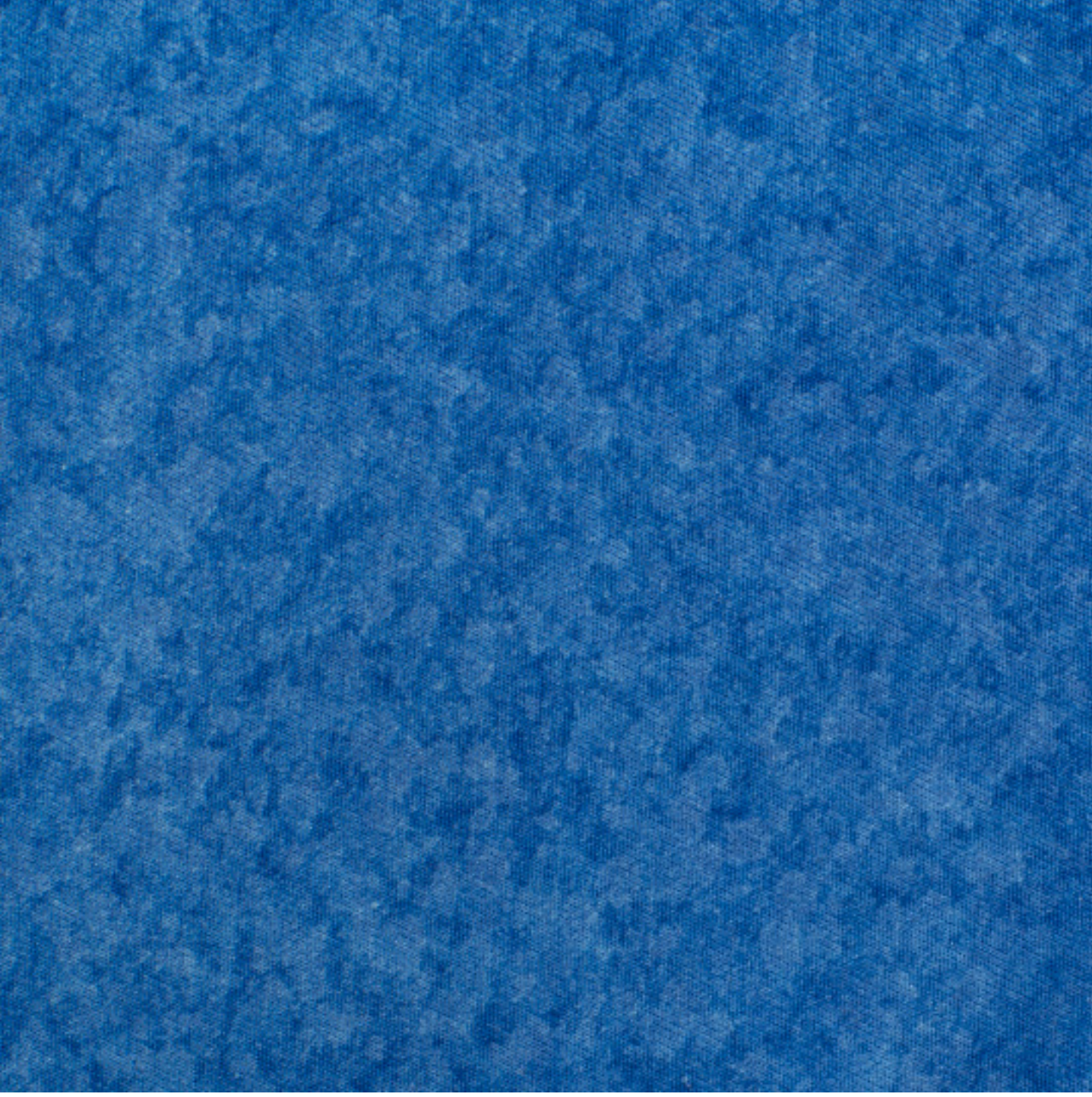
Hampstead Heath, August 21 2016, 5–6pm, some initial sun, then cloud. raindrops 5.52. [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
120 × 100 cm

'5 Oclock afternoon: August 1821 very fine bright & wind after rain slightly in the morning'



