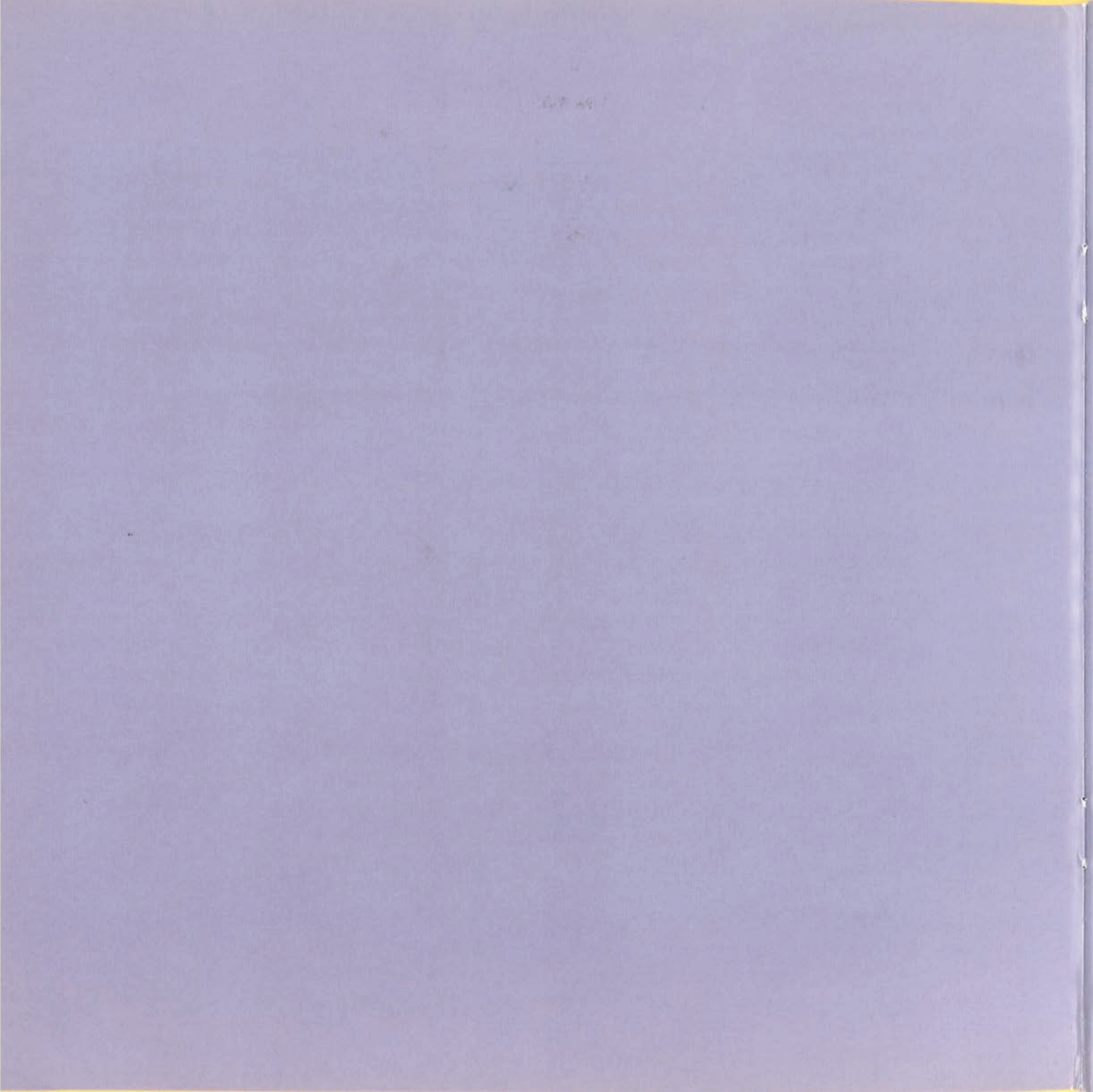


**Jon Schueler**  
*Skyscapes*



**Jon Schueler**  
*Skyscapes*

## Sounding and Responding: The Paintings of Jon Schueler

### *Introduction*

The Scottish landscape had a profound effect on the evolution of Jon Schueler's painting. From 1970 to 1975 the North American Abstract Expressionist artist was a full time resident of Mallaig, where he established a studio in a former school-house named *Romasaig*. Between 1975 and his death in 1992, although based in New York, Schueler continued to spend three months of most years working in this studio overlooking The Sound of Sleat on the West Coast of Scotland. The artist first painted in Mallaig as early as 1957.

This location, and particularly the land/sea/ skyscapes he encountered there came to have an abiding influence on the development of his work.

### *Sounding/Responding*

Schueler's relationship to nature is not a slavishly imitative or mimetic one nor is it governed by a descriptive impulse. Rather, he harnesses the energies unleashed by the forces of nature and transforms them through the act of painting - striving to find painterly equivalents. This initiates a search for the verisimilitudinous where the canvas conveys a truth-value or authenticity, a form of *responding* derived from and in tune with the *soundings* Schueler has gathered through his keen observations and experience of nature. He was acutely responsive to wild nature, particularly skies and their ever-changing conditions. This is evidenced not only by his luminous painting but also through his insightful and revelatory writing.<sup>1</sup>

There exists a productive tension between representation and the abstract that distinguishes much of Schueler's later output. At best this tension institutes a gently abrasive relation that enables the work to revel in shifting ambiguity and shrouded enigma. It becomes the generator of a harmonious productive discord. Consequently, the painting occupies a middle ground between the two, allowing the work to trade in levels of truthful inexactness or purposeful ambivalence.

