



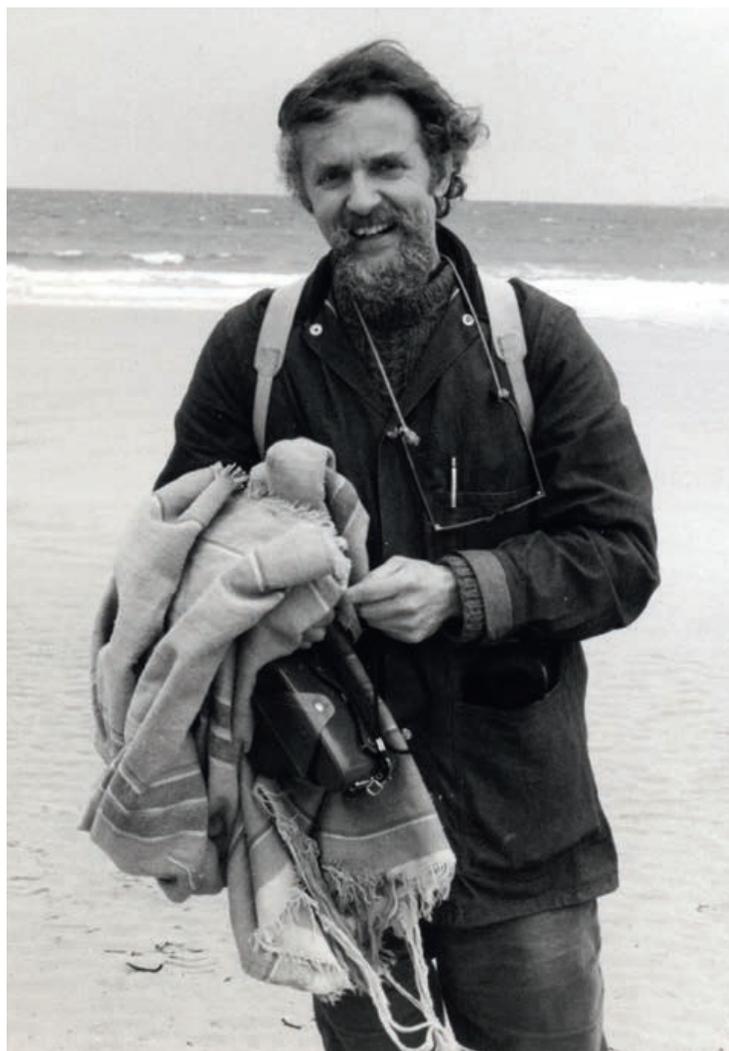
# IN HIS ELEMENT

American artist Jon Schueler found more than just inspiration on the wild west coast of Scotland

Words Catherine Coyle

**J**on Schueler spent much of his time in the clouds. In the early days, it was as a navigator during the Second World War; later, it was at his home in Mallaig on the west coast. When he first came to Scotland from America in 1957 he was searching for a place where he could be as close to nature as possible; somewhere he could experience the elements fully and honestly.

The Wisconsin-born artist had a special connection to Scotland that didn't just inform his work but held him in its grip. "The confusion of my life had been yearly compounded for 40 years," he wrote in his autobiography, *The Sound of Sleat*. "A north wind blowing off the sea ►