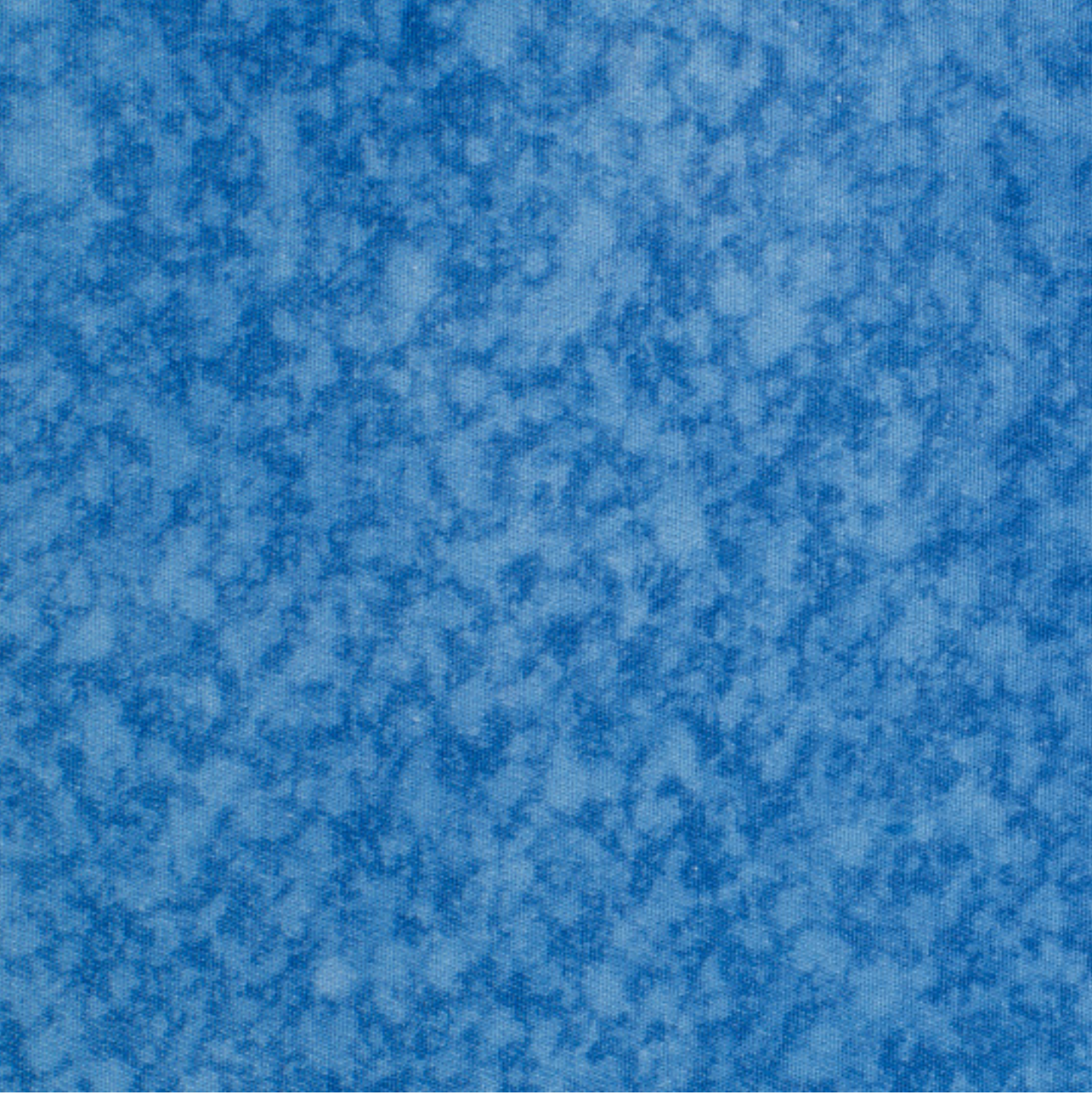
Hampstead Heath, 3rd September 2016, 12–1pm, bright start, fifteen minute light shower. [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
69 × 48 cm

'September 3d. Noon. very sultry. with large drops of Rain falling on my palate light air from S.W.'