Beclouded and mist-laden skies are transposed through paint on canvases that not only conjure these natural phenomena, but have become so firmly lodged as part of our Scottish landscape image-repertoire that curiously, enigmatically, our encounters with certain conditions of climate and landscape have the uncanny effect of bringing Schueler's painting to mind. Paradoxically or complementarily Schueler represents the landscape and the landscape comes to represent Schueler. A cycle of reflexivity is established where cause and effect become blurred, subject and object separations overruled. There is a mutual recognition and contiguity, a consonance. The allure of the Mallaig landscape and the skyscapes over The Sound of Sleat, especially the dull luminosity of snow clouds, provided a fitting match for Schueler's inner turbulence, passions and visions.

An outside is interiorised and in turn transformed and made manifestly exterior once again, in the form of the work. A particular process of *subjectivation* is initiated and sustained through the activity of painting. This process of enfolding, unfolding and refolding of interior and exterior produces a distillation, a concentration, and the rhythms and temporalities

of this exchange set in train a *pulsional* movement - outside/inside/outside creating an erotic charge: a *jouissance*.<sup>2</sup>

The *soundings* Schueler gathered from his empathic observations of nature made demands for the painter to respond as a *painter*, instigating a quest to seek visual corroboration in paint. In many ways, the painting becomes a sounding board or *abat-voix*<sup>3</sup> for the forces of nature, amplifying the *visual* sounds and near-silences recorded through his assiduous studies of natural phenomena, particularly cloud-laden skies. In these canvases, we hear through the eyes. These sounds, the visual sounds of the sky, might be clear as a bell or so muffled as to be barely audible. Nature is simultaneously concentrated, focused and amplified through Schueler's work. Our attention is held when the demands of nature find their riposte in the demands of art. A fitting symmetry is established between the world outwith and the world within the frame of the canvas. A vital equivalence emerges between a psychology, an artist's temperament, his passions and the phenomenal world. In this sense the work enacts a double occupancy being both an object in this world and a world set apart: a world in itself.

