



2nd April – 15th July 2016

*Exhibition opening hours:
Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm
University of Stirling Art Collection
Pathfoot Building, Stirling FK9 4LA*

JON SCHUELER
SPEAKING OF
THE SKY



Left: 1970, Jon Schueler on the sands of
Morar, Scotland. Photo: Magda Salvesen
On the cover: *Night Sky: Magda*, 1973,
244cm x 226cm (o/c 374)

Speaking of the Sky: Jon Schueler in Stirling

We are delighted to be hosting this major exhibition of work by American expressionist Jon Schueler (1916–1992), and to be part of the Scotland-wide 2016 centenary celebrations. It is particularly appropriate to be showing Jon Schueler's work in the Pathfoot Building as two of his works have been on permanent display here for over forty years.

In 1973, Schueler met John Richards, the architect who designed the Pathfoot Building, the first to be constructed in 1969 for the new University of Stirling. They became friends and Schueler visited the campus with his partner Magda Salvesen. Impressed by Richards' vision for developing an inspiring backdrop for staff and students, which fused architectural design and art, Schueler loaned two works, *Night Sky: Bunty* and *Night Sky: Magda*, to the University Art Collection. (The latter has since been gifted to the University). They were both originally hung, along with Mary Martin's *Mural*, in the Dining Room, and are now on permanent display within the striking modernist architecture of the Pathfoot Crush Hall.

The *Speaking of the Sky* exhibition has stimulated collaborations between the curators, academics and students as part of the Art Collection's ambition to make knowledge visible. Students of Creative Writing have contributed poems and musings and Film and Media students and academics have created soundscapes inspired by Jon's paintings and life.

These alliances between art and academia serve to emphasise the focus of the University of Stirling Art Collection to make art and culture part of the everyday experience for staff, students and visitors alike. The art collection welcomes everyone into a creative environment, where creative thinking and creative acts are at the heart of our identity as a place of learning.

The University is rightly proud of its connection with Schueler. Additional works by Schueler have been purchased for the collection, and in 1981 the University hosted an exhibition of his paintings. Continuing the University's connection with Schueler, *Speaking of the Sky* forms part of a series of events and exhibitions taking place across Scotland to celebrate his centenary year during 2016.

I would particularly like to extend my thanks to Magda Salvesen for her friendly help and collaboration in organising this exhibition.

Jane Cameron
Curator, *University of Stirling Art Collection*

SCHUELER

"The first sky was a night sky ... an all-encompassing void of darkness, an infinity of loss, an eternal Nothing, which must have held all ... and now has become the world of my search".

The work of Jon Schueler uses the language of the sky to express the human emotions and experiences central to his life and relationships. Born in Milwaukee in September 1916, Schueler lost his mother within months of his birth. When his father remarried four years later, he returned from the care of his maternal grandparents to a home with a stepmother who convinced him that she was his mother. At twelve he discovered the truth, which seems to have had a significant effect on him and, later, on his relationships with women - "My life became tumultuous that year, and has never really calmed down since" (p. 128-9). Although very young when his mother died and incapable of remembering her, he believed later that, in forgetting, he had betrayed her and her memory.



Wondering: July '83, 1983, 175 x 193cm (o/c 1342)



The Search: Red and Grey, II, 1981, 122 x 102cm (o/c 1173)



Late 1950, Jon Schueller on the double bass with the Studio 13 Jazz Band. Photo: Mrs. Jack Lowe

Throughout his life Schueller sought a form of expression equal to his strong emotions. Initially hoping to become a writer, he graduated in English in 1940 from the University of Wisconsin. His plans were interrupted by WWII, during which he was a navigator with the US Army Air Corps. After his discharge he began attending an evening art class with his first wife in Los Angeles and discovered the power of painting. In 1948 he joined the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, and while there took up the double bass, later becoming involved in the New York

jazz scene. Painting, however, was always his one true form of expression: "The stroke of paint ... That is the one most important thing" (p. 310).

Fundamental to Schueller's work are the motifs of Woman (she) and Nature (sky). Both are intimately tied to his life in Scotland, where he came to seek a sky commensurate with the struggles, search and emotions that were at the heart of his experiences. Although the three strands – she, sky and Scotland – are intertwined, each is worth its own consideration.



Mood with Magda: Winter Dream, 1974, 191 x 201cm (o/c 560)

SHE

"Magda.

The Woman in the Sky.

Where are you, Bunty?

*The war storms through
memory in grey."* (p.280)

Married five times, Schueler, through most of his life, had a troubled relationship with women - from his stepmother who displayed a mix of "closeness and cold distance," (p.160) to the women he sometimes married "in haste, in hate, in guilt [and] in compulsion"². Cindy Lee³ summed up his unrealistic expectations of women in a letter she wrote following a short affair in 1958: "I know your need - woman all for you - with you - cooking, loving - making - doing, passive - passionate - docile but with spirit - but above all - gravitation around you," (p.54). Schueler fully recognised himself in this description.

Two women, however, stand out from the others: Bunty Challis, encountered while in England in November 1942, and his fifth wife, Magda Salvesen, whom he met in 1970. The two paintings which form the centre-piece of this exhibition are named for these two women - *Night Sky: Bunty* and *Night Sky: Magda*, both from 1973. While Bunty offered him an irresistible vision of the Highlands, Magda gave him a stability essential to his life and art.