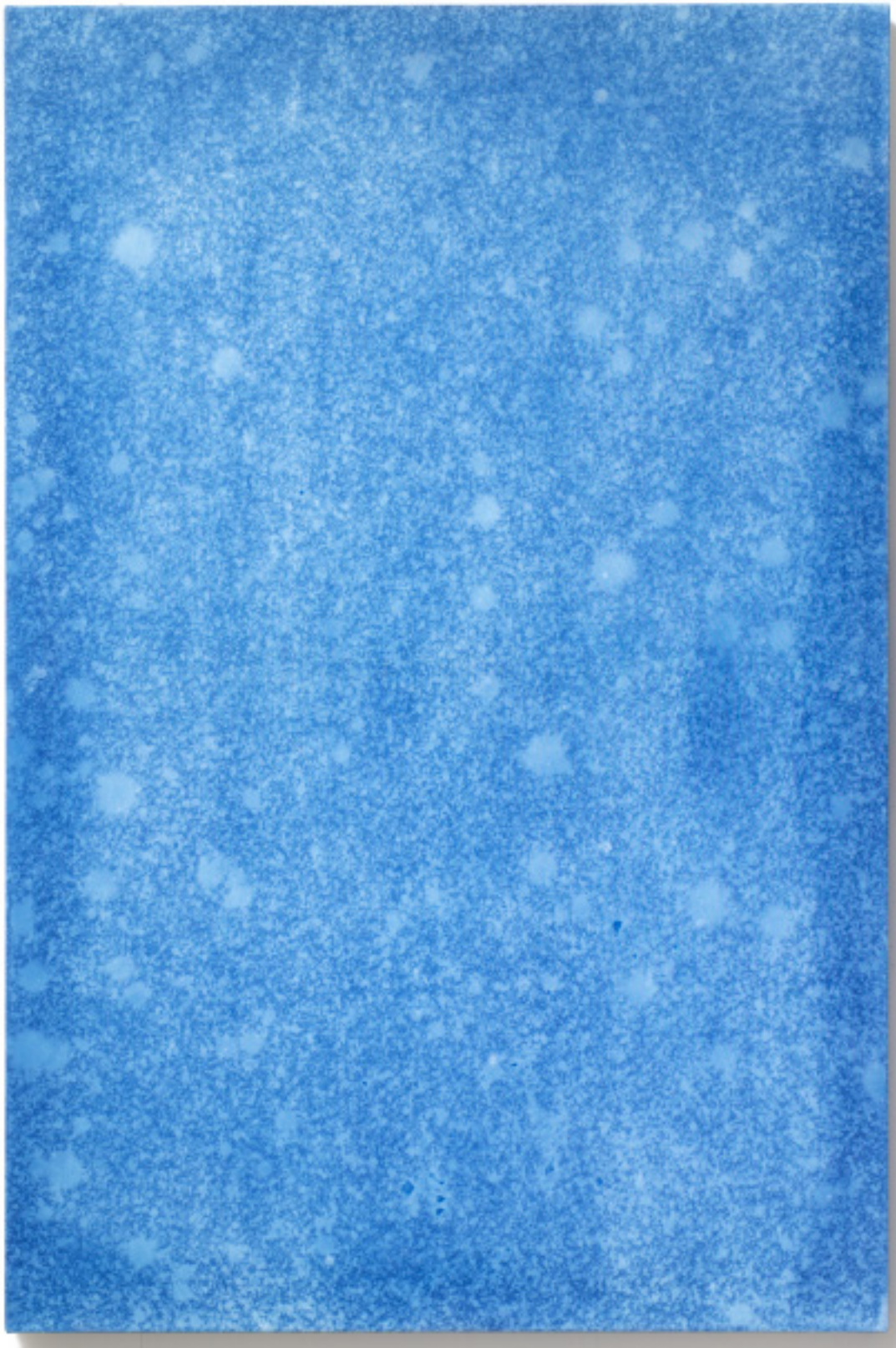
Hampstead Heath, 10th September 2016, 11–12am overcast, almost immediate drizzle with occasional breaks. [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
120 × 80 cm

'Sepr. 10 1821 Eleven o'clock Sultry with warm rain falling large heavy clouds […?] a heavy downpour and thunder'



