



Jon Schueler in his studio, Mallaig, Scotland, 1973

Photograph © Jon Schueler Estate

## An eye born of light, sky and sea

As Scotland celebrates the centenary of the artist Jon Schueler, John Francis salutes his passion for the natural world

*I have looked each day at the lonely horizon, at that line (or is it a line?) where the sea and the sky meet. I have tried to understand it and tried to know how to paint it and what the painting of it might mean. I have seen light immediately above and I have seen light immediately below. I have tried to understand the shadow and the reflection upon reflection. I have seen everything definite, the line, the light, the shadow, the color, on a clear day, and I have seen everything disappear in the mist, the fog, or the passing of a cloud. After many days, I had seen so much that I could understand nothing. Yet I had seen enough to try to paint. It would have been easier to paint – it was easier to paint – before I had looked.*

In his memoir, *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter's Life*, published in 1999, Jon Schueler captured the struggle and the endurance that characterise the lives of so many artists in their encounters with the natural environment, indeed with Nature itself. There is no middle way, no possible compromise with the subject. Equivocating is not an option, as the creative drive to engage with Nature is unrelenting. The absolute necessity of total immersion is inescapable. And the courage to be creative never falters.

In his writing, Jon (whom I knew as a friend) subtly exposed the constant searching and sometimes desperate frustrations of those long years before the canvas. It was a journey that he chose to make in both New York and the Scottish Highlands, where he found

the essential inspiration for his ongoing encounter with the natural world. His paintings are meditative studies on the environment that we have placed at risk without fully understanding what we have to lose by unrestrained growth and exploitation of non-renewable natural resources. He was not a campaigning environmentalist, but instead expressed his concerns largely through the medium of oil on canvas.

This year, to mark the centenary of Jon Schueler's birth, there are many opportunities to see his work exhibited at different venues throughout Scotland. His paintings are also included in many permanent collections in Scotland, the US and elsewhere.

Jon was a long-standing member of the New York School of Abstract Expressionists, alongside Pollock,



Sea Light: Dreaming, I (1981) by Jon Schueler

152 cm x 132 cm, oil on canvas © Jon Schueler Estate

Newman and Rothko, who collectively brought the understanding and appreciation of the visual arts into an entirely new dimension in the late 1940s. However, Jon was different. He could even be described as a disciple of J.M.W. Turner because he believed that Turner alone had mastered the ability to reveal the colour, form and intense

imagery of the sky itself.

During the Second World War, when he served in Britain as a US Army Air Corps navigator, Jon learned something of the natural beauty that prevails on the west coast of Scotland and vowed to immerse himself in the magical and mystical qualities of that “lonely horizon”.

He found his vocation during a

working visit in 1957 to Mallaig, the fishing village that later became a central part of his existence. Here he encountered Nature in all its diversity and strength. He engaged with the ever-changing state of the sea and sky – the hauntingly dynamic imagery of so much of his painting. He went out with local fishermen to face the rawness and

savagery of hostile waves whipped to a frenzy by North Atlantic gales howling through The Minch and across Eigg and Rhum, the adjacent islands of the Inner Hebrides.

He walked in the snow clouds and the driving rain sweeping across the rocky headlands, retained these images deep inside and then returned to his studio to confront the ultimate reality of the artist: the blank canvas stretched and primed ready to receive significant, vibrant and urgent brushmarks. *My Garden is the Sea* (1957) suggests this involvement with Nature through the vibrancy of the colours and the use of a palette knife to build up the expressive forms. Drawing on his own visual memory of long hours flying amidst clouds at high altitude and contrasting this with revelations of summer nights over the Sleat peninsula, Jon continued to work with energy and enthusiasm in both his New York and Mallaig studios to create a formidable array of paintings without edges.

These are powerful and complex structures, which reach into the depths of the soul, unearth the archetypes and scratch at the unconscious mind. They are Jungian in the truest sense and reflect Jon's personal journey through many turbulent relationships with women and other artists. This was an artist who did not spare himself any of life's vicissitudes – they were his burden, his trial, his cross and his release. This was his remarkable achievement.

Those who carefully examine the achievements of the New York School will recognise that its members should not be sub-divided into early or late participants. They were all drawing on the same well for their inspiration: a hopeful world being reborn in the tragic aftermath of two world wars. It is often said that this group of artists took painting to the limit of free form and deconstruction of figurative line.

They have left behind a truly astonishing collection of wondrous images to constantly remind us of our own responsibility towards Nature and thereby intimations of our own mortality. The paintings convey us forward into the future with a message to our grandchildren and their grandchildren that this solitary planet deserves and warrants our vigilant care and respect. The duty

of stewardship for the natural environment, especially for wild land with its diversity of flora and fauna, should continue to be pursued. It remains the foundation of environmental ethics and sound conservation management.

I was introduced to Jon Schueler in 1970, during his first Edinburgh exhibition at the Richard Demarco Gallery. We found an immediate rapport and soon embarked on a wide-ranging discussion of environmental issues. Jon had decided to rent the old schoolhouse, 'Romasaig', not far from Mallaig, as his studio. It had an open prospect of the sea, facing across the Sound of Sleat, and Jon soon set about painting the changing skies over the Sleat peninsula, that most southerly point of the Isle of Skye. The outlook from the studio was the source of much inspiration.

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In the mid-1980s, I was appointed to lead the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) in Scotland, and the environmental discussions with Jon continued. At the time there were many political struggles over statutory protection of land judged to be of intrinsic Nature conservation value throughout Scotland. This was the primary focus of NCC effort, and it was inevitably controversial. Jon and I shared the overall perspective of a just and sustainable society that upholds the identification and scientific assessment of these scarce habitats. The lasting effect of environmental designation, which attaches a restrictive covenant to this wild land, is profound. Everyone in the community will benefit over the longer term.

During the intervening years my

friendship with Jon had developed considerably and I continued to visit him in his studios on both sides of the Atlantic. He had an acute concern and rising awareness of the way in which the values of Nature conservation and environmental protection were being constantly challenged in the political arena.

The artist, often surprisingly, remains in touch with the innovative capacities of science, engineering and technology, all of which contribute to our perception of the future. At the same time he or she acknowledges the struggle for survival in difficult and troubled times across a frequently war-torn world. The artist will never expect to have a comfortable life. And, as Jon's own significant marks on canvas and on paper serve to remind us, art – like science – is a belief system that goes to the centre of our being. It is a spiritual path.

*This abstraction of the sea and the sky and Sleat – I was possessed by it, wanted to walk into it, to disappear into it. I was exhausted afterward. There was no colour I could define: the greys were not grey, the silver was not silver, the blacks were not black. It was all light and all darkness. Believe me, I have seen eternity, and it is frightening and it is most beautiful, more beautiful and more powerful than any man or any woman or the works of either. I wondered, afterward, how I'd ever have the arrogance to paint again; yet it is now even less possible to do other than paint.*

Jon Schueler deserves to be remembered for his courage and determination and for his willingness to underpin his artistic expression with thoughts, words and deeds that reflect his own generosity of spirit and concerns for the future of the global environment. **R**

John Francis is former Director of the Nature Conservancy Council, Scotland. A guide to exhibitions of Jon Schueler's work across Scotland in 2016 is available at [www.jonschueler.com](http://www.jonschueler.com). For the Jon Schueler Symposium and Exhibition to be held in May at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Isle of Skye, see [www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/en](http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/en). Quotations are from *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter's Life* by Jon Schueler, edited by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, Picador USA, 1999.