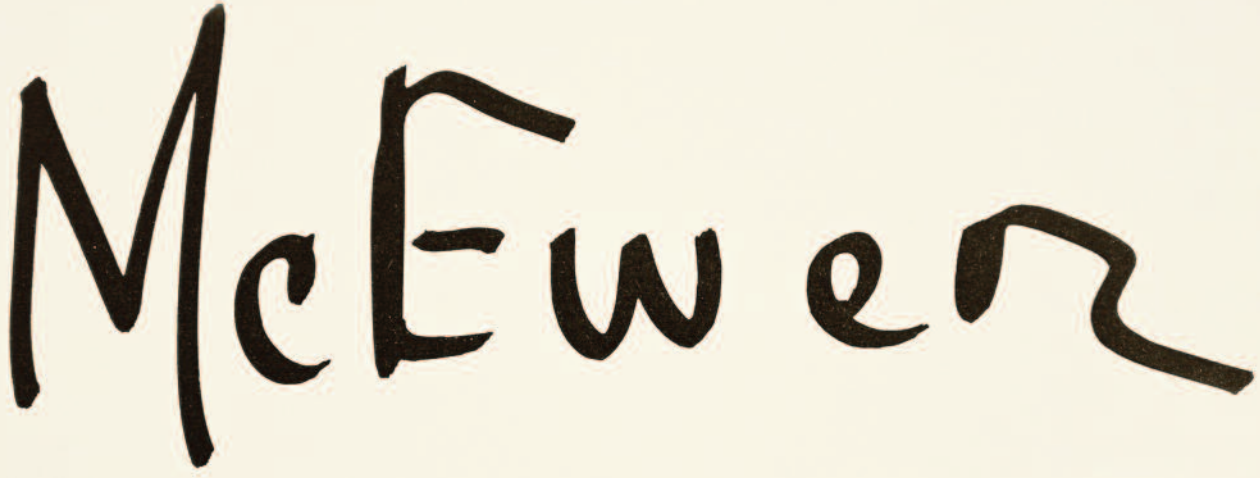

McEwen

Mira Godard
Gallery

22 Hazelton Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5R 2E2 (416) 964-8197
godard@godardgallery.com godardgallery.com