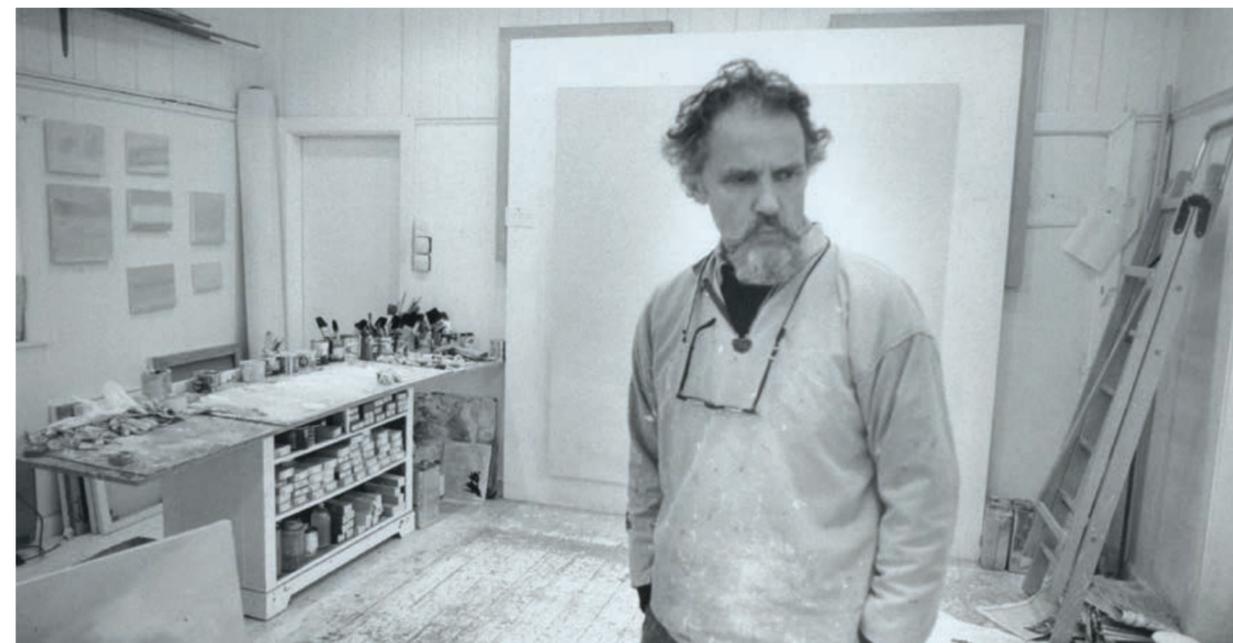


“HE WAS LOST IN THE CLOUDS BUT ALSO ACUTELY AWARE THAT HE COULD BE BLOWN UP AT ANY POINT”



[Clockwise from top left] Jon Schueler's studio, Romasaig, 1975; the artist in his studio, 1973, photographed by Archie McLellan; *Watercolour 55*, painted in 1971-72; *Watercolour 540* and *Watercolour 549*, both from 1985. [Previous page] Schueler photographed on the Sands of Morar by Magda Salvesen in 1970; *Watercolour 515*, from 1985

PHOTOGRAPH: MAGDA SALVESEN



promised clarity. I wanted to live in the middle of one of my paintings for a year. I wanted to be in one spot and watch the painting change. I saw clouds menacing my mind's eye, and the rain shafts or the mist obliterating horizons and forming new forms with the clouds and land-masses blending with the sea. I chose northern Scotland as my cathedral, because for my needs at that moment, it seemed the only church that would do.”

This year, to mark the centenary his birth, Scotland is hosting a collection of exhibitions, talks and events celebrating Schueler's work. Resipole Studios, on the shores of Loch Sunart in Argyll, is one of 11 galleries that will be showing works by the abstract expressionist. “This is our biggest show,” says artist Andrew Sinclair, the gallery owner. “We've had no one of his stature before. It's a great chance for people to see his work in the west coast setting that inspired it.”

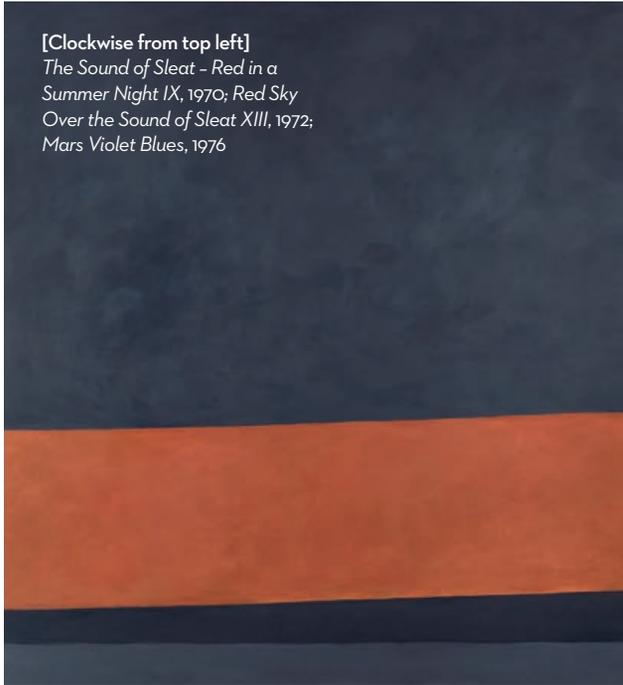
Jon Schueler was born in Milwaukee in September 1916. He studied literature there then joined the US Air Force where, stationed in the UK, he trained as a navigator of B-17s. “He was in that glass bubble at the front of the plane,” says Sinclair. “He was lost in the clouds but also acutely aware that he could be blown up at any point. That was imprinted in his head; it stayed with him.”

