

Jon Schueler's Song

Essay by Mary Ann Caws for the brochure **Jon Schueler's Song**, at The Lobby Gallery, 499 Park Avenue, New York, July 7, 2012-January 4, 2013

Looking at these large paintings by Jon Schueler (1916-1992), you might believe that Claude Monet's water lilies in the Orangerie had been miraculously reinterpreted in terms of sky, and transported to the walls of 499 Park Avenue, imparting an unexpected radiance to its dark walls.

"I found every passion in the sky." In *The Sound of Sleat* (edited from his journals and letters by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau in 1999) Schueler writes of the way his World War II experiences as a navigator in the US Army Air Force found their way into his paintings to produce a kind of "war sky." The best testimony to his life and work, this memoir recounts his childhood in Wisconsin and war years, his postwar California training with Clyfford Still and Richard Diebenkorn, and his East Coast association with the Abstract Expressionists and the Leo Castelli Gallery. We read of his impassioned living and working in Mallaig, Scotland (1957-58 and 1970-75) and his subsequent annual visits to this fishing village, separated from the Isle of Skye by the Sound of Sleat.

We keep thinking of the sky in these paintings, for although it is never a question of seeing or living only in upward flight, each of these works triumphs, by its own power of convergence and color, over any flatness. In *Changes: Red, Blues and Light*, (1982) for example, we have a strong sense of the way the various forms weave in and out, moving back and forth through white clouds and edging their way into our own space, now transformed by all this light and motion.

Such light! And yet none of these five works from between 1978 and 1985 were actually painted in his intimate Mallaig studio, but in his large, 4000 square foot New York loft (acquired in 1976) that provided the opportunity for the breadth and scope of four of the paintings. And, in a sense, all these works, like the fifth, could be part of the series entitled *The Search* (1981), which were painted in the huge and high University of Edinburgh gallery where they were to be exhibited. Jon Schueler's ongoing search is self-reflective as he seeks the myriad ways in which colors can break through all impediments--as if these walls were to go skyward. We might imagine the remembered *Blue Skies of Long Past Adventures* (1984) entering our own present. This sense of immediacy relates to the principal thing Jon Schueler learned from Clyfford Still-- that is, the moral responsibility of the person painting: to deeply affect the viewer.

Strangely enough, these northern skies also seem to incorporate the 1973 memory of Moroccan dryness in *Desert, 1* (1978-80) -- the earliest of these paintings so beautifully displayed. Look at the great red swaths coming at us over the blue streak at the base. In New York, Schueler writes of the conflict and conversation between the land, the sky, and the waterscape: "Blue patches showing, red thoughts..." and then, from Maine, in the same summer of 1962, "Red is my color of memory." He muses back on painting reds in Scotland in 1957-58, and on the reflections of red cloud on red sea. "I took the red of rage with me to Scotland ...Rage red in my heart..." The reds invade and invigorate the very stuff of *Desert I*, and later, that of *Blue Skies of Long Past Adventures*. In an uncanny way, the mad enthusiasm Jon Schueler felt for the Scottish sea and sky and their emotional power reaches us as we stand in this

very building, a quintessential part of the New York cityscape. Even when he is painting In New York, Schueler dreams of the north, and looking upwards in the canyons of the streets, he strikes a balance between city and sea, between the west and the east coast of America, and between America and the Scotland for which he so passionately cares.

“I had wanted to live in one of my paintings,” says Schueler. Yes, despite the distance they imply, and often, their great size, they feel dwelled in. The force of this painter’s mental and physical gestures--through the motion back and forth of the colors and shapes---fully occupies each space. And often, we sense a kind of joyousness, along with the depth of the rage. “I’m painting the dream of nature, not nature itself,” he said. The power of his work comes from that dream.

This is a sky song indeed: the paintings sing aloud or quietly. Such works of art never sit still, and their dynamism provokes our own dynamic response. In answering the force of these openings of the imagination, in summoning our most vital intensity against whatever darkness they and we encounter, we move, remembering them, into the light of the street outside.

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