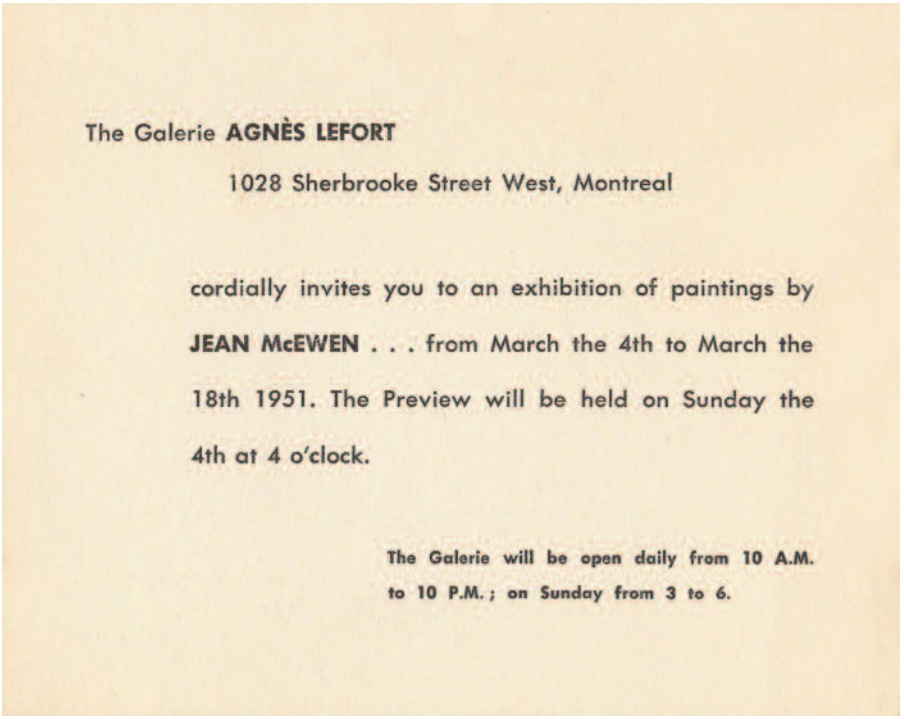
JEAN McEWEN

Essays by

Indra Kagis McEwen

David P. Silcox

November 14 – December 19, 2020



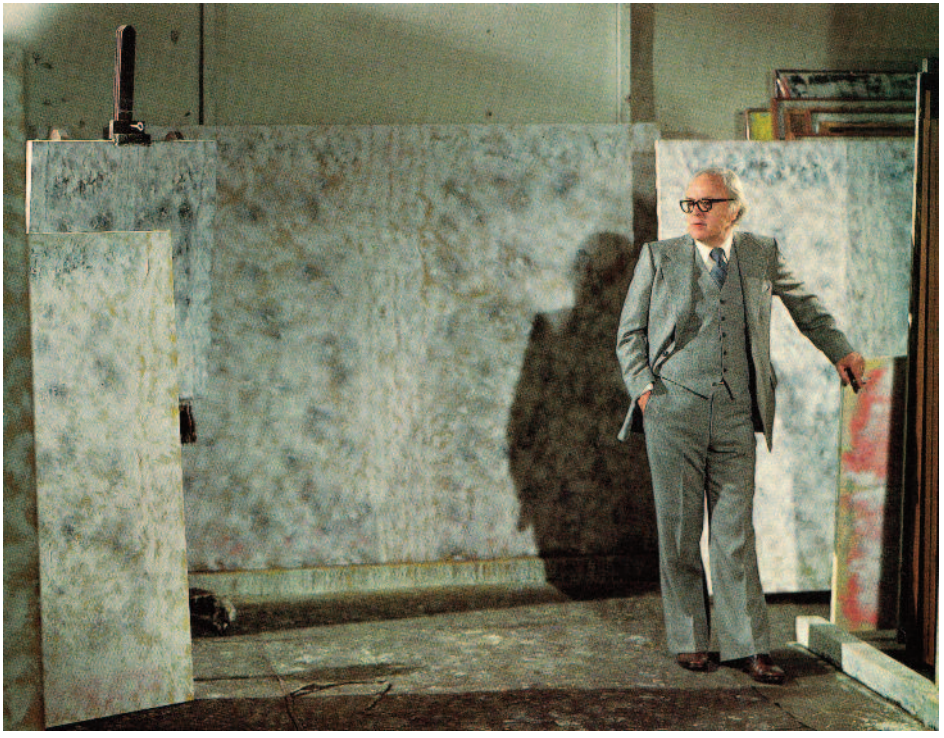
Jean McEwen, one of Canada's most distinguished and innovative artists, was born in Montreal in 1923. He studied pharmacy at the Université de Montréal, graduating in 1948.
McEwen began painting in 1946 and after meeting some of the Automatistes in Montreal, he decided to become a painter. His first major exhibition was held at the Galerie Agnès Lefort (now Mira Godard Gallery) in 1951.
Encouraged by Paul-Émile Borduas, McEwen travelled to Paris, where he met Jean-Paul Riopelle and Sam Francis.
In 1960 he became the president of the Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal (created in 1956).
In 1963 he took part in the São Paulo Art Biennial.

Jean McEwen received a number of prizes and awards over the course of his career. In 1961 he won first prize in the Concour artistique de Quebec. In 1977 he received the Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award from the Canada Council for the Arts, given for artistic achievement. In 1998 he was awarded the Prix Paul-Emile Borduas, the highest distinction conferred by the Quebec government in the realm of the visual arts.

Jean McEwen exhibited regularly in Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto and New York.
The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal gave him his first restrospective,
Jean McEwen: l953-1973 (in 1973).
The Montreal Museum of Fine Art mounted a second retrospective, **Jean McEwen: Colour in Depth,** in 1987 and in 2019 exhibited **Untamed Colour: Celebrating Jean McEwen**.

McEwen's paintings can be found in numerous national and international public, corporate and private collections including: Albright-Knox, Buffalo, N.Y.; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto;
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts;
Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Vancouver Art Gallery and Walker Art Centre, Indianapolis.

Jean McEwen died in Montreal on January 9, l999.



Jean McEwen in his studio, 1976

JEAN, A MEMOIR IN FIVE ADDRESSES

Indra Kagis McEwen

1490 Sherbrooke Street West

When I began working for Mira Godard in the fall of 1969 I was 24 and had a live-in boyfriend. Jean was 45, married with two teenage daughters. In those days, Galerie Godard Lefort, Mira's gallery on Sherbrooke Street near the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, was something of a hub in the contemporary art scene in Montreal and Jean was one of her top artists. But in 1969, his stature was beginning to falter.