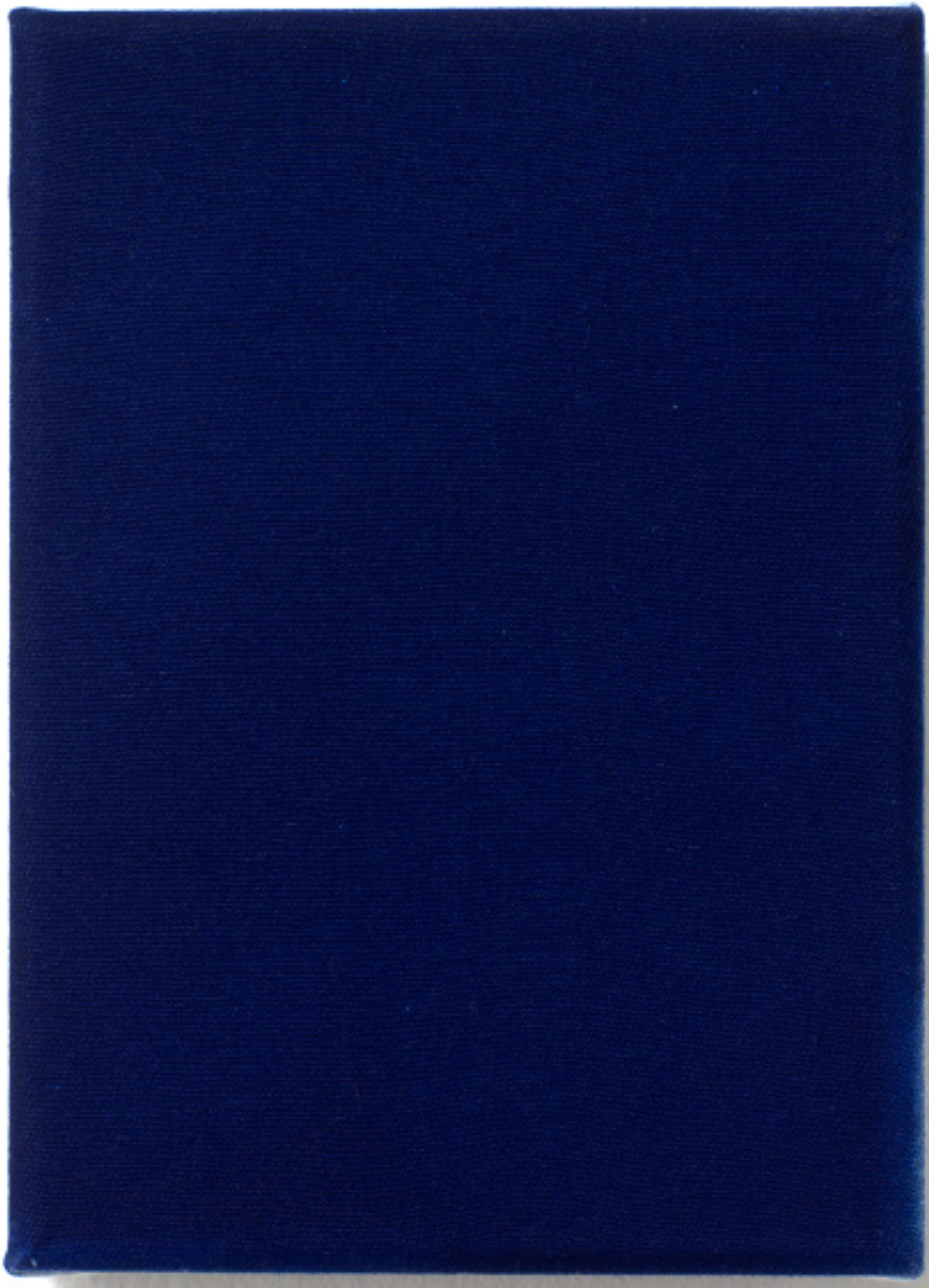
Hampstead Heath, 10th, Noon–1pm, drizzle turning to rain, occasional breaks and a very brief heavy shower. [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
120 × 80 cm

'Sepr. 10. 1821, Noon. gentle Wind at West. very sultry after a heavy shower with thunder, accumulated thunder clouds passing slowly away to the south East. very bright & hot, all the foliage sparkling and wet.'



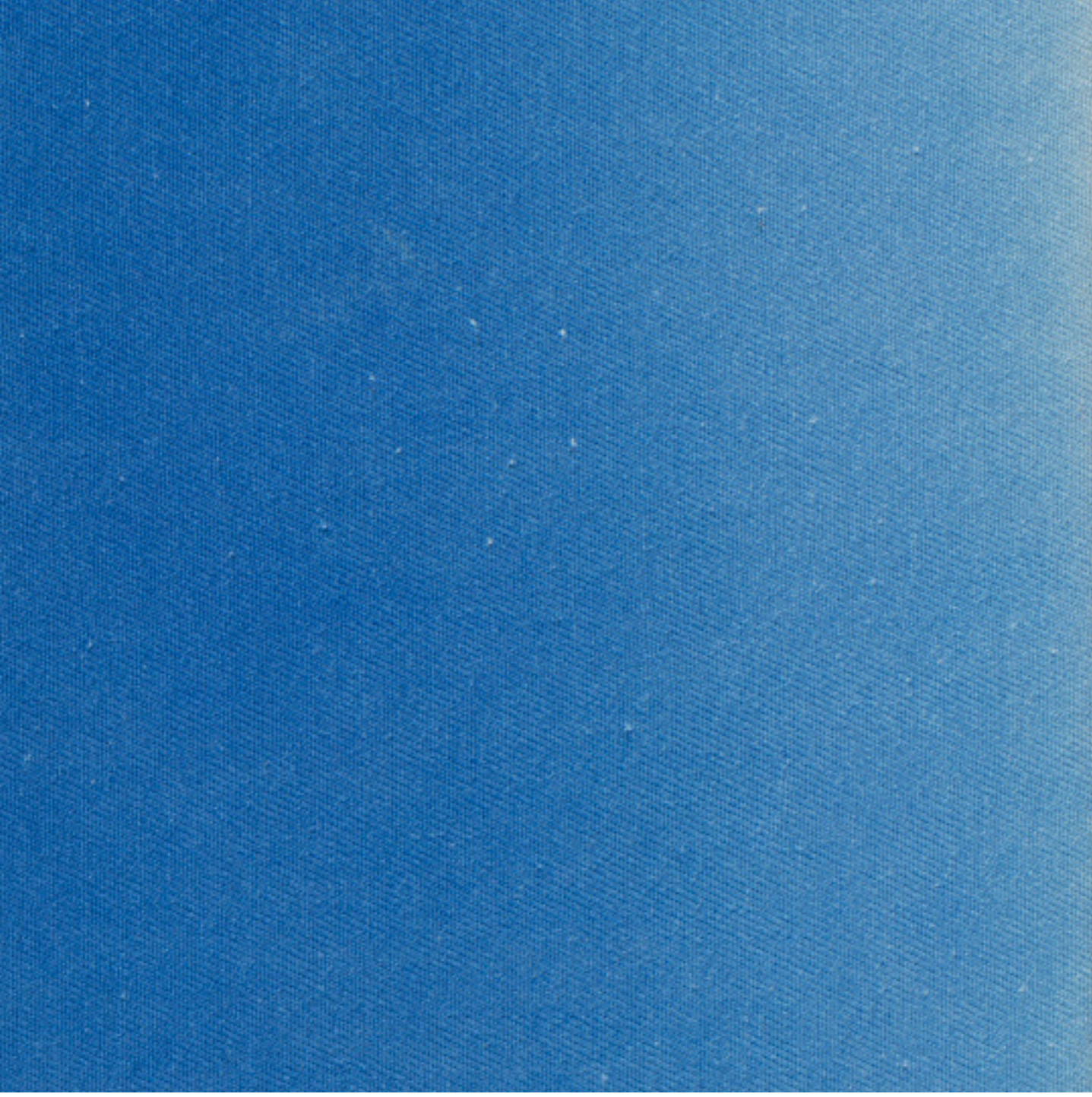
Hampstead Heath, 11th September 2016, 10–11am, bright and clear and glorious. [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
18 × 13 cm

