

Jon Schueler: The New York Years 1975 - 1981

Essay by Diana Ewer for the catalogue **Jon Schueler: The New York Years, 1975-1981** at David Findlay Jr Gallery, 724 Fifth Ave, New York, January 8-31, 2015

For the American painter Jon Schueler (1916-92) the sky held all things. An all-consuming passion, it inspired a lifetime of painting landscapes, seascapes, and skyscapes. By the mid 1970s the artist was increasingly concerned with the sky as the only appropriate visual metaphor for exploring mood and memory.

The inner dimension of Schueler's painting pulsates through his New York works on view at the David Findlay Jr Gallery. "Like windows in the walls" ¹, the skyscapes seek to unveil deep emotional responses. As our eyes move from canvas to canvas, we feel compelled to follow the artist's wistful, yet empowered brushstrokes that pull us in, through layers of light and shadow, through the sky to infinity. Participation is inevitable.

Increasingly disillusioned with the commercial emphasis of the art scene and the advent of Pop Art, in 1970 Schueler left New York, where for two decades before he had actively exhibited within the prevailing vanguard of Abstract Expressionism. He embarked on a five-year period of painting in Mallaig, a remote village in the Scottish Highlands. Stimulated by the turbulent weather conditions and surrendering to the isolation, Schueler refined his artistic focus with compelling clarity: *"Here I can see the drama of nature changed and compressed. Lands form, seas disappear, worlds fragment, colors merge or give birth to burning shapes, mountain snows show emerald green. Or, for a moment, life stops still when the gales pause and the sky clears after long days of careening sound and horizontal rain or snow. The sky: Father, Mother, Mistress, and the lonely mystery of endless love. Each moment of light or night is as complex as all life."* ²

A keen correspondent, Schueler nurtured ties with New York supporters throughout his years away. Renewed interest in his work was, in part, facilitated by the enthusiastic response of the art dealer Ben Heller who visited the Mallaig studio in 1974 and then placed paintings in significant American collections. Along with financial stability, this period brought two seminal museum shows, both in 1975: a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art and a three-person exhibition, *"Landscapes, Interior and Exterior: Avery, Rothko, and Schueler"* at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

This curatorial and commercial recognition provided Schueler with the necessary momentum to return to New York in 1975. However, Scotland remained an important touchstone, the artist recognizing the necessity of keeping the two locations in deliberate counterpoint. His dream of *"flowing back and forth between the two places I loved and the two tensions which were so much a part of my being"* ³ would be realized through the annual summer vacations taken in Scotland.

Working high up in loft studios - briefly on Jones Street in Greenwich Village, then from 1977 in Chelsea - the sky pressing in through every window, gave Schueler an invigorated creative perspective. These studio interiors provided him with a transformative space that enabled him to get *"inside the space. My nose right up against the canvas, losing sight of the edges, of the limitations, trying to feel*

the lack of boundary, even as the boundary forms the limitless space." ⁴ Thrilled by the possibility of painting larger canvases again, he knew that he had finally found a scale, one that could take in the smallest and the most expansive, equal to the range of his memories of the sky and the ambition of his artistic vision.

The skyscapes on view here represent new dimensions, delicately sought during a period of great inner strength, and undoubtedly marked by his marriage to his life partner Magda Salvesen in 1976.

Encouraging meditation and wide open to interpretation, they are infused with light and lyricism.

Poised between polarities, these paintings refuse firm boundaries between abstraction and realism, artifice and nature, the inner world and outer world, the past and present, the personal and universal.

The creative oppositions shaping Schueler's skyscapes were present long before he became a painter.

Flying as a navigator on bombing missions during World War II - sitting in the Plexiglass-nose of a B-17 bomber - he found a beauty in the skies equal to their horror: "*There in combat and before, the sky held all things, life and death and fear and joy and love. It held the incredible beauty of nature.*" ⁵

"*To Paula: The New Year's Grey*" 1976 captures the essence of a sky rich in melancholic emptiness. We search for reference points on the horizon, but any attempt is stalled by a restless fluidity in the layering of paint. A visual metaphor for the layering of memory, the predominant color - battleship grey - evokes a sense of longing in endless loop. The title suggests a deeply personal painting, but its appeal is universal.

Despite the enduring influence of Abstract Expressionism - particularly of Clyfford Still (1904-80), his teacher at the California School of Fine Arts - Schueler remained foremost a painter of nature. The work entitled "*Abstraction*" 1978, possibly a playful misnomer on the part of Schueler, does point to his continual engagement with ongoing art historical discourses. He certainly upheld a commitment to the importance of truth in art through a singular vision. However, unlike the Abstract Expressionists, he would never deny his influences, which were diverse and included literary and musical (especially jazz) figures as well as visual artists.

Schueler embraced many painters, but frequently turned to the later work of JMW Turner. Inspired by a recent trip to Morocco, "*Desert Blues*" 1978 radiates a warm pulsating energy, the intensity of light behind dissolutions of form becoming an expression of something far beyond the physical. Like Turner, Schueler sought to push "further into nature"⁶, while remaining cognizant of his human limitations.

The New York paintings (1975 - 1981) retain an immense power today. Recognizing himself that this was a period of great inner strength, Schueler wrote, "*Before, my paintings seemed to me to speak of the violence of motion and emotion. Now that motion is still there but quiet and invisible half the time.*"

⁷ It was always his intention to return to New York; the city's creative energy and intellectual stimulation were a very necessary part of his being. With raw emotions tempered and his artistic vision fully formed following the Mallaig Years of 1970-75, Schueler balanced the contraries running through these skyscapes, allowing them to move effortlessly between nature and abstraction, reality and memory, past and present. These New York years would underpin an audacious exhibition in Scotland,

held during the summer of 1981 at the Talbot Rice Art Center. Within the towering walls of the gallery itself, Schueler painted a series of expansive skylscapes (the two largest 18 feet in length) while spectators looked on from the floor above. The artist entitled the show "*The Search*" laying bare his passion for the sky as the supreme metaphor for the subtle and complex rhythms of mood and memory.

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¹Whitney Balliett, *Profiles, City Voices: Jon Schueler and Magda Salvesen*, *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1985, p. 36

²Whitney Museum of American Art, *Jon Schueler*, exhibition brochure, April 24 - May 25, 1975

³Ed. Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter's Life*, 1999, Picador USA, New York, p. 354

⁴Ed. Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, *op. cit.*, p. 280

⁵Ed. Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, *op. cit.*, p. 296

⁶Ed. Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, *op. cit.*, p. 223. Schueler wrote of Turner, "When I saw the Turners through the years and compared them with other work, it has seemed to me that he went further into nature ... in paint than any other painter. He, the stylist of incredible facility, did most to break down style, to destroy it, to find the possibility of paint talking as paint, as an extension of the most immediate perception and sensibility, so that it became most like nature ... This is what I would like my paintings to be."

⁷Ed. Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, *op. cit.*, p. 202