

Jon Schueler: the Mallaig Years

Essay by Phyllis Braff for the catalogue **Jon Schueler: The Mallaig Years, 1970-75**, David Findlay Jr Gallery, September 5-29, 2012

Many artists envision ideal circumstance that could potentially facilitate and spur their creative and aesthetic inspirations. Both Jon Schueler's paintings and extensive memoir¹ suggest that his visions and dreams were especially ambitious. While Schueler first visited the Scottish village of Mallaig in the winter of 1957-58, he returned in 1970 to pursue what proved to be a five-year period of concentrated painting in this scenic hamlet in the Western Highlands. He long fantasized about the potential impact that experiencing churning atmospheric conditions might have on his approach to art. Two decades of exhibiting as a participant within the prevailing avant-garde of Abstract Expressionism had deepened Schueler's questions about relating pigment to both external and subjective experiences. He believed that under powerful climatic circumstances he could explore these issues... possibly even realizing an important breakthrough.

The resulting canvases are often turbulent with energy. Some are vibrant; others are somber. Some paintings project a single dominant color while others project a wide field of action. All of Schueler's works align with and contribute to the sensibilities of an era when artists and their audiences were increasingly questioning the line separating abstraction from nature. In 1975, the year Schueler returned to New York, the Cleveland Museum of Art presented *Landscapes, Interior and Exterior: Avery, Rothko and Schueler*. The exhibition implied that Avery processed an image based on observation, that Rothko worked from an internal route, and that Schueler blended both approaches. Many of the Mallaig paintings were included in the presentation.

Schueler's blending of nature and abstraction during this Scottish Highland period embraces and builds on a rich art vocabulary. One or more floating abstract shapes appearing on a painterly field often relates to the artist's studio translation of configurations adjacent to Mallaig, particularly the island of Eigg in the watery stretch known as the Sound of Sleat that runs between the mainland and the Isle of Skye and beyond. The sense of non-referential forms constructing the surface is also strong in the pale *Jane Series, II*, and in the gray toned *Sky Near Rhum, II*, even though the paintings are distillations of direct experiences.

Surfaces projecting constant pigment motion are another carryover from the sensibilities associated with Abstract Expressionism. Rippling motion activates the ephemeral *Sun Leaving, III*, for example, while pulsating movement in the golden yellows of the large vertical *Sun Leaving, IX* seems to parallel the unpredictability of nature. Schueler spoke of his attempts to convey "the skies in visible motion" when recorded by a documentary film crew in his Mallaig studio.²

Schueler also developed the Mallaig canvases with a keen mastery of abstraction's visual tensions. This is especially notable in color juxtapositions. *Whisper*, with its parallel bands of warm and cool tones, is one example; another is *Reflection: Red and Blue*, which features a horizontal purple rectangular form gaining resonance from the surrounding red field. Powerful, too, is the tension generated by the tipping

yellow shape suspended against parallel sections of lavender and gray in *Fantasy: Light Near Rhum*. In a number of canvases, including *Red Sun, I*, Schueler also tests the pull between multiple readings created by a disc shape that can be either cosmic symbol or geometric compositional component.

Abstraction's embrace of minimal color definitions, an approach that requires the eye to adjust and accommodate chromatic changes, is especially well suited to Schueler's explorations of atmospheric phenomena. The dusty toned *Reflection: Red Sun* and the paler *Reflection: Shadow and Light, I* both mesmerize as they slowly reveal their forms and as these forms seem to change characteristics.

There were compelling subjective thoughts fueling Schueler's search for the artist's role in what he considered "the mysteries of the skies"³ In his memoirs he writes of his childhood sensitivity to Wisconsin sky phenomena, and he recalls the strong emotions associated with his flight time as a B-17 navigator based in England during World War II. Both navigator and bombardier flew in the Plexiglas nose of the B-17, "as though suspended in the sky."⁴

Another contributing factor was Schueler's awareness of J. M. W. Turner's interest in making pigment achieve ephemeral cosmic effects. During Schueler's California art school years, his respected teacher, Clyfford Still, had brought Turner's work to the attention of students. A decade later, Schueler visited this art in London. He explored ambitious techniques such as multiple layers of colored glazes while in Mallaig, and this aspect of his research into maximum luminosity may have been influenced in part by the 19th century master.

Schueler's interests went well beyond presenting an impression of nature's luminosity, however, and were directed toward probing cognitive issues, memory, psychology and a range of personal factors. He humanized nature in a very direct manner and expanded possibilities for the subconscious to become part of a painting. The Mallaig paintings are significant in the way Schueler processes content generated by external sensations--blending this content with the complexities of late 20th century abstraction.

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¹Jon Schueler's manuscript was edited by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau and published under the title *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter's Life* in 1999 by Picador USA, New York.

²Jon Schueler: *An Artist and his Vision*, Films of Scotland, 1972.

³Idem.

⁴Schueler, *The Sound of Sleat*, op.cit., p. 296.