'Hampstead Sept 11, 1821. 10. to 11. Morning under the sun—Clouds silvery grey on warm ground Sultry. Light wind to the S.W. fine all day—but rain in the night following.'



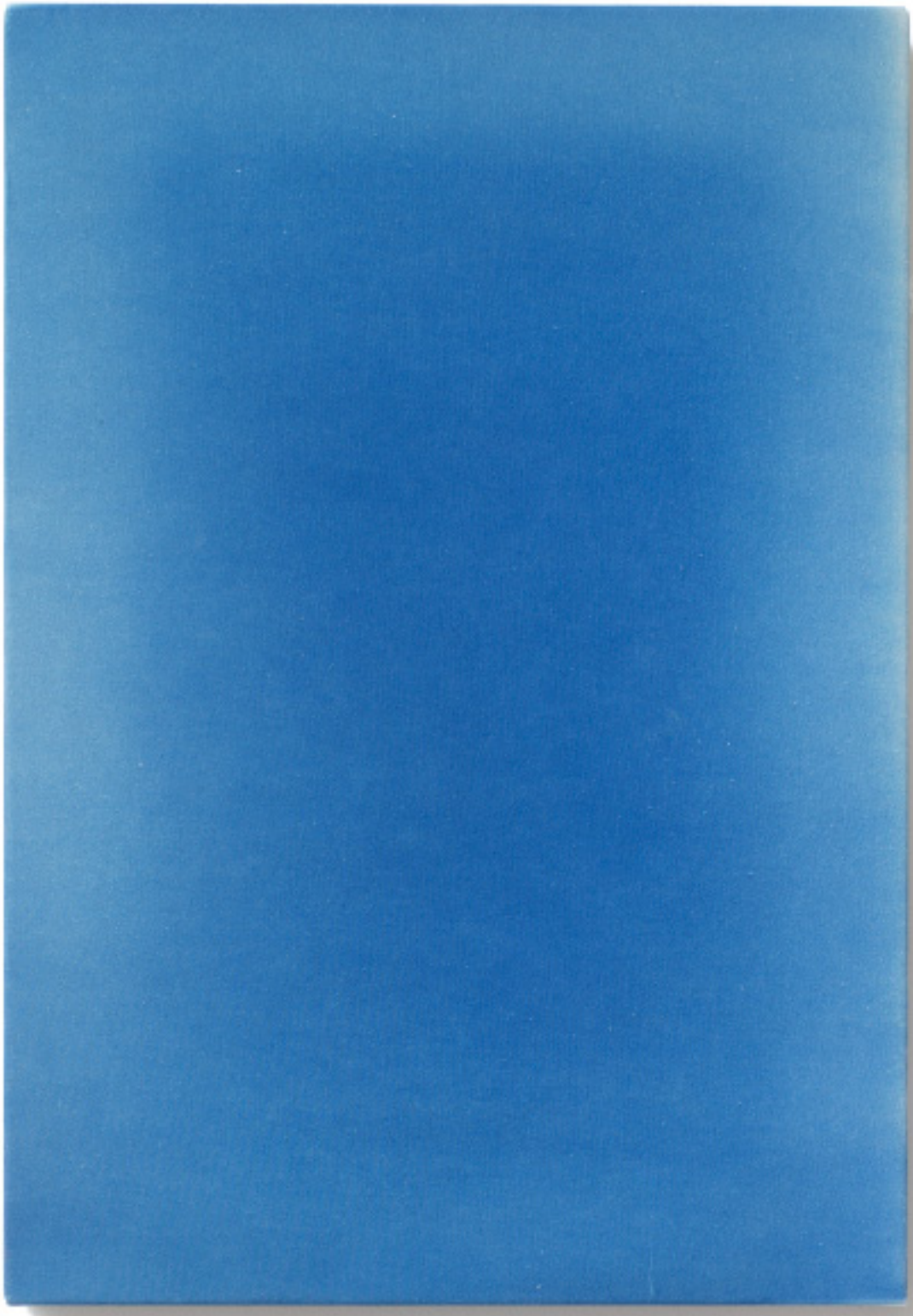
Hampstead Heath, 12th September 2016, noon–1pm. some cloud but bright and very warm. sunbathing weather for art. late and improbable specks of rain. [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
69 × 48 cm