### *Touch/The Haptic*

Jon Schueler's painting is predominantly gestural, sometimes in the large, expansive, 'shouty' sense of this term but also in the more restrained, quieter sense where the animation of paint is reduced to a low visual whisper. In the later canvases that convey gentler articulations of mist-laden, muted, close-toned skies, surfaces are generated that invite the eye's caress. These surfaces are highly nuanced, seductive and responsive. Each layer of thin paint represents another exploration of the painting's surface redolent of the way we might absent-mindedly explore a lover's body through caress. These layers of paint, sometimes little more than the merest smear, the lightest kiss or blush of colour, bring to mind what Marcel Duchamp called the *infra-mince* or ultra thin. This notable quality of the later canvases and watercolours introduces, paradoxically, a sense of 'thick time' where seductively simple surfaces invoke a hidden structure of complex depth and multiple layers of time. There is in Schueler's work a great presence of time as if time itself were being painted.

In *The Phenomenology of Eros*, the Lithuanian-born French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, proposes that:

*'The caress consists of seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away, as though it were not yet. It searches, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain way it expresses love but suffers an inability to tell it.'*<sup>4</sup>



Image: *Burning Blues* (o/c 1278)  
1982, oil on canvas, 66 x 66 inches

What resonates most strongly here in relation to Schueler's work is the emphasis on *search* and the desire to capture the ineffable; the unutterable; the unsayable. This mute endeavour suits painting's *raison d'être*; that is to show, to reveal, rather than to tell. Reaching toward the elusive, '*seizing upon nothing*' is the profound fate of these beguiling canvases saturated with desire. Ultimately desire desires desire and consequently is never quenched. Similarly Schueler's painting quest was an endless one. In part the quest was endless as the paintings represent a journey into the artist's psyche as much as a journey into painting itself. No matter how satisfied or otherwise painters are with their work (Schueler was not shy in declaring his belief that he had produced a 'great' painting!) there is always a kind of failure. It is this very failure that guarantees the continuation and future of painting. I am fond of citing Maurice Blanchot's assertion that the '*... impossibility of writing is best expressed through the act of writing itself...*' and substituting '*painting*' for '*writing*'.<sup>5</sup> In making this simple substitution, an instructive truth about the condition of painting is delivered.

Nevertheless, the caress of art can convey in an inimitable way the weight of the poignant to the viewing subject. When we stand before a painting, as our gaze

explores the surface, as we are seduced and incline toward the work, as surface traverses surface, virtual skin encounters virtual skin, attachments form. One skin inheres upon another, seeking through this encounter, this *caress*, the powerful admixture of *intelligibility in sensibility*. Schueler intuits the truth of this proposition in his own writing when he observes:

*'The knife and brush are extensions of the hand. An extension of the sensibility, which is everything one has ever thought or felt or known in one's life. Sensibility thus defined is meaning.'*<sup>6</sup>

The tools of the painter's trade are thus viewed as prostheses and we might posit that sight and the canvases themselves be considered as extensions of the artist's body. In the same way that we might plausibly argue that language, in all its manifestations, from utterance to the written word extends the body beyond its corporeal limits, so too we might propose that the limits of sight correspond to the limits of the reach of the artist's body beyond its material boundaries. Equally, we might consider Schueler's canvases as metaphorical skins; skins shed by the artist as he makes his way through the world: sounding... responding... each painting revealing a facet of his being.

As we scrutinize the surfaces of Schueler's

canvases, we are struck by the way in which the worked canvas surface acts as a highly responsive, taut, sentient skin that reverberates in consonance with the forces of nature coupled with the inner forces of Schueler himself. For there is with Schueler's work and this is made very clear in his writing, a strong sense that as he worked on the canvas he simultaneously worked on himself: that they somehow became one and the same. Whatever other significance the skies over *The Sound of Sleet* held for Schueler, and his engagement was deep on many fronts, they operated as a vehicle for an extended exploration of both self and painting.