Until 1965, Jean's medium had been oil on canvas. Early 60s paintings like ***The Unknown Flag***, built up with layer upon layer of rich, saturated colour, had enjoyed exceptional success, both critically and commercially. But in 1965, Jean scraped off his palette, so to speak and, partly because of an allergy he had developed, turned to acrylic as a medium. His acrylic paintings, whose cloud-like surfaces, structured by hard-edged bands of contrasting colour, featured pale or sharply acid pigments so thinly applied that their canvas support sometimes showed through. ***Dans la pureté du non-être (Valéry)*** is what he called one of them. The title, a line from a poem by Paul Valéry ("In the purity of non-being"), suggests the level of clarity he was reaching for. Collectors familiar with his work were confused, his dealers edgy. Walter Moos in Toronto dropped him. Mira's fondness for Jean, who had great charm and was a very likeable man, did not blind her to the troubling fact of his plummeting sales, but it did, to her credit, keep her loyal.

I only understood this later, of course. In 1969, I was still a neophyte when it came to the currents of contemporary Canadian art, and ignorant of their anecdotal baggage. I do remember, though, a day in January 1970 shortly after the gallery reopened after the Christmas break, when Jean appeared carrying a painting he was impatient for Mira to see. He often dropped in for a visit on Saturday afternoons, sometimes on his way to buy a record on Ste-Catherine Street, or to bring Mira a small gift — a pot of *paté de campagne* he had made or a flask of his house *liqueur de framboise*. He loved to cook and especially loved to share.

Late last Christmas night, he told Mira, he had been completely overcome — you could even say obsessed — by a compulsion to paint so irresistible that it drove him to begin work, without delay, that very night. The result was the painting he had brought to show her. A small, dark, yet intensely luminous work, with rich royal blue thickly layered over red and a little green, divided by a broad brownish median, picked out with intermittent flashes of white at the sides. Not a hard edge in sight. ***Tableau de la nuit de Noêl***, oil on canvas, twenty by twenty inches. Mira could barely contain her excitement. Jean had left the stratosphere of pure non-being and was back in the garden of earthly delights. Jean painted with his hands. The austere acrylic paintings, whose colour he applied with brush and roller, had deprived him of that direct contact with the works and the sensual pleasure he took in their creation.

His public had shared in that pleasure, and was happy to renew it. Regular exhibitions followed, their series titles drawn from poetry — **Miroir sans image** (Louis Aragon), **Compagnons de silence** (Valéry, again) — or from music: **Das Lied von der Erde**, named for Gustav Mahler's famous song cycle. In 1973, Jean turned 50 and was at last able to give up his day job at Merck Frosst Pharmaceuticals. He had a retrospective of his work at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art that year, and also made an album of lithographs, ***The Four Seasons***, with a printmaking studio in New York. In 1973, I broke up with my live-in boyfriend. At the end of the year, just before the gallery closed for Christmas, Jean asked me which of his ***Four Seasons*** I liked best. I chose ***Spring***, which he then presented to me, inscribed with the dedication *Le printemps pour Indra*. The thin end of the wedge.

Indra and Jean, 1490 Sherbrooke Street West, November 1975

3 St-Paul West

The early 19th-century, four-storey grey limestone building on the northwest corner of St-Paul and St-Lawrence in Old Montreal is now a tourist accommodation, advertised as *Loft et appartements du vieux-Montréal*, with all amenities, including whirlpool bath and internet access. Units cost from $250 to $700 CDN a night. There is a French bistro, *Modavie*, on the ground floor.

The whole building went for less than $250 a month in 1966 when Jean's friend and fellow artist Charles Gagnon contacted him excitedly with news of the find he had made. This was before Expo '67 initiated the preservation movement that eventually brought about renewal of the entire area. In 1966, 3 St-Paul West was, to put it mildly, a dump. But Charles, who like Jean still painted, inconveniently, in cramped quarters at home, was ecstatic. With Yves Gaucher, another friend and fellow painter, joining them to share the cost, each would have an entire floor as his studio, with huge windows overlooking St-Paul Street, not to mention the grain elevators at the foot of St-Lawrence Boulevard that still lined the riverbank in those days, blocking the river from view. At street level, a seedy tavern, forerunner of the French bistro, was not included in the deal.

Studio, 3 St-Paul West, 1987 (photo: Charlotte Rosshandler)

It was agreed that Yves would take the first floor, above the tavern, Charles the middle floor, and Jean the one at the top, reached by a seriously unsafe, impossibly rickety set of stairs. It was, as I said, a dump, with badly fitting single-glazed windows, flaking paint, and rotting wood everywhere. The entire building was a firetrap. Plumbing was minimal. Each floor had a sink, but there was only one toilet. This was the source of

some contention, since to reach the toilet, which was on Yves's floor, you had to pass through his studio, and no artist wants his work-in-progress inspected by another. But all in all the three of them managed to rub along for over 20 years, until the building was sold in 1988.