'Sepr. 12 1821. Noon. Wind fresh at West … Sun very Hot. looking southward exceedingly bright vivid & Glowing, very heavy showers in the Afternoon but a fine evening. High wind in the night.'



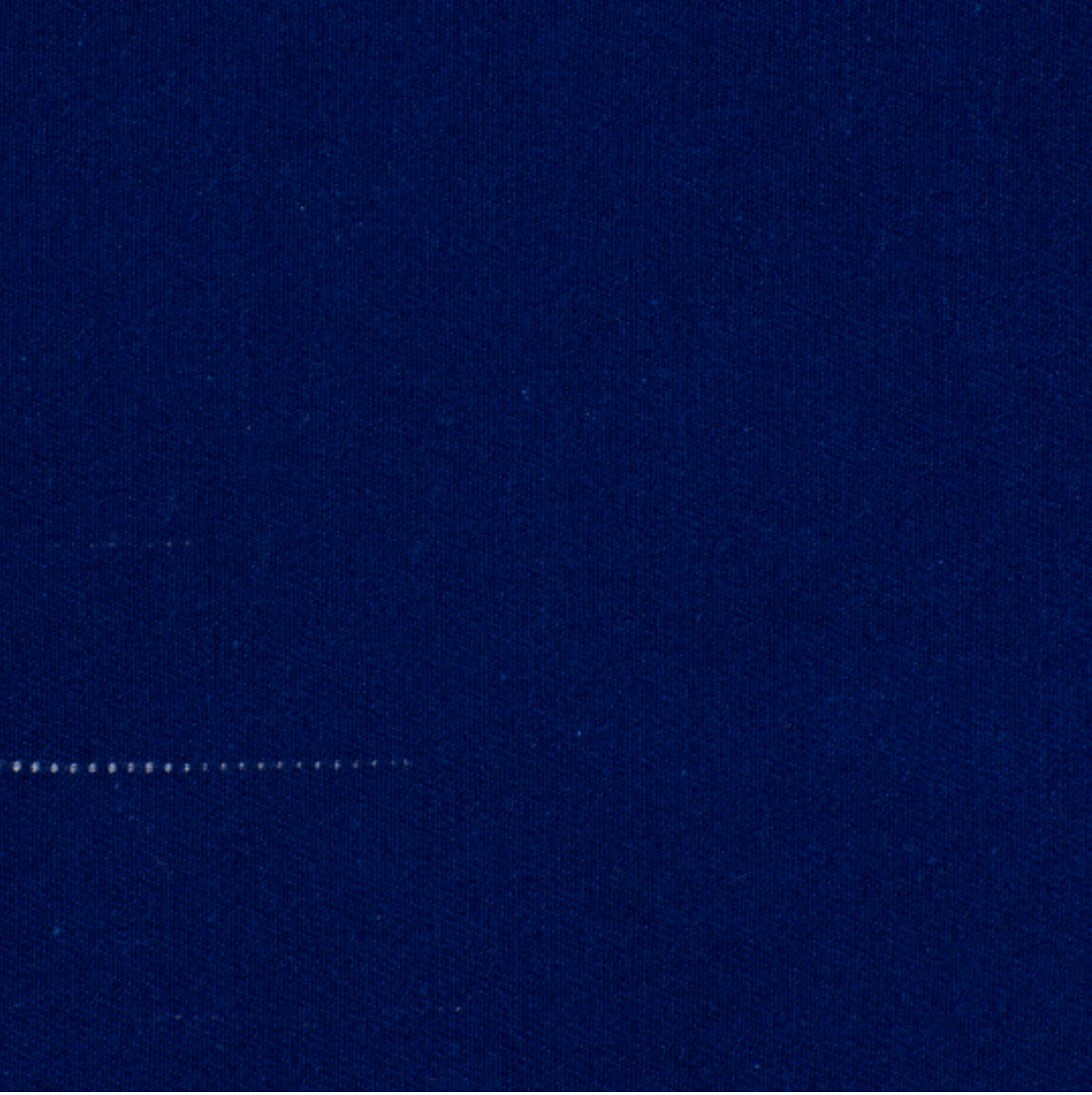
Hampstead Heath, 12th September 2016, 6.35–7.35pm. Sun setting over Harrow. Overcast with a couple of brief moments of sun. [S]
Cyanotype on cotton
50 × 35 cm

