JON SCHUELER

1916-1992

COMING UP FOR AIR & REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUND OF SLEAT

‘Coming Up for Air’: Paintings by Jon Schueler

At
Waterhouse & Dodd
16 Savile Row,
London W1S 3PL

30th September –
28th October

Waterhouse & Dodd are pleased to present two concurrent exhibitions of the work of the American Abstract Expressionist painter Jon Schueler (1916-1992), in association with the Jon Schueler Estate.
In an exhibition of twenty oil paintings in their gallery on Savile Row they trace Schueler’s artistic trajectory from pupil of Clyfford Still in California, and friend and associate of Joan Mitchell, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and Helen Frankenthaler in New York in the 1950s, to a painter who found fresh air and renewed inspiration in the remote West Highlands of Scotland. “Coming up for air” was how Schueler himself described his escape to the Scotland he had dreamed about since World War II.

Cover: Cloud over Knoydart, 1957 59 x 102 cm

Above: Vineyard Study, 1957 51 x 92 cm

‘Jon Schueler:
Reflections on the Sound of Sleat’

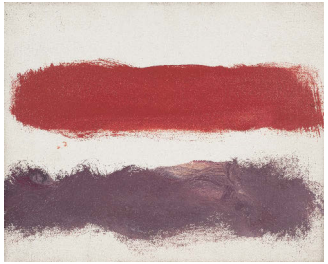
At The Caledonian Club,
9 Halkin Street, London SW1X 7DR

29th September – 4th November

To coincide with the exhibition in Savile Row, Diana Ewer has curated a suite of Schueler’s Scottish paintings at the Caledonian Club. Painted on the Sound of Sleat in the ‘70s and ‘80s, they show how effectively Scotland healed many of the demons from which Schueler sought to escape: his difficult childhood, the guilt and anguish of his personal life, and above all the distressing flashbacks from his wartime service as navigator in a US Air Force bomber. As a committed expressionist painter, Schueler harnessed the pain of these memories to create powerful artworks, building in layer upon layer of paint remembered and re-imagined skies of unfathomable depth.

Right: November, ’81, Romasaig, Scotland, 1981 152 x 132 cm

Shortly before America entered the Second World War, in 1941 Jon Schueler enlisted in the US Air Force and subsequently served as navigator on a B-17 Flying Fortress; by the time he was discharged on medical grounds he was one of only two survivors from its original crew. Suspended in the plane's plexi-glass nose during the immensely hazardous daylight raids over France and Germany, Jon developed his own highly complex relationship with the sky, one that was to fuel a lifetime of art. He always retained "the angle of view from those flying days", an imagined raised viewing point, realised as if he were still flying at 15,000 feet. When painting at Mallaig in Scotland, he explained his habit of going out in the fishing boats to draw inspiration from the coast and skies - "by going out to sea it detaches me from the ground". In this sense, whether flying or on the water, Schueler is literally immersed in his paintings - "I'm in the painting, in the sky, in the sea."

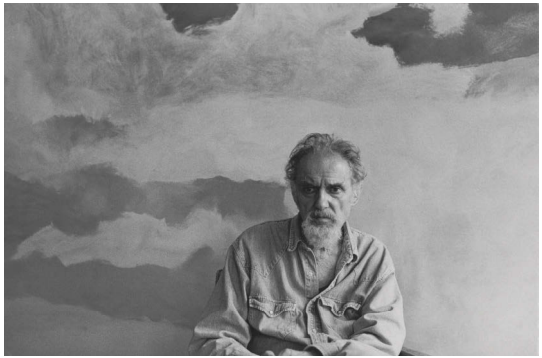


Left: Loch Eishort, 1969 89 x 71 cm
Above: Rest Orange III, 1988 36 x 48 cm
Sky Shifts VII, 1984 20 x 25 cm
Sound, 1968 51 x 91 cm

Jon Schueler was one of the second generation of Abstract Expressionist painters, a group of artists who confirmed New York's place at the very centre of the art world. In the 1950s, along with fellow artists like Joan Mitchell, Norman Bluhm, Mark Rothko and Franz Kline, he ate most nights at the Cedar Street Tavern, and like them he did battle with the blank canvas, baring his soul and committing his feelings to it with honesty, sensitivity and integrity. Much of his career, even while in New York, was spent examining nature. But as he later said, "I am not a nature painter, although deeply concerned with nature. My most profound impulse is to confront myself and my thoughts on the canvas."