Located as it was directly under the leaky roof, Jean's studio was especially vulnerable to extremes in temperature. He had a small gas furnace for heat in the winter (there was no central heating) and a variety of fans to combat the summer heat, but there were days when it was simply too hot or too cold to work. A long rope tied to a ring in the floor was what he planned to use to escape through a window in the event of fire. Luckily, the need never arose. Over the years, the studio acquired a carpet of discarded canvasses Jean was unhappy with, laid face down on the splintery wood floor.

For all its egregious failings, the place had a certain charm — a romantic appeal, which, like that of the Paris attic in Puccini's *La bohème*, was not lost on Jean, whose favorite opera it was. Charles Aznavour's signature song of the same title, about a successful painter's nostalgia for his penniless, carefree youth living in a garret with his beautiful lover, was also a favourite. In the summer of 1952 Jean was 28 years old and a penniless artist himself when he made a short 8-mm film as the poetic record of a camping holiday he took with his then wife, Louise, Jean-Paul Riopelle (also penniless at the time), and Riopelle's young family on Belle-Ile-en-Mer, an island off the Brittany coast of France. In the opening frame, the camera zooms in on the title of the film, a single word written in the sand: *bohème* — Jean's own inimitable signature.

I visited his studio for the first time in 1974. It was a beautiful, warm sunny Monday early in May. Jean had asked me to come to see his new work the following week, and I had agreed, even if I was, as they say, not comfortable with the idea. In the meantime, on the Monday in question and although the gallery was closed, Mira had asked me to come in, because she now had a second gallery in Toronto, and needed to go over some things with me before she left for the week. When she mentioned that she had an appointment with Jean to visit his studio later in the day, I told her about my own upcoming studio visit, and asked if I might go with her. My hope in this was to avoid having to make the solo visit I had reluctantly committed to and what I feared would turn out to be an awkward one-on-one with an artist whose motives I sensed were not entirely professional.

When we arrived, Jean was waiting for Mira at the top of his seriously unsafe stairs holding a single rose. With the unexpected appearance of two women, the would-be *Rosenkavalier*'s gallant gesture was suddenly derailed and forced to become, very much against his will, a judgment of Paris. Confusion reigned; flirtatious banter and embarrassed laughter ensued until, in the end, it was Mira who got the rose, which she then gave to me, saying that in any case she was leaving for Toronto.

I don't remember what paintings Mira and I looked at that day. Nor indeed did I manage to avoid making a second studio visit, which Jean followed up with an intense courtship (and many more roses) that eventually led to our marriage. He was irresistible.

3908 Parc La Fontaine

The row house where we lived when we were married in September 1976 is in the Plateau Mont Royal, which, like Old Montreal, was very down at the heel at the time. On either side of us, three- and four-storey houses that had once been bourgeois residences with one *logement* or apartment per floor, were now rooming houses, with the rapid turnover of disadvantaged tenants typical of such circumstances. Our house had avoided that fate, being exceptional in having belonged to the same family for nearly 70 years, from the time Hormisdas Dubuc sold it to Napoléon Jeannotte in February 1909, not long after it was built. It was also exceptional in that the principal *logement*, which we occupied, extended over the two upper floors of the building's three storeys. These two floors were linked by an elegant curved staircase with a carved fruitwood handrail: the *coup de foudre* that convinced us to purchase, obstinate in our inattention to the crooked windows and sloping floors that compromise so many houses in the Plateau, built as they are on shifting clay. In years gone by, a Jeannotte proprietor with the misguided aim of sprucing things up had painted over the grey limestone façade, which was a shame, but certainly no deal-breaker. The ground floor was a rental property, with a family of sitting tenants who had lived there for over a decade. At the back, there was a tumbledown garage and a yard, which opened onto a *ruelle* that, like every back alley in that part of town, was a neighbourhood playground, reverberating all summer long with noisy games of *hockey shazam* and *ballon chasseur*.

On the stairs of 3908 Parc La Fontaine, c. 1995 (photo: Marianne McEwen)

Jean at home, 1998 (photo: Marc-André Grenier)

3908 Parc La Fontaine had always been a family home, and Jean and I wasted no time confirming that historic avocation. By June of 1980, we were the parents of three children, two boys and a girl. Jean was a devoted and enthusiastic father, celebrating the arrival of the first two with paintings called ***Bonjour Jean-Sabin*** and ***Bonjour Marianne*** respectively. The late Roy Heenan, an inveterate collector of Jean's work, never failed to mention how much he loved his ***Bonjour Marianne*** whenever we crossed paths. That there was no ***Bonjour Jérémie*** to greet the arrival of our youngest — Jean may have been tired of the trope by then — is no barometer of his feeling for the baby of the family. He loved all three, equally and unequivocally.