Night Sky: Bunty, 1973, 244cm x 226cm (o/c 375)

Schueler met Bunty, who worked for the American Ambulance Corps during the war, while he was based in RAF Molesworth. Both were married, but war had geographically separated them from their spouses. Bunty had Scottish connections, having holidayed in the Highlands and Schueler was entranced by her descriptions of dynamic Highland skies and became determined to experience them for himself. The red, which can be seen in *Night Sky: Bunty*, is reminiscent of Schueler's memory of an evening during which he and Bunty took down the blackout curtains to look out over London during a bombing raid, watching explosions across the horizon. Theirs was a relationship based partly on escape from the immediate terror of war, but also on a mutual understanding of the implications of the horrors witnessed.

In 1957 Schueler finally arrived in Scotland; he soon discovered Mallaig, and then Skye in 1967, both crucial to the development of his painting. It was during his third and longest visit to Scotland (1970 – 1975) that Schueler met Magda who would remain a partner for the rest of his life. *Night Sky: Magda* speaks of the light and calm that Magda brought to his life. He gained the space and security with her to explore his more difficult wartime memories and to continue his search for life's mysteries.



Bimty: Black Sky Remembered, 1981, 122 x 112cm (o/c 1200)



The Sound of Sleet: December Light, II, 1970, 106.5 x 122cm (o/c 54)

SKY

*“Black. The Night Sky.
Birth: from the womb
into the night of day.
Death: reaching up into the
black for the presence that
must be there but which
could never be found.
War: in the sky, the calm,
work-a-day quality of
terror and the exquisite
beauty of death.” (p.193)*



The Search: Black Shadow Blues, III, 1981, 122 x 102cm (o/c 1157)



April 1972, The Sound of Sleat and the islands of Eigg, Rhum and Skye, Scotland. Photo: Jon Schueler

The significance of the sky as an image for Schueler, however, pre-dates both his visits to Scotland and his commitment to painting. During his time with the Air Corps he spent missions in the Plexiglas nose-cone of B17 bombers. Reflecting on his paintings he observed that the implied horizon in his works is the “horizon of altitude, as though one were flying” (p.204). The sky formed the backdrop to his intense war experience, and he came to associate the sky with birth, death and the tumultuous emotions of life. It would seem that he found in the skies over the Sound of Sleat the very characteristics that he

attributed to war: “the infinite vagaries of chance and change” (p.168).

Exploring the sky through his paintings allowed him to reach something he could express in no other medium; he could not do so in writing, and music was too fleeting to capture it: “when I peer deep into the horizon of the sky and when the canvas forms and finds its heat and its mystery, it is the uncontrollable mystery of woman and of creation, of formlessness forming, of the ununderstandable being felt” (p.118).



Sing Blues in Grey: Reflection, 1975, 160 x 178cm (o/c 634)

SCOTLAND

“an experience of the utmost in visual excitement” (p. 47)

Inspired by Bunty’s evocative descriptions of Scotland during the war, Schueler described the place he was searching for to anyone who would listen. Eventually he was directed to Mallaig where he stayed for 6 months in 1957, renting a cottage, living simply and painting prolifically (completing forty five canvasses in six months). Back in the US he was intent on finding a way to return. After managing a short painting trip to Skye in 1967, he took up a teaching post the next year in Illinois with the hope of funding a longer stay. January 1970 found him again in Mallaig, where he remained—with Magda, who joined him in 1971—until 1975.

It was in Scotland that he found his ultimate muse — the sky:

“I had wanted to live in the middle of one of my paintings ... I wanted to be in one spot and watch the painting change. I saw clouds menacing my mind’s eye, and the rain shafts or the mist obliterating horizons and forming new forms with the clouds and landmasses blending with the sea. I chose northern Scotland as my cathedral, because for my needs ... it seemed the only church that would do” (p.63).

Had he lived, Schueler would have turned 100 this year. In his 76 years he fitted in experiences that could have filled two lifetimes, but in his final years he still found himself wishing for more time to continue painting and communicating (p. 351). The art which he created is a distillation of all the “confusions of sky, image, and life,” (p. 118).

Rhona Ramsay
Arts and Heritage Consultant



1965, Jon Schaefer's paint brushes and assorted supplies, in his 901 Broadway, NYC studio. Photo: Maren Heyne



Sleat: Black Blues in Grey, 1977, 175 x 193cm (o/c 877)



Night Sea Burning, 1974, 175 x 193cm (o/c 530)



The Search: Red and Blue, 1980–83, 178 x 160cm (o/c 1068)

¹Schueler, Jon, *The Sound of Sleet: A Painter's Life*, edited by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, Picador USA, 1999, p.130 (all page numbers in the following essay refer to this publication).

²p. 50: the quote refers specifically to the feelings and circumstances behind his marriage to his second wife Jody, which had just ended, but could easily describe any of his first four marriages.

³Cindy Lee, née Laraçuen (1925 – 2007), a Mexican American artist whom Schueler met in Paris in 1958. She later illustrated the work of Robert Graves and was a muse of his, known as the Black Goddess, between 1963 and 1966.

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