Looking is inextricably akin to the caress. It unfolds in the register of the *virtual haptic*. Schueler understood this register well when he writes of '*...feeling, through eyes...*' in the following quote:

*'This reminded me of having painted the woman, having her lie before me, feeling, through eyes, her breasts, her thighs, her open cunt, her skin, her color, her repose, her passion, and knowing that she was to be pushed back into the sky, that the whole effort would be toward the painting to be painted when she'd no longer be seen.'*<sup>7</sup>

Touch, it would appear is of paramount importance in Schueler's paintings, especially so in the skiescapes where a delicacy of touch and subtle shifts in the

pressure of the brush bring into being poetic surfaces that bristle with affect and tremor with tenderness. Indeed 'the idea of the hand' is almost the only thing for which he takes absolute responsibility as he eschewed most other social conventions and expectations. He wrote:

*'I take responsibility for the hand, for its feelings and its movements. The moment's quiver, that moment's nuance, that caress of paint, that force or failure, that is the hand and is the music and the knowing of the hand.'*<sup>8</sup>

Almost invariably in the later canvases (in contrast to the earlier heavily worked impasto surfaces) this touch is light although imbued with an extraordinary weight of passion, affection and the keen intensity of love. These feelings are by some small miracle transmuted through the hand, brush and paint to the canvas. In this respect Schueler is unashamedly romantic. His responses to the landscape are interiorised, intensified and projected as a solemn song to nature returned to the world through his resounding painting. In his autobiography he writes about the iniquitous exchange of commercial transaction: art for money. In a letter to the New York textile businessman Ben Heller,<sup>9</sup> he laments the moment when a painting leaves the studio and immediately becomes a commodity. Illuminatingly, he talks of painting in candid terms:



'... the painting, which has been formed of a result of the most intimate activity, and presumably holds in its structure the most intense feelings; the most personal visions'.<sup>10</sup>

In the same letter, he elaborates further when reflecting upon the fate of the artist: 'He started - somewhere, at some moment - with love. He ended with money.'<sup>11</sup>

What is revealed here is the sense that no matter how much money the sale of a work might generate, the true exchange value would be love, not money. The primacy of touch and deep feeling in Schueler's canvases bring to mind a poem by James Laughlin<sup>12</sup> that explores the reverberations of touch that to my mind strongly resonates with Schueler's concerns:

#### *Lines To Be Put Into Latin*

*The lightest touch  
if it is gently giv-  
en can yield as much  
affection as a deep  
embrace soft as a  
glance swift as a  
drop of rain light  
as a leaf I give  
you these again.*

#### ***Painting/The Search***

Although deeply responsive to a particular geographical location, *The Sound of Sleat*, Jon Schueler's works don't lie within the conventions of the topographical. Rather, they represent an exploration of an evolving interiority as it takes *soundings* from and *responds* to exterior events. But, this division is immediately unsatisfactory as Schueler's paintings present to us, as previously mentioned, evidence of a process of *subjectivation* where inside and outside become enfolded through a sequence of *peristaltic* rhythms that ultimately render strict inside/outside definitions redundant. According to the French philosopher, Giles Deleuze:

*'Subjectivation is created by folding'.*<sup>13</sup>

A highly distinctive process of *subjectivation* is initiated and sustained through the activity of painting. This process depends on continual incorporation and subsequent externalisation or manifestation: a perpetual enfolding, unfolding and refolding of interior and exterior. The later canvases seem to posit a conundrum: Where does the painter's touch end and the natural world begin? In the most absorbing of his works we see an eye, a consciousness, enter into perfect calibration with the world where a persuasive symmetry is established between an artist's sensibility and this, our shared world. Schueler effected subtle