Notwithstanding the restless *bohème* of his inner life, or perhaps because of it, Jean was a man of very regular habits. Early every morning, except on weekends, he went to the studio to work, usually for about four hours. The rest of the day, at least during the first years of our marriage, he was happy to devote to our home life. We enjoyed shopping together and shared the cooking. He kept a hardbound notebook where he recorded his favorite recipes: cassoulet, fish soup, *homard à l'armoricaine*, paella, veal sweetbreads. Delicious dishes, all of them, though hardly your average everyday fare, which was mostly my remit. When we entertained, as we often did, Jean shone. He was also unapologetically partial to Kraft dinner.

He was a dependable diaper-changer during the seemingly endless diaper years and, to give me a break, often took the children to the park across the street to play. To passersby who asked about his adorable grandchildren, he proudly answered that he was their father, not their grandfather.

With Jean-Sabin, Jérémie and Marianne, June 1982

Truth to tell, Jean's studio time and his home time were never really separate. Our (luckily) large and very high-ceilinged living room was a gallery for revolving temporary exhibitions of new work regularly brought

home from the studio to be contemplated and, more often than not, reworked, as indeed paint spatters on the living room floor testify to this day. For Jean, a painting was rarely if ever finished. *Je peins toujours le même tableau*, he was fond of saying — "I am constantly painting the same painting" — as if there were an inner vision he could never properly bring to light driving a ceaseless effort that left him forever dissatisfied. During family holidays on Prince Edward Island or in Maine, he painted watercolours. *Je peins toujours le même tableau. Je peins toujours*. Painting was Jean's life.

18 Rue de l'Hôtel de Ville, Paris

Home life and studio life converged on the same space during the year we spent in Paris not long after we were married. Jean had just received a Victor Lynch-Staunton award from the Canada Council for the Arts as well as notice that he had been allotted a studio in the Cité internationale des arts in Paris, when I came in one spring afternoon to find him lying on his back on the living room rug, grinning stupidly at the ceiling. "How would you like to go to Paris for a year?" Seriously? And so on the 2nd of September, 1977, with our ten-month-old son, Jean-Sabin, in tow, we boarded a plane for the City of Light.

Built in the early 1960s after a modernist design that recalls the work of Le Corbusier, the Cité internationale des arts is located on the right bank at the southwest limit of the Marais, just east of L'Hôtel de Ville, the Paris city hall. It is an imposing, box-like six-storey structure almost a block long, clad in white pre-cast concrete panels and raised on pillars at street level. Our studio on the 4th floor was a large squarish room, with an adjacent sleeping alcove just big enough for a double bed and nothing else. The kitchen, not much bigger than a broom closet, had a single-burner electric hot plate on a minuscule counter and a small sink with a few shelves above. There was no room in it even for the tiny fridge, which stood on the table in the studio area. The bathroom was also, to put it kindly, basic. To the left of the entrance, a small windowless box room, what the French call a *cagibi*, would become our son's bedroom for the year. Arriving exhausted after a sleepless overnight flight with a fractious infant, we were not impressed. *I* was not impressed. Dirty and poorly maintained, the place was clearly not meant for family life. What kind of intolerable *bohème* would this turn out to be?

Once we had found a collapsible cot for the baby at the nearby BHV department store, bought a few groceries, drawn aside the tattered curtains and sat down to a meal of fresh baguette, soft Coulommiers cheese, and an especially welcome bottle of red wine, things began to look up. Opening the curtains changed everything. The Seine flowed under our windows. Across the water, beyond a screen of poplars at the river's edge, the cream-coloured fronts of the tall 17th-century houses on Île St-Louis glowed softly in the early evening light. Over to the right, you could see the twin towers of Notre-Dame silhouetted against the still-bright western sky. We were in *Paris*!

Studio, 18 Rue de l'Hotel de Ville, September 1977

Family life and studio life resumed, despite the many drawbacks of a place that somehow, in the end, managed to accommodate both. Jean found an art supply store (a *droguerie*) in Île St-Louis, and was soon painting in the mornings as usual on the fine linen canvasses he purchased there, which he did not mount on stretchers, but stapled to the studio wall. While he worked, I took Jean-Sabin out in his stroller, visiting nearby parks, or walking for miles in the city I came to love. When the weather was bad, we went to the nearby Centre Georges Pompidou, which had just opened and whose entire street level, free and open to the public, was ideal for a one-year-old eager to practice his walking skills.