Thus he would commit to memory the changing skies and patterns of cloud and mist and sea, and later in his studio, as he described it, "all alone, he (the artist) looks at the bare canvas and looking at the bare canvas he now confronts himself, and somewhere, somewhere out of that comes the vision."

Left:
Red Sky Romasaig IV, 1988 92 x 81 cm
Above:
Mushroom Rosey, 1991 25 x 30 cm
Winter Red II, 1990 25 x 35 cm
Red Tomorrow, 1988 25 x 40 cm



Above: Sahara I, 1973 183 x 200 cm
Right: The Search: Summer Sky, Black, 1981 91 x 112 cm
The Search: Variations, Umber and Black I, 1981 36 x 46 cm
The Search: Variations, Black and Light II, 1981 31 x 41 cm

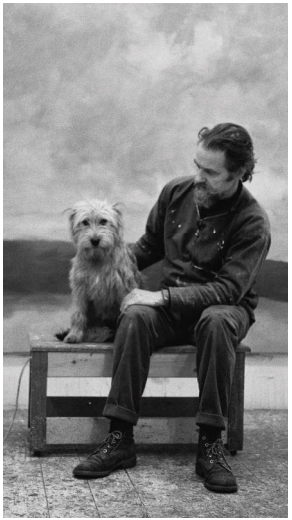
Schueler first discovered Scotland towards the end of the 1950s, and at this same time his painting technique gradually changed. Until 1958 much of his work depended upon the palette knife, “the killing power of the knife” as he melodramatically described it. Thereafter he started to build up the paint in thinner layers, applied with large brushes, often scrubbed into the canvas, each layer leaving the suggestion of what lay beneath. This process was, as he saw it, “an endless rending of veils”. Thus he would tear aside the mist, or the clouds, or even the blue sky, and peer behind to see what was there, perhaps a light, perhaps the “light of truth”, or perhaps some deeper mystery.

Through the 1960s many of his paintings carry some vestige of ‘the woman in the sky’: sometimes, he has suggested, his own mother who died when he was just 6 months old, and later sometimes his wife Magda. And when all figuration had gone there is a sense of what might have been there and even, as Jon himself proposed, some residue of the figure’s sensuality.

When in 1970 Schueler finally came to settle in Mallaig, making a home and studio in the former school-house named ‘Romasaig’, he had come to know that part of Scotland well. In this small fishing village on the Sound of Sleat, the distant islands of Egg and Rum and the southern tip of Skye all merge with sea and sky; when he first saw it, Schueler recalled “the geiger counter fell off the wall!”

This landscape under skies that were in perpetual motion, lit by the distinctive Northern light - this was the backdrop of his dreams of the past 25 years.

He redoubled his acute observations of nature before doing battle with the bare canvas. And the influence of other artists crept more noticeably into his work, most notably J M W Turner whose late paintings Clyfford Still had introduced him to in the 1940s (though the other Abstract Expressionists like Joan Mitchell would always rigorously deny any such external influence). Schueler still retained his sensitivity, which remained un-calloused and still raw, but it’s as if his fear of failure in the face of the blank canvas had receded.



Left:
Red Sleat: Blues and Gold, 1977
92 x 112 cm
Silver Sound: Winsor and Mars, 1975 92 x 112 cm
Above:
Neist Point I, 1989 25 x 31 cm

WATERHOUSE & DODD

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Coming Up for Air

at 16 Savile Row, London W1S 3PL

30th September – 28th October
Open Monday - Friday 9.30am - 6pm

Special Openings:
Saturday 1st October 11am - 4pm
Frieze Week:
Thursday 13th October 6 - 8pm
Saturday 15th October 11am - 4pm

Reflections on the Sound of Sleat

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Viewing by appointment only

Please contact
diana@dianaewer.com or
jonathan@waterhousedodd.com

Red Sky II, 1980 76 x 61 cm

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