

JON SCHUELER: THE CASTELLI YEARS. By Jay Parini

Essay for *The New Criterion*, November 2010, pp 46-47

Jon Schueler (1916-1992), the American painter, was often grouped with the second generation artists of Abstract Expression, although - as this new show of his paintings from the mid-fifties (October 6-28 at David Findlay Jr. Fine Art) makes clear - his body of work really is much broader in its affiliations. If anything, his painting reaches back to Monet and the French Impressionists, while it leans toward the mystical realism of J.M.W. Turner, who would become a lasting influence on Schueler during his last prolific decades, when he lived part-time in Scotland and often painted visions of the sea and sky in eerie contention.

I first became acquainted with Schueler, the man and artist, in the early seventies, when I saw a one-man show in Edinburgh. A tightly coiled, thin man with a goatee and intense eyes, Schueler seemed willing and able to discuss every aspect of his painting, its influences, and the directions it was going. I learned from him that he had apprenticed himself to Clyfford Still (1904-1980) after the war (in which he served on bombing raids over Europe as a navigator, sitting in one of those plexiglass noses typical of the B-17s). Still was, of course, a leading figure among the first generation of Abstract Expressionists. Not surprisingly, Schueler's earliest paintings often looked a bit like Still's, with their zigzag lightning bolts, their vivid displays of color, and palette-knife gestures that gave to the paintings a thickly textured aura.

In the mid-fifties, Leo Castelli discovered Schueler. He was a visionary dealer with a keen nose for talent, and he would eventually represent many of the prominent painters of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. He offered Schueler, then 40 but hardly well known, the first one-man show at his new gallery on East 77th Street in 1957. The fifteen paintings in this show are from this original exhibition and a second one in 1959, and they include such striking canvases as *Summer: Martha's Vineyard* (1957), an evocative canvas where shimmering purples mingle with yellows, with some earthy tones that might be the soft hills of the Vineyard. There is also a patch of blue that forms a far horizon - the point toward which the eye is ultimately drawn.

Another painting that impressed me is *The First Snow Cloud* (1958), where bold slanting strokes are dabbed on (representing clouds, perhaps), with dark purples in the upper left of the canvas bleeding into lighter shades, with a touch of yellow here and there to give a hint of sunlight to an otherwise somber picture at the tipping point between seasons. At the bottom the colors in the sky are mirrored in a horizontal layer of paint that may represent the sea.

Schueler was, foremost, a painter of nature, drawn by seascapes and cloudscape that become emblems of spiritual or psychological states, with each image representing a *paysage moralisé* - to borrow a phrase from an Auden poem by that title. That is, no seascape or landscape in his painting is simply itself; it gestures in directions, seeking to inspire, to terrify and, mainly, to seize viewers, drawing them into a psychological state.

As evident from this assortment of paintings, the artist was trying to find himself in these years with Castelli, searching for a subject and manner that would embody his vision. One sees the beginnings of the mature painter emerging in such paintings as *Winter Storm* (1958), where chunks of reality seem to hang in perilous approximation, and where the eye is drawn into a vortex, as the broad swathes of maroon and pinks usher the eye toward a distant blue center. Space is the subject, and how the textures of land and sky form a kind of mind/body split: one should note the bottom horizontal layer, the base upon which the more vertical and massive representations of sky are set. This layer is often present in these paintings as a point of departure.

Again, it seems that Turner - the English painter of inchoate vision -- is beginning to exert a pull, effecting a transformation that will continue, as Schueler visits and later moves to Mallaig, a coastal town in Scotland, and finds in the damp, dizzying skies of that intense seascape the ideal symbol of his own search for meaning. And it would be a misnomer to call such work "abstract." Even in the mid-fifties, Schueler resisted the notion of abstraction and wished to distance himself from, for example, Mark Rothko.

In 1957, he wrote a revelatory letter to Jon I.H. Baur, at the Whitney Museum (which had bought one of his paintings from Castelli) to argue against classifying him with the Abstract Expressionist group. Here is an excerpt from that letter:

I think that if there is one single word that is going to be troublesome, it is going to be "abstract." The word has had too many specific connotations in regard to art - and still does. I personally am trying to "make real" my vision rather than trying to abstract nature, and I think that there is a big difference. I am interested in reality - in the reality of my vision - not realism on the one hand, nor abstraction on the other. As regards painting - the thinking about painting, the use of paint, the search for the image and the truth in the painting - I have been trying to move from abstract to real, from symbol to fact.

As Schueler seems to have understood, the movement from symbol to fact is never quite possible. A brushstroke of paint cannot be otherwise than symbolic, in obvious ways. That is, it never becomes the thing it represents, and so it gestures beyond itself, as do images and symbols by their very nature.

And so we get a major painting by Schueler such as *Snow Cloud and Blue Sky* (1958), where we can see that the artist is really looking *at* something: a seascape that gives us a small patch of blue sky contending mightily with red and black clouds, perhaps the snow clouds of the title. It's a vision of contrarities, with various states or moods in opposition. It's a scene of struggle, and it's abstract only in that viewers of the canvas will find themselves mirrored, caught and swirled in the energetic strokes of the brush, unable to break free of a thrash of energies represented in short strokes of the brush. There is a thin line to suggest terra firma, as ever, in gradations of blue, red, and black, but it's quite a dark strip of earth, even frightening, and merges with water (in any case), so one could not stand there. The viewer has to concede the dominating sky, entering the drama of Schueler's contesting moods.

Sometimes, with thickenings of paint and short strokes, the paintings of Jon Schueler in this period become quite surreal in affect, as with *Evening I* (1957), where one almost seems to drift in the

atmosphere of Monet, with his famous lily ponds that always appear to gesture to so much more than material realities. Monet sought to frame the shifting effects of light, air, and water, much in contrast to the Cubists, who dismissed him and sought more permanent and stable forms. During the Castelli years in particular and in pictures such as *Evening I*, the Monet influence seems to predominate, as a writer noted in *Life* (December 2, 1957). "Old master's Modern Heirs" is fascinating to read, half a century later. As the unsigned article observes, any number of painters, including Jon Schueler, had begun to repossess Monet in the mid-fifties. While working close to nature, these painters (Hyde Solomon and Sam Francis were two others mentioned along with Schueler) sought to create landscapes with a pulse of brushstrokes or thick smears of paint from the palette knife that represent an effort to simulate the actual motion of nature, that sense of becoming.

Jon Schueler was a student of this process, the process of becoming. His landscapes - seascapes, mostly, during the later decades - seem perpetually alive, with churning colors, with a clash of moods, with spectacular drama on every canvas. It's as though he did not wish to drift in directions taken by such contemporaries as Rauschenberg or Johns or Warhol. Pop Art had no appeal for him, as he had set his feet on a clear path now. As one might have expected, he and Leo Castelli would, in the late fifties, part ways. Castelli would be drawn to more and more to painters affiliated with movement from Pop Art to Neo-Dada and Neo-expressionism. Schueler would go his own way, exploring a vision of Turner, making sublime images of sea and sky.

© Jay Parini