Studio, 18 Rue de l'Hotel de Ville, Christmas 1977

A fitting tribute to the city where he made them, Jean's paintings that year were among the most luminous of his career, ultimately forming a series he called ***Suite parisienne***. In late spring, before they were rolled up and shipped home, the largest of these were exhibited for six weeks at the Canadian Cultural Centre, then located near the Invalides on the left bank. Mira had come to visit during the winter to see what Jean was up to. Enthusiastically, she scheduled a show for her Toronto gallery the following year. She was also impressed, when she stayed for dinner, by the meal Jean produced, as if by magic, in our impossible kitchen with its single burner.

Shopping, Paris, December 1977

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention, and we become very inventive. The wonderful food on offer in the surrounding shops was an inspiration, of course, and things like bread, cheese, *charcuterie* and *patisserie*, not to mention the delectable ices at Berthillon, the famous *glacier* on Île St-Louis, needed no cooking. I remember concocting a *pot-au-feu de dinde* for Christmas dinner — half a small turkey, simmered in a well-seasoned broth with leeks and lots of root vegetables. We didn't give the missing gravy, stuffing and all the rest a second thought.

We returned to Montreal at the end of June, a little earlier than planned because I was heavily pregnant and wanted to be home when the baby arrived — Marianne, named for the emblem of the French republic under whose auspices she had been conceived.

4710 Rue St-Ambroise

Much had changed in our lives a decade later when, in the spring of 1988, Jean was forced to look for a new studio after the building in Old Montreal was sold to a developer. He had had a major retrospective, **Jean McEwen: Colour in Depth**, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts the year before, and was now teaching part time in the department of visual arts at Concordia University.[1] Our youngest, Jérémie, was about to turn eight. I had just completed a professional degree in architecture at McGill, and was looking for work. The intervening years had been busy.

With Pierre Théberge (left), then director of the MMFA, at the opening of **Jean McEwen: Colour in Depth**, December 1987

Jean found what he wanted in the neighbourhood of St-Henri, where a disaffected Simmons mattress factory was being re-purposed as studio space for artists and craftspeople. Dating from about 1920, the huge four-storey former factory at 4710 Rue St-Ambroise, now known as Complexe du canal Lachine, was a late addition to the string of red-brick industrial buildings that sprang up along the Lachine Canal after it opened in 1824. Jean's generously dimensioned studio on the top floor had a 12-foot ceiling and a solid mill deck floor. Large, newly installed double-glazed windows looked north to a panorama that included Westmount directly opposite and downtown Montreal to the right in the east. Although it had neither the ramshackle romance of the studio in Old Montreal nor, needless to say, the incomparable view of the one in Paris, it turned out to be a fine workplace, clean, well lit and properly heated in the winter, with a public toilet down the hall and a freight elevator opposite the studio door. Designed to accommodate Simmons mattresses of every size, including king, the elevator was also of course ideal for the removal of paintings, which was an especially welcome change from 3 St-Paul West, where the precarious stairs to the top floor had always presented a major challenge to moving paintings in or out.

Studio, 4710 St-Ambroise, 1998 (photo: Marianne McEwen)

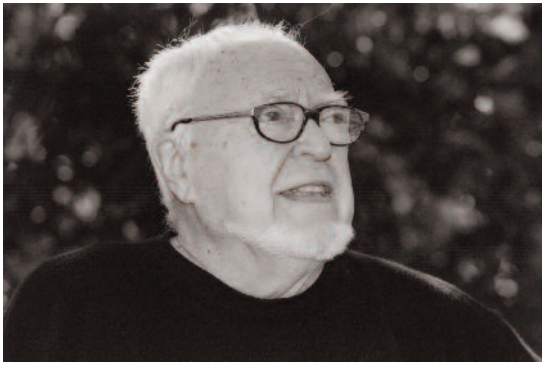
For all that Jean's work, once produced, is instantly recognizable to those who know it (*je peins toujours le même tableau*), new paintings, when they first appeared, were rarely what you could have called predictable. It was, in other words, virtually impossible to guess what he would do next. Such unexpectedness was especially true of the paintings that came out of the studio in St-Henri during the last ten years of his life.

In 1992, after a painful recovery from double-bypass coronary surgery, he painted a series called ***Trou de mémoire Blackout***, named for the title of a book by the well-known Quebec novelist Hubert Aquin, who had been Jean's friend before his untimely death by suicide in 1977. The works were shown at the Galerie Gérard Gorce, where Jean exhibited in the years following the closure of Mira's Montreal gallery. Even though these paintings seem to signal, as the art historian Constance Naubert-Riser observed, "the eruption of primordial chaos" [2] ; even if, to call them unexpected would be, to say the least, an understatement, they were still, in their obstinate sensuality and expressive appeal to narrative content, identifiably Jean's paintings.