After his service, Schueler moved to California where he worked as a journalist, writer and broadcaster. He

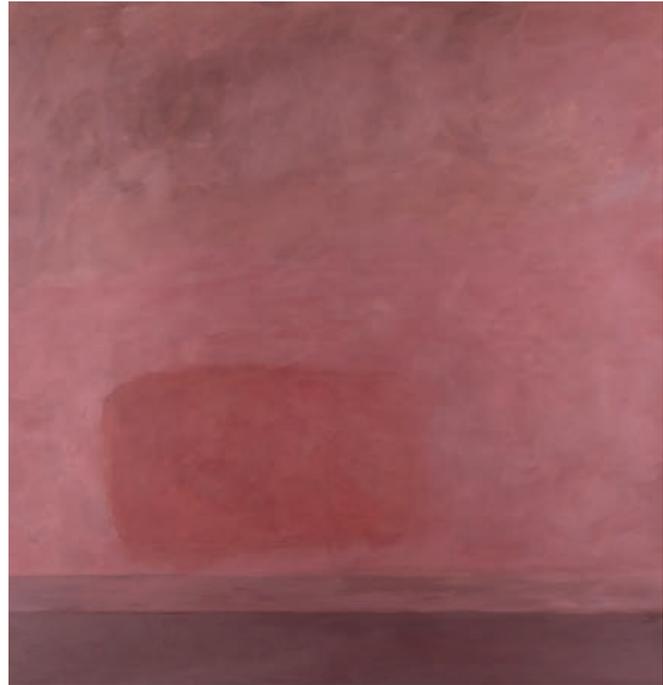


taught literature at the University of San Francisco but, by 1948, had enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts where he was taught by and worked alongside artists including Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Richard Diebenkorn. “It was around this time [1950s] that I said to myself, quite self-consciously, that I was painting about nature,” Schueler wrote. “Still, Rothko, Pollock and the others had broken through figuration and abstraction to feel the idea and freedom and power of non-objectivity. I wanted to break through the restrictions of non-objective thinking. But I wanted then to use its freedoms. I wanted to include everything that might inform my mind. To include the marriage act, the dialogue between nature and this artist, as part of nature, I wanted to push through figuration into abstraction, and through abstraction into non-objectivity, and to come out the other side. My ‘avant garde’ was to paint not nature, but about nature. To recognise that nature informed me, that my fantasy and imagery and paint itself could only be as true and informing as my intense response and subjectivity.”

By 1951 Schueler had left California and moved east, where he began exhibiting in prominent New York galleries. He was considered a member of the city's abstract expressionist school and was making a name ▶



[Clockwise from top left]  
*The Sound of Sleat - Red in a Summer Night IX, 1970; Red Sky Over the Sound of Sleat XIII, 1972; Mars Violet Blues, 1976*



as an exciting artist. But he was searching for something else, something that would take him to Scotland, as his widow, Magda Salvesen, explains: “In 1957 he began to feel that he was already painting about the North, and that for his work it was an absolute necessity to leave New York to search for this imagined place; a physical need to be immersed in a place where nature was fiercer, more elemental, where man seemed small in the face of the enormity of larger forces.”

Schueler travelled back and forth between Scotland and the States in the intervening years. He taught for a while (he was head of painting at a university in Illinois) but by 1970, once he had enough money to quit, he moved to Mallaig.

His style had developed, giving way to intense works that reflected the relentlessness of the skies he experienced there. Later, when he had a more permanent base in Mallaig, he was able to live through the changing seasons, the altering light and the vast openness of what he saw as soon as he stepped out of his front door, looking across the Sound of Sleat. “His work,” says Andrew Sinclair, “is so subtle on first glance... it demands an almost meditative contemplation. Once you give in to that, his paintings draw you in. He wasn’t scared to leave it as it was. He had enough confidence not to over-work it – you don’t see that very often.”

Schueler developed Parkinson’s, which contributed to a different approach in his final phase of painting. He used broader strokes – the condition produced a tightening of his muscles, rather than causing him to shake – and he worked with a strong palette that Magda Salvesen remembers as being quite sombre. Although he painted for shorter spells, being in the studio remained his greatest satisfaction and his biggest challenge.

There are 38 works by Schueler on show at Resipole Studios, with more at the Mallaig Heritage Centre, Thurso Gallery, Paisley Museum and Art Galleries and others. The poet Anne Stevenson described Schueler as a ‘writer in paint and a compulsively honest painter in words’. However you read his work, it is worth seeing in the flesh, in the environment in which it was conceived, and under the skies in which it was born. ■

*For exhibition details, see [www.jonschueler.com](http://www.jonschueler.com)*