transformations akin to the poet's where lucid evocations of the phenomenal world are subtly commuted into the realm of the *noumenal*, the ineffable, and ultimately dwell somewhere beyond reach, beyond mere description. The quintessentially ungraspable character of Schueler's work is consonant with the elusive nature of desire that drives his practice so unconditionally. The skies over *The Sound of Sleat* offer the ideal inspiration and compliment to the traits of a Northern Romantic sensibility and interest in the sublime to be found in both Schueler's character and work. This influence can be traced not only to earlier exponents of the Northern Romantic tradition of landscape painting such as Caspar David Friedrich, James Ward and Turner but also to the exploration of an abstract sublime by his fellow Abstract Expressionists. The celebrated American art historian and critic Robert Rosenblum argued in a landmark essay, *The Abstract Sublime*<sup>14</sup> that painters such as Newman, Rothko, and Clyfford Still revived the tradition of the sublime, found in 19th century landscape painting, re-staging *in abstract terms* the same sense of awe that overwhelms the senses. Schueler's own investigation into the sublime is shown in an exemplary way in the painting *The Search: Black Shadow Blues IV*, 1981, currently on exhibition for the duration of 2016 (the centenary year of Schueler's birth) at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow.



Image: *The Search: Black Shadow Blues IV* (o/c 1155), 1981, oil on canvas, 60 x 52 inches, courtesy of Glasgow Museums

In this painting, the thin, brushy, dry, scumbled paint captures the conditions of weather determined in part by geological structures that stretch back into pre-history. Shifts in temperature are registered from cold, smoky blues, to hints of searing volcanic reds and back to sombre greys. This thinly-painted surface, animated by lively brushwork, bestows qualities of evanescence to the work. It conjures the fleeting, rapidly-changing, atmospheric, reminiscent of Turner and ultimately indebted to the imperceptibly slow-changing mass of the landscape itself. We are presented with a vapourous, and vertiginous space where indications of solid forms are dissolved in a misty miasma. Upward and downward movements are emphasized and heighten the profound sense of vertigo. The torn, frayed and lugubrious form on the upper left is reminiscent of the jagged forms of his teacher, Clyfford Still, and, curiously, also of classical Chinese landscape painting. In Chinese landscape painting, the viewer is most usually led along a path that suddenly vanishes and is then suspended in an open space, a void: an *aporia*. Schueler enacts something similar in *The Search: Black Shadow Blues IV* where *terra firma* is dissolved, reduced to a rock-shadow, a presence both elusive and pronounced. Should we take a step into an obscured *terra incognita* we would risk plunging headlong into the pit of an abyss. A terrifying intimation of the *Heights*

*of Despair*<sup>15</sup> is imparted through this work and we gain a glimpse of what Schueler means when he writes of a 'poetry wrenched from pain'.<sup>16</sup> It is with remarkable assuredness that Jon Schueler articulates uncertainty, mystery, the nebulous and the elusive through an adroit handling of paint. Strangely, like many of his works, this one oscillates between nearness and distance so that we move from the intimacy of a delicately wrought, highly nuanced surface where paint is ultra-thin, to an overwhelming vastness that imports intimation of infinitude. One senses that behind this carefully manufactured surface lies complex timescales. Slowed down geological/glacial time is counterposed by the quickness and ephemerality of constantly changing atmospheric phenomena and weather patterns. In this work as with so many of Schueler's paintings vision is obscured; is clouded. Truth is disclosed through the guise of concealment. Certain kinds of clarity, paradoxically, require an obscuring of vision: a testimony to the virtues gained by yoking blindness and insight. A necessary obscuring of vision imparts, with a revelatory clarity, the mysteries and arcane depths of this work.

### *Lust for Life/The Erotic*

Jon Schueler's painting is driven by passions, most notably, lust. Evident in the canvases is a lust for life; for painting; for nature and for women. These lusts found their most intense corollary in nature: in the sky. Looking over the span of Schueler's work, whilst acknowledging significant shifts and emphases in pictorial space and developments in formal terms, one sees a thread running through the work that remains constant. The constant that drives the work is an urgent sexually charged energy or expression of vitality. This life force seeks *cathexis* and meaning through the act of painting itself. Schueler's work imparts a keen recognition of the proximity of the quick of life and the quick of painting: the essential pulse of this connection lies in the *transformative* potential and motility of paint. Even in the stillest of Schueler's works, there is always movement and movement generates visual energy. Many of his paintings appear to carry a carefully heralded, gently nurtured image or *proto-image*. But no sooner does an image begin to emerge than it slips the bounds of fixity and dissolves into another quixotic form, like clouds, endlessly morphing and eddying. This process of forming and unfurling has the power to induce a similar destabilisation in the viewing subject, a disorientation that, as we stand before the painting, pondering this *terra infirma*, requires a new steadying, a modest

adjustment or rectification. This adjustment entails a small shift in the responsive viewing subject's position, a shift in our perception/orientation in relation to the work and has the capacity to alter our reckoning.