Narrative came prominently to the fore in 1997 with the album ***De ma main à la couleur / Hand to Colour***, a series of 15 watercolours framed by poems written in their author's hand. Jean had always written poetry, for indeed his life as a poet had begun in adolescence, well before he began to paint. The biographical notes that introduce four poems published in the Quebec literary journal *Gants du ciel* when Jean was 21, cite the young poet's self-declared aim as the desire to convey *une musique de l'âme* — "a music of the soul." [3] The same desire, the same music (you could say) became the wellspring of his painting. In ***Hand to Colour***, where the principal conceit is that of the poet's "hand" addressing the painter's medium, colour, this music is played so to speak on both instruments at once in joint celebration of the artist's life-long love affair with colour and words.

Jean had made artists' books mixing text and image before, notably the album ***Les îles réunies*** of 1975, an extended riff on John Donne's "no man is an island," which he wrote/painted during our courtship. ***Hand to Colour*** was different, both in form and in content, a late work, completed just over a year before he died. But its "lateness" had less to do with its having been executed late in his life than with another kind of lateness: the lateness of being too late, of not being on time — or even necessarily timely. *Loving you / I lost track / of time / that was late*, he wrote. [4] The words the poet addresses to the object of his desire in ***Hand to Colour*** overflow with time running out. This is precisely the lateness Edward Said explored in his *On Late Style*, published posthumously in 2006, where he writes of "artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution, but as intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction."

The last, "latest" (in Said's sense), and certainly among the most unpredictable of Jean's works were the ***Poèmes barbares*** ("Savage Poems"), which left 4710 Rue St-Ambroise in the fall of 1998 for exhibitions held simultaneously in Montreal at the Galerie Simon Blais, and in Quebec City at the Galerie Madeleine Lacerte. The exhibition catalogue, edited by Constance Naubert-Riser, included verse iterations of these "savage poems." Jean's inability to accept that a painting was ever really finished meant that he reworked certain canvases after they had been photographed for the catalogue, with the result that more than one painting hanging in the show did not match its photographic reproduction.



Jean, November 1998 (photo: Marc-André Grenier)

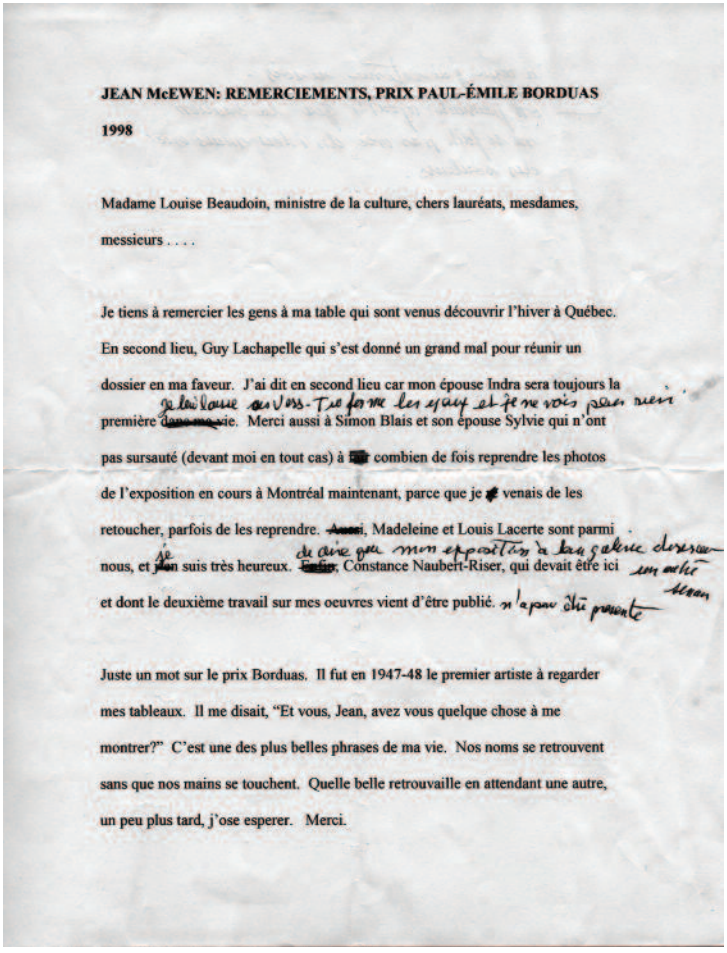
The opening of the exhibition in Montreal was celebrated in late November with newly released 1998 Beaujolais nouveau, whose unassuming freshness Jean particularly liked. The evening was doubly festive, for he had just been awarded the Prix Paul-Émile Borduas, something of a lifetime achievement award in Quebec and the province's highest artistic honour.

