

Mapping Memory: Jon Schueler Skyscapes

“*Mapping Memory: Jon Schueler Skyscapes*” at the Wallace L. Anderson Gallery, Bridgewater State University (BSU) is the inaugural exhibition to mark the Centenary of the birth of the American Artist, Jon Schueler (1916-1992). Schueler’s commitment to arts education – he was a visiting artist and teacher at the Maryland Institute, Baltimore, the University of Illinois and the Yale University School of Art - makes BSU a particularly fitting venue. The Anderson Gallery’s curatorial goal “to establish an environment of learning, enrichment and inspiration with exhibitions that illuminate the direct relationship between the Arts and Ideas,”¹ is in keeping with the artist’s own ethos. This shared vision permeates the exhibition, encouraging both students and visitors to actively participate in the paintings, exploring their own ideas and thoughts, moods and memories in response to the art.

A selection of seven skyscapes from the 1970s and early 1980s drawn entirely from the artist’s estate, the exhibition includes a rarely seen significant trilogy *Changes (A), (B) & (C)*, 1976. Painted a year after two seminal museum shows for the artist in 1975 - a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art and a three-man show “*Landscapes, Interior and Exterior: Avery, Rothko and Schueler*” at the Cleveland Museum of Art - this dramatic series embodies a lifetime ambition to capture from memory the evocative and fleeting moods of the sky on canvas.

Schueler’s skyscapes are as fresh and vibrant as the day they were painted. Moving from one painting to the next, we feel compelled to follow the artist’s delicately wistful, yet powerful brushstrokes. They pull us in, through layers of light and shadow, through the sky and beyond. Rich buttery yellows, pulsating reds and soft powdery blues invite us to step into and be consumed by an enthralling transformative world. Everything is moving. Nothing is still.

¹ Jay Block, Statement of Curatorial Philosophy for the Wallace L. Anderson Gallery, see link: <http://www.bsuararts.com/about.html>

Taught by Clyfford Still (1904-80), who became the artist's mentor and briefly by Mark Rothko (1903-70) and Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) at the California School of Fine Arts in the late 1940s, Schueler went on to actively exhibit in New York within the prevailing vanguard of Abstract Expressionism, with notable solo shows at the Stable Gallery (1954) and the Leo Castelli gallery (1957). By the mid 1970s, he had been integrated within the art canon as a "Second Generation" Abstract Expressionist of the New York School. However, the artist's influences were always much more diverse than this category suggests and included literary and musical (especially jazz) figures outside narrow Abstract Expressionist circles.²

Schueler's artistic sensibilities were particularly aligned with Romantic landscape artists such as the English painter, J.M.W. Turner (1775 – 1851). The endless potential of nature and sky as transformative forces for painterly expression was clear to the artist early on when Still showed reproductions of Turner's work at art school. The painter's attention to the ever-changing character of the natural environment and in particular skies, struck a resounding cord with Schueler who increasingly believed that the sky held all things: *"The sky gave me the freedom to respond. It changes, shifts, moves, there is no form it cannot become: there is no change that cannot take place. Each moment is its own. It mirrors life's infinite change, infinite variety, infinite possibility."*³

An all-consuming passion, the sky became the creative force behind a lifetime dedicated to painting landscapes, seascapes and skyscapes in a distinctive style that combined his background in abstraction with his sensory experience of nature. Growing up in Milwaukee, Schueler recalled the impact of the vast and dramatic Wisconsin skies on his formative years. *"I remember thunderheads forming over Lake Michigan, when I was a child ... The power within the thunderheads, light, cloud, lake sky, beating and throbbing,*

² Jon Schueler strove to "accept every painter, from caveman to the present, as a contemporary, to accept or reject them as influences upon my work, not because of their place in art history but because of their effect upon my sensibilities and my mind." Extract from Jon Schueler *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter's Life*, edited by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, Picador USA, 1999, p.222. He embraced a vast range of artistic influences within a far-reaching circle of creative friends, making regular trips to Europe studying the work of the Italian Masters Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Michelangelo (1475-1564), as well later work by Francisco Goya (1746-1828), J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and Claude Monet (1840-1926). Schueler's close-knit peer group included artists, musicians and literary figures such as: artist Philip Guston (1913-1980), jazz musician Oscar Pettiford (1922-1960), Scottish poet Alastair Reid (1926-2014) and art critic Irving Sandler (1925-).

³ "Jon Schueler: An Artist and His Vision", DVD, 1971. Quoted from an interview with Jon Schueler filmed in Mallaig, Scotland.

waves pounding the shore, sky mystery endless – I wanted to be sucked up into it and be part of its power.”⁴ However, his experience flying as a navigator on bombing missions during World War II had the most profound influence on him. Sitting in a Plexiglas-nose of the B-17 bomber he found a beauty in the skies to equal the horrors that was utterly compelling: “*There in combat and before, the sky held all things, life and death and fear and joy and love. It held the incredible beauty of nature. It was the storm and the enemy gracefully flashing by and the friend waving from the crippled ship. It was the memory of a beautiful woman.*”⁵

Stream of Vapor, 1982 captures the essence of a sky rich in lamenting beauty. As we search for reference points on the horizon, our attempts are stalled by a restless fluidity in the layering of paint – a light gray that covers a dark gray and underneath is another gray of an even darker hue. A visual metaphor for the layering of memory, Schueler’s minimal shifts in color palate not only evoke the ethereal nature of recapturing past experience, but imbue the painting with the deep sense of searching. The title suggests a profoundly personal artwork - possibly a reference to his wartime flying experience – without sacrificing its universal appeal. We have all traced the contrails in the sky to conjure up memories of past journeys and forgotten or lost connections. This search motif is enhanced by a positive sense of renewal that delicately winds its way across the painting, in patches of brilliant blue that are in deliberate counterpoint to the layers of gray.