Cloud-filled skies provided Schueler with the perfect ostensible subject and stimulus, they acted as a kind of muse, inspiring the artist to create works that go beyond the depiction of observable phenomena and touch upon the ineffable and the *noumenal*. The billowing, voluptuous cloud forms, the sensuous appeal of nubile transformations assume a distinctly erotic appeal where the fleeting and the ungraspable recall the fate of Tantalus.<sup>17</sup> Temptation lies just beyond reach; desirable but unattainable. 'Woman in the Sky' was the title of a 1967 exhibition held at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore and was a motif explored, in an explicit way, through a series of large paintings. Albeit in a less overt way than the works that formed this exhibition, the idea of skies populated by women or fecund female forms was an abiding one. According to Schueler, the sky contained all of nature and all passions were there to be found. This included the life force and erotic allure of woman. Such imaginative speculation belongs to a long tradition stretching back to the cloud nymphs of Greek mythology.

Schueler wrote of the Woman in the Sky paintings:

*'My intention is to gradually push her into the sky so that figuration would disappear.'*

18



Image: *Woman in a Yellow Sky* (o/c 65-10)  
1965, oil on canvas, 63 x 68 inches

His declared ambition was to purge obvious figuration from the 'architecture' of the work while retaining the sensuality of woman as an erotic cloud-like presence in the sky. The act of pushing 'woman' into a nebulous entanglement is a reversal of the myth of Nephele where her illusory form is moulded from clouds, in the image of Zeus' wife Hera, and so is extricated and differentiated from the surrounding sky.

In these skiescapes, we encounter Schueler's particular *Phenomenology of Eros*: places where desire is made visible, made palpable. These paintings capture the energies of the evanescent, the fleeting, the fugitive and the quixotic not only momentarily, but *also* forever. In a work like *The Search 1*, 1981, forms emerge and dissolve in the guise of patches of voluptuous colour, an interminable dance of forming/unforming is initiated. A certain shaping of form, a delineation, begins to surface then quickly recedes back into an undifferentiated nothingness. In this rhythmic interplay between voluptuous form and the formless lies the erotic. Eros and Thanatos are entwined in an eternal embrace and the *jouissance* mentioned beforehand is the name we might properly give to this embrace as it rescues the usual understanding of the erotic from the merely pleasurable. The knot of positive lusts that impel Schueler's paintings, they also usher in a disquiet, the disquiet of

death: of nothingness. Certain of Schueler's works are so emptied out that we are presented with little more than a pellucid surface, almost nothing, where intense light obscures as much as it illuminates. For all the affirmative and optimistic energies that occupy the canvases there is always the lurking presence of death lying in wait just beneath the surface or, in some instances, bubbling on the surface.

At times death stalks the paintings as a form of effacement, an erasure, an expansive presence of virtually nothing. At other times it registers as a disturbing awareness of our common death-bound subjectivity whereby the artist articulates an acute awareness of finitude measured against the infinite.

**Jim Mooney**



Image: *The Search I* (o/c 1178)  
1981, oil on canvas, 79 x 168 inches

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Jon Schueler, *The Sound Of Sleat: A Painter's Life*, eds., Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, New York, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *Jouissance* is the French term usually translated as pleasure but importantly has its root in *jouir*, the argot for orgasm.

<sup>3</sup> An *Abat-Voix* or sounding board is the board placed behind a pulpit that enables sound to be projected into the space of the congregation.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, "Phenomenology of Eros", Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press: pp 257-8.