'Sepr. 12. 1821. Sun setting over Harrow This appearance of the Evening was just after a very heavy rain more rain in the night and a very [light?] wind which continued all the day following—while making this sketch observed the Moon rising very beautifully due east over the heavy clouds from the late showers had fallen, and Wind Gentle … increasing from the North west. Rather.'



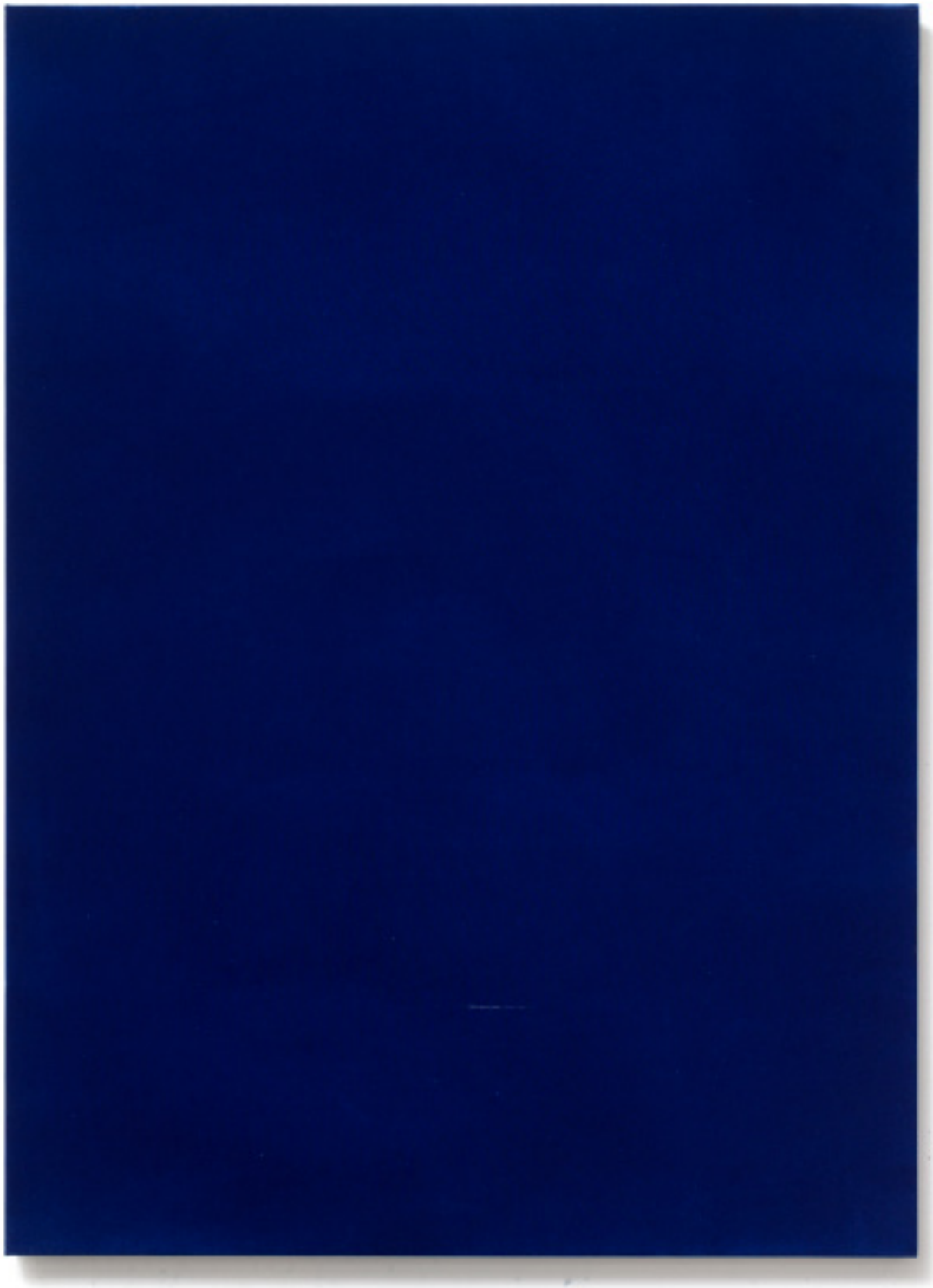
Hampstead Heath, 13th September 2016, 1–2pm, hottest September day since 1911 [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
195 × 120 cm

'Septr 13th. one o'clock. Slight wind at North West, which became tempstuous in the afternoon, With Rain all the night following.'



