

Jon Schueler – Sound of Sleat Shadows

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MORAY ART Centre's latest exhibition provides the perfect setting for appreciation of *Jon Schueler – Sound of Sleat Shadows*, a selection of works created by the artist at Romasaig between 1974 and 1981. Although Schueler's work springs from the New York School of Abstract Expressionism of the 1950's, this exhibition leads us to a more expansive understanding of the artist's work, and of his engagement with the natural world, particularly the endlessly changing environment of Western Scotland and the eternal "search" that is the human art of painting.

The elusive qualities of landscape that so inspired the artist from his first journey to Mallaig in 1957 until his death in 1992 are coupled with an engagement with paint handling, grappling with the canvas itself as a means of expression. Presented in the chapel-like space of Gallery 1, this richly contemplative series of paintings are distinctive in his oeuvre for their delicacy of light and colour.

Alive with movement and the element of air, the influence of Turner can clearly be seen in these abstracted skies, combining fluid brushwork with a vibrancy of hue that bursts through canvases of ethereal shifting grey. The way that Schueler allows colour to emerge from his beautifully controlled palette is part of our journey into the work as viewers.

Red Blues in Grey 1974 (Oil on Canvas) is a superb example of this subtle dynamism, with a patch of blue hopeful and radiant shining through dazzling grey. Horizontal bands of soft yellow, blue and red at the base of the canvas convey a sense of grounded height counterbalanced with an expansive aerial view of the sky. Schueler's vision, rooted in observation of the natural world and his experience as a navigator during World War II, sends our thoughts skyward in a magnificent combination of feeling and intellect.

Response to the natural environment in painterly terms is visceral and immediately physical but also transcendent; it does not rely on literal subject matter or optical illusion in relation to land, sea and sky. Schueler articulates beauty in these works that we immediately recognise in the northern landscape around us but scarcely pause to contemplate in our daily lives – in this way they are an absolute gift. Giles Sutherland in his excellent catalogue essay describes Schueler's work as a synthesis of "exterior and interior states, blending nature and abstraction, emotion and landscape", qualities which illicit a profound stillness within the image and the viewer.

Paintings on a more intimate scale such as *Sun Shadow III* 1974 (Oil on Canvas) focus on a fragment of sky – fleeting and evocative yet as concentrated as a prayer. Explored within an astonishingly narrow tonal range, the artist tests the boundaries of visual communication, ultimately giving us all the information we need to feel and see the moment, held forever in time by the painting.

The exploration of plastic elements through abstraction, such as colour, form and composition, are exquisitely balanced in another small canvas, *The Search* 1981, with its vibrant burst of yellow and red in direct response to the Scottish landscape and its weather. The finely balanced mixing of colour and brushwork in a larger scale painting such as *The Search-Light* 1981 is deceptively simple, employing a myriad of warm and cool hues to animate the surface with dancing light.

What makes this artist so fascinating is his understanding of the craft of painting and of mankind in relation to the natural world; "The sky in passing holds and reveals all as it reveals itself". In his work and writings we see the landscape revealed in a way that is self-reflexive, both in terms of the artist's direct experience and our human need for connection through painting and landscape.

This is not recognition or resonance through a view of a particular location, but revealed in minute degrees of colour and shade, penetrating the surface appearance of the world to arguably a more expansive representation of reality. Schueler creates a space and refuge for the mind in this selection of works which is genuinely moving and thought provoking.

True to the vision of Moray Art Centre as a "research centre for beauty; an incubation space for the arts, a place of sharing and debating ideas and a community of creativity", *Jon Schueler – Sound of Sleat Shadows* is an uplifting experience. The combination of natural observation and abstraction in the artist's work is a challenging, potent catalyst for debate and contemplation of beauty – our conception and inner definition of the term aesthetically, intellectually and emotionally.