<sup>5</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans., Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Schueler, op. cit., p 202.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p 200.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 202.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Heller was a textile businessman and important collector who later became a private dealer. The letter was written in Guilford, Connecticut on 30 March 1961.

<sup>10</sup> Schueler, op. cit., p 111.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p 112.

<sup>12</sup> James Laughlin was a North American poet and forward-thinking publisher who founded the highly influential New York publishing company *New Directions* in 1936. "Lines to be Put Into Latin" by James Laughlin, from THE COLLECTION POEMS OF JAMES LAUGHLIN, copyright 1993 by James Laughlin. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

<sup>13</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, The Athlone Press, London, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime", ARTnews 59, no 10 (February 1961) pp 38-41.

<sup>15</sup> An oblique reference to E M Cioran's work of the same name.

<sup>16</sup> Schueler, op. cit., p 112.

<sup>17</sup> According to Greek myth, Tantalus was buried in water under low hanging fruit, with both water and fruit being just out of reach. We derive the verb 'to tantalise' from this myth.

<sup>18</sup> Schueler, op. cit., p 318.



*Night Sky, October I (o/c 1)*  
1970, oil on canvas, 72 x 79 inches





*Morning: Yellow and Blue (o/c 607)*  
1975, oil on canvas, 10 x 12 inches



*Silver Sunday (o/c 1193)*  
1981, oil on canvas, 16 x 18 inches



*Night Sky: The Sound of Sleat VI (o/c 22)*  
1971, oil on canvas, 72 x 79 inches



*The Sound of Sleat: June Night IX (o/c 46)*  
1970, oil on canvas, 32 x 40 inches



*Horizon: Red and Black (o/c 1228)*  
1981, oil on canvas, 8 x 10 inches



*Red Sun II (o/c 218)*  
1972, oil on canvas, 63 x 70 inches



*Rannoch Remembered (o/c 504)*  
1974, oil on canvas, 72 x 80 inches



*Winter Series 15 (o/c 79)*  
1970, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches





*Light: Island and Sea III (o/c 132)*  
1971, oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches



*Sun and Sky (o/c 720)*  
1976, oil on canvas, 8 x 7 inches



*Sarah and the Sea (o/c 727)*  
1977, oil on canvas, 14 x 12 inches



*Blue Sky Shadow II (o/c 730)*  
1976, oil on canvas, 8 x 10 inches



*Red Sleat: Blues and Gold (o/c 863)*  
1977, oil on canvas, 36 x 44 inches



*Light Over Sleat (o/c 482)*  
1974, oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches



*Yellow Sun and Fog (o/c 718)*  
1976, oil on canvas, 6 x 8 inches

## Biography

Jon Schueler, acclaimed member of the NY School, was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1916. After receiving a BA and MA from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he joined the US Army Air Force in the fall of 1941, and, as a navigator of B-17s stationed in Britain, he flew missions over France and Germany. Following World War II he attended the California School of Fine Arts from 1948-51 where he was part of the vibrant group centered around Clyfford Still, Richard Diebenkorn, Hassel Smith and David Park. With the help and encouragement of Clyfford Still, Schueler moved to New York in 1951. After solo exhibitions at the Stable Gallery (1954) and with Leo Castelli (1957), he spent six months in the North West of Scotland where his work, initially informed by Abstract Expressionism, became imbued with the force of the weather and the changing skies.

New York became his base between 1959 and his death in 1992. These years, however, were punctuated by many visits to Mallaig, Scotland where he acquired a studio overlooking The Sound of Sleat in 1970. The weather and light of this area became a touchstone for his preoccupation with the power of nature—whether expressed tumultuously or in subtle and hidden forms. Numerous exhibitions in both the US and the UK took place during this period, including a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the group show *Landscapes, Interior and Exterior: Avery, Rothko and Schueler* at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and *Jon Schueler: The Search* at the University of Edinburgh's Talbot Rice Art Gallery.