Hampstead Heath, 24th September 2016, 10–11am, clear and warm [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
95 × 70 cm

'Sepr. 24th […] 10 o'clock morning wind S.W. warm & fine till afternoon, when it rained and wind got more to the north'



Hampstead Heath, 25th September 2016, 2–3pm, caught the end of light drizzle. broken clouds looking similar to those of 195 years ago. [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
240 × 135 cm

'25th. Septr 1821 around from 2 to 3 afternoon looking to the north—Strong Wind at west, bright light coming through the Clouds which were lying one on another.'

Constable's sketches from September 1821 progressively integrated the structure of trees into the teeming complexity of the clouds, creating painterly surfaces that were characterised by an intense all-over animation. This all-overness was taken to its logical conclusion on the 13th September, when Constable produced his first oil sketch devoted exclusively to the sky. In developing an approach to painting in which every depicted element was underscored by a sense of movement, Constable offered a pictorial logic that was both fundamentally at odds with inherited conventions of depicting the world and wholly in accord with contemporaneous advances in how the world was understood. At the close of the eighteenth century the geologist James Hutton had stressed the central role of the rain in the continual evolution of the earth's surface, arguing that 'matter itself must be in motion'. This emphasis on pervasive movement was reinforced at the start of the nineteenth century when the meteorologist Luke Howard — whose work is often claimed to have influenced Constable's cloud studies highlighted the role played in the transformation of clouds by 'the constant operation of electricity.' As Howard's follower Thomas Forster argued in a book that Constable owned, not only was electricity understood to determine the flux of the clouds, but the 'discoveries made by Sir H. Davy … incline one to regard it as the universal agent in all the changes of form which matter undergoes.'

Constable's desire to give enduring life to transient phenomena was timely and occupied others in varied fields. For instance, at the start of the century Constable's contemporary Humphry Davy, whose research into electricity was revolutionising understandings of matter, published an account of his and Thomas Wedgwood's attempts to render permanent the fleeting image of the camera obscura. Failing to find an adequate long-term fix for the image, these experiments did not usher in the photographic revolution, the medium only becoming a public phenomenon in 1839. In the years immediately following photography's unveiling many diverse processes were developed — indeed as early as spring 1839 Constable's eldest son claimed he had 'found out a new and capital way of fixing the photogenic drawings'. These early processes were all but superseded by the end of the century, with the exception of John Herschel's cyanotype or blueprint, which remained in wide use into the twentieth. A cheap and simple process, the cyanotype forms an image in prussian blue, the earliest modern synthetic pigment and one that offered artists an affordable alternative to mineral blues — indeed it was the blue that Constable predominantly employed in the sky sketches he painted on the Heath.

Hampstead Heath, 27 September 2016, 10–11am, mainly overcast [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
69 × 48 cm

'Sepr 27th 1821—10 morning, fine moring after rainey night'

It is perhaps easy to imagine that Constable turned to the sky because of his unwillingness to confront earthbound problems, yet his studies date from a period in which the clouds were increasingly understood as far more than emblems of mercuriality or alterity: to gaze at the clouds wasn't necessarily escapism. In the year that Davy attempted to give the transience of light enduring form through photography, Luke Howard gave the clouds conceptual stability when he introduced the terms by which they remain known to this day — cirrus, stratus, cumulus, and nimbus. And although he didn't suggest that climate change was a global concern, in the years immediately preceding 1821 Howard's meticulous attention to the weather led him to suggest that the burning of fossil fuels affects the climate on scale that stretches far beyond the local. Not only did the weather dramatically affect humans, humans were beginning to affect the weather.

Hampstead Heath, 27 September 2016, noon, very slight drizzle early on, gusty [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
69 × 48 cm

'Noon 27 Sept very bright after rain wind West'

Constable's sketches are a meditation on time and transience that offer a remarkable record of an artist's struggle to give pictorial life to radically altered understandings of the world. They attempt to make sense of a vastly expanded system in which change replaced stability and in which the local and apprehensible was necessarily implicated with that which stretched beyond sight and conception. Stalking the artist's ghost today, the significance of the heightened attention to the weather that informed his art becomes all the more potent, not least when sitting on the Heath in mid-September in temperatures in the mid-thirties, exactly 195 years to the day and hour after Constable painted his first pure cloud study.

Hampstead Heath, 27 September 2016, slight drizzle for first 15 mins. wind abated. glum throughout [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
69 × 48 cm

'4 afternoon 27 Septr 1821 wood bank of Vale very [warm?] & bright after rain'

Hampstead Heath, September 28, 2016, warm, some sun, typically overcast, light breeze [L]
Cyanotype on cotton
120 × 80 cm

'Sep. 28 1821 Noon—looking North West windy from the S.W. large bright clouds flying rather fast very stormy night followed.'