During World War II Schueler met and fell in love with Bunty Challis who served in the American Ambulance Corps in England. In their short but intense relationship, she shared with the artist her experience of the wild and isolated Scottish Highlands. Bunty and her stories made an indelible impression on Schueler who first visited the remote Scottish fishing village of Mallaig in the winter of 1957-58. He would later leave the States and return to the scenic hamlet in 1970 for a five-year intense period of painting. Stimulated by the continually shifting Northern skies and turbulent weather conditions of the Western Highlands, Schueler finally found the natural environment to satisfy his artistic

⁴ Jon Schueler, *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter’s Life*, edited by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, Picador USA, 1999, p.131

⁵ Jon Schueler, *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter’s Life*, *op. cit.*, p.296

ambitions. Surrendering to the isolation, the artist refined his artistic vision with compelling clarity: *“When I speak of nature, I speak of the sky, because the sky has become all of nature to me. But it is most particularly the brooding, storm-ridden sky over the Sound of Sleat in which I find the living image of past dreams, dreams which had emerged from memory and the swirl of paint.”*⁶

When Schueler returned to New York in 1975 his mind was fueled with vivid memories of the atmospheric skies of Northern Scotland. During this time of immense creativity, he set to work high up in loft studios first on Jones Street in Greenwich Village, then from 1977 in Chelsea. The New York sky pressing in through every window contributed to his invigorated creative perspective, the interior of the studio providing him with a transformative space that enabled him to get *“inside the space. My nose right up against the canvas, losing sight of the edges, of the limitations, trying to feel the lack of boundary, even as the boundary forms the limitless space.”*⁷

Thrilled by the possibility of painting on larger canvases again, Schueler embarked on trilogy *Changes (A), (B) & (C)* completed in 1976. The series represents new dimensions, sought during a period of inner creative strength. Schueler recalled: *“Before, my paintings seem to me to speak of the violence of motion and emotion. Now that motion is still there but quiet and invisible half the time.”*⁸ Encouraging meditation and wide open to interpretation, the trilogy appears limitless, infused with an ever-changing light and lyricism. The title “Changes” possibly referencing Scotland’s fluid weather patterns that had become so familiar and vital to the artist.

A highly personal vision, the trilogy seeks to make the invisible visible. It could also be interpreted as a metaphorical search for the restoration of memories past through the medium of oil paint. A key concern for the artist was connecting the materiality of the medium with ephemeral experience and emotions. A living thing in itself, hovering

⁶ Whitney Museum of American Art, *Jon Schueler*, exhibition brochure, April 24 – May 25, 1975. The Sound of Sleat is a narrow sea channel off the western coast of Scotland. It divides the Sleat peninsular on the south east side of the Isle of Sky from Morar, Knoydart and Glenelg on the Scottish mainland.

⁷ Jon Schueler, *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter’s Life*, op. cit., p. 280

⁸ Jon Schueler, *The Sound of Sleat: A Painter’s Life*, op. cit., p. 202

effortlessly between nature and artifice as if poised between two worlds, the series invites intense contemplation from within us.

In Search for Oscar, 1983, with the delicate beauty of its palpable blues, is a powerful example of the artist reflecting on memories past to come to terms with loss. In this elegy marking the passing of a close friend and talented jazz musician, Oscar Pettiford (1922-1960). The artist's graceful brush strokes mirror the bassist's natural improvised jazz rhythms. For Schueler, painting was necessary for self-preservation. It connected him with the past and reinvigorated his present; the skylscapes attest to his constant search for lost connections and suppressed memories. *"My battle is the battle for memory. In the painting, it is finally in the nuance of the brushstroke, in the disturbance of color or the suggestion of line. The moment's space. It is the poetry about the poetry of paint. This is the area of combat; that is the contrail, which shows where I've been and what has happened, for that is the happening."*⁹

Communicating "the happening" was essential to the artist and the sky paintings on view at BSU certainly speak to this creative force. Inviting our participation the works are part of an ongoing ever-changing continuum - *"windows in the walls"*¹⁰ - with no beginning or end point. No matter where our eyes move, the paintings move with us to reveal intense momentary compressions of movement and change. Never static, surfaces remain in constant motion, with a single horizon line continuing indefinitely from one canvas to the next, headed towards the sublime.

However, Schueler understood the dichotomy that his painting was rooted in.

At the same time he embraced nature as part of life's ongoing continuum, he knew that the painting inevitably subjected this vitality to a fixed form and it is precisely this tension that deeply informs the work: *"Change is constant. So is surprise. Once a canvas is finished, the paint is frozen there. Yet, it has a inner life, and as day moves over it it*

⁹ Jon Schueler, *The Sound of Sleet: A Painter's Life*, op. cit., p.296

¹⁰ Whitney Balliett, *Profiles, City Voices: Jon Schueler and Magda Salvesen*, op.cit., p.36

changes.”¹¹ We can trace an inner dimension pulsating through the exhibition; the variations of color, light and mood contingent on the visceral particularity of time and weather, seek to unveil emotional responses within us. Each canvas therefore poses a new opportunity for deep personal contemplation, exploration and interpretation.

Diana Ewer, New York, 2015

¹¹ Whitney Balliett, *Profiles, City Voices: Jon Schueler and Magda Salvesen, op.cit.*, p.51