Image right: Jon Schueler in his studio, Romasaig, Mallaig, 1970.  
Photo: Magda Salvesen.

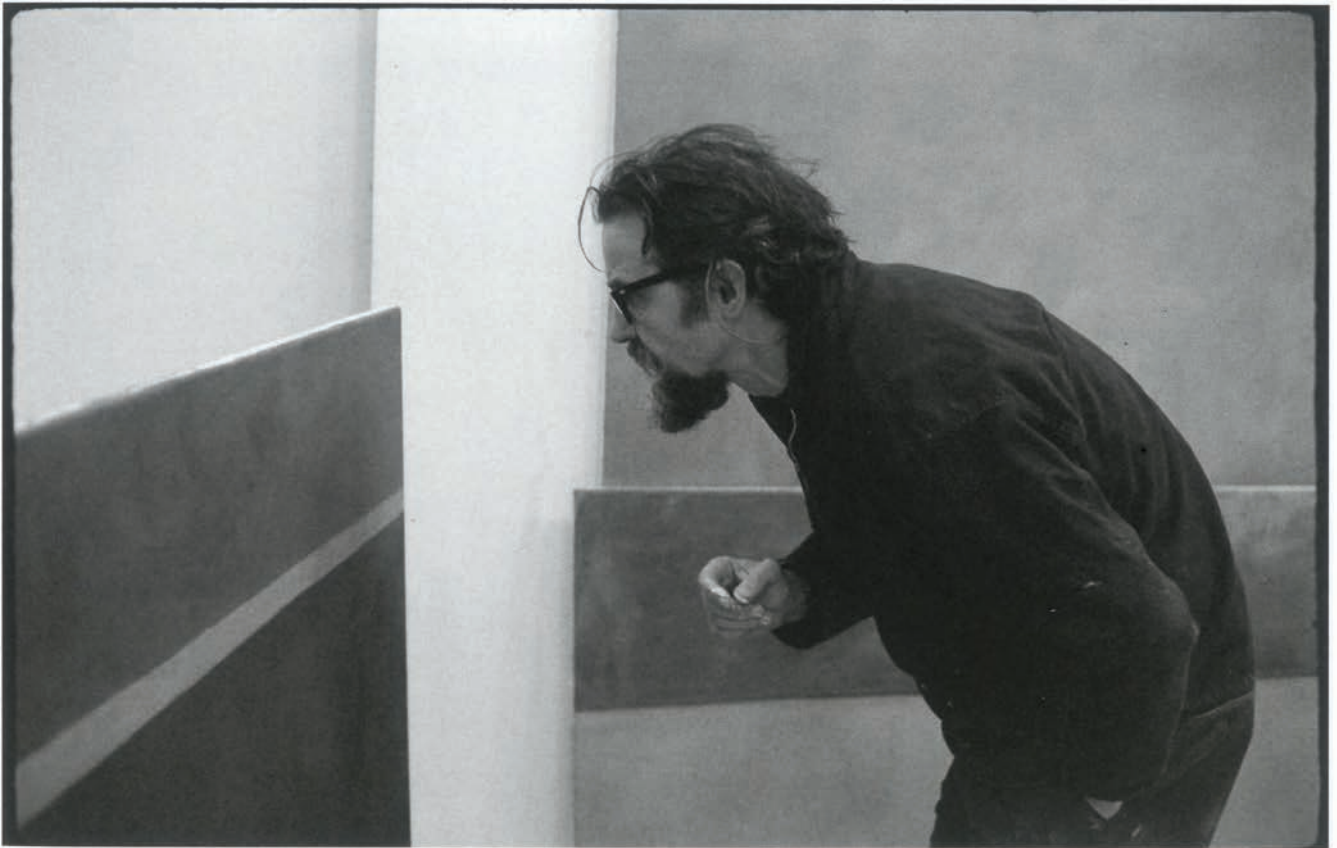


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