Ten days later we were in Quebec City to attend the award ceremony, an annual event known as *Les prix du Québec*, where Quebeckers from many different disciplines are honoured for their achievements. The speeches had gone on for a while, when at last it was Jean's turn. I had typed his acceptance speech for him, and had to smile when, true to form, he rushed to make some last-minute changes by hand before climbing to the stage. He looked very smart in a new pale-yellow shirt, jaunty bow tie, and navy blazer.

Palais des congrès, Quebec City, 5 December, 1998
(photo: Simon Blais)

He warmly thanked everyone who needed thanking, gallantly putting me at the top of his list. To *mon épouse Indra*, he said (and this was his hand-written emendation), "I leave this verse, *tu fermes les yeux et je ne vois plus rien* ('you close your eyes and I no longer see a thing')." He concluded with a word about the prize and its namesake, Paul-Émile Borduas, who, in 1947–48, had been the first artist ever to look at his paintings.

> *"And you, Jean, do you have anything to show me?" he would say. They were among the most beautiful words of my life. Our names converge, though our hands do not touch. What a wonderful reunion, as I wait for another— I dare to hope — a little later on.*



JEAN McEWEN: REMERCIEMENTS, PRIX PAUL-ÉMILE BORDUAS

1998

Madame Louise Beaudoin, ministre de la culture, chers lauréats, mesdames, messieurs . . . .

Je tiens à remercier les gens à ma table qui sont venus découvrir l'hiver à Québec. En second lieu, Guy Lachapelle qui s'est donné un grand mal pour réunir un dossier en ma faveur. J'ai dit en second lieu car mon épouse Indra sera toujours la première dans ma vie. Merci aussi à Simon Blais et son épouse Sylvie qui n'ont pas sursauté (devant moi en tout cas) à combien de fois reprendre les photos de l'exposition en cours à Montréal maintenant, parce que je venais de les retoucher, parfois de les reprendre. Aussi, Madeleine et Louis Lacerte sont parmi nous, et je suis très heureux. Enfin, Constance Naubert-Riser, qui devait être ici et dont le deuxième travail sur mes oeuvres vient d'être publié.

Juste un mot sur le prix Borduas. Il fut en 1947-48 le premier artiste à regarder mes tableaux. Il me disait, "Et vous, Jean, avez vous quelque chose à me montrer?" C'est une des plus belles phrases de ma vie. Nos noms se retrouvent sans que nos mains se touchent. Quelle belle retrouvaille en attendant une autre, un peu plus tard, j'ose esperer. Merci.

Manuscript of Jean's prix Borduas acceptance speech

A month later, early in the evening of Saturday, January 9th, snow was falling heavily in Montreal when Jean went out into the storm to look for a sheltered spot to park his car. While he was moving it, he was felled by a heart attack and I never saw him alive again. The folded sheet of paper with his prix Borduas acceptance speech was still in the pocket of his blue blazer when I took it out of the closet to bring to the undertaker, along with the yellow shirt, for him to wear to his funeral. As I write this, twenty years later, the poignancy of what he said strikes me afresh, and the thought that those words were the goodbye he never spoke, in the end.

1. Constance Naubert-Riser, *Jean McEwen: Colour in Depth*, exhibition catalogue. Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1987.

2. Constance Naubert-Riser, *Jean McEwen: Poèmes barbares*. Laval, Qc.: Les 400 coups, 1998, p. 22.

3. *Gants du ciel*, December 1944: Jeunes poètes canadiens, p. 48.

4. Jean McEwen, *De ma main à la couleur / Hand to Colour*, edited by Indra Kagis McEwen with translations by Judith Terry and an introduction by Laurier Lacroix. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016, poem #22.

Jean in his studio, Rue St-Ambroise, 1998

JEAN ALBERT McEWEN'S FUNDAMENTAL AND MASTERFUL PAINTINGS

David P. Silcox, C.M.

In Old Montreal, in the 1950s, an old stone building stood at the corner of Rue St-Paul West and Boulevard St-Laurent. To judge by the weathered stones, I thought the building, which had seized my attention, had managed to survive many snowstorms, ice storms, heat waves, and bitterly cold winters over many years.
In a flight of fancy, I imagined the building's age at 400 years, which meant that it would have been built at the dawn of the 17th century.

St-Paul Street West was planned by Francois Dollier de Casson in 1672, so I was a little off. In places along its length you can still see patches of the original cobblestone surface. The ground-floor tenant was a tavern or bar. The air it gave pedestrians strolling by was that the tavern had been there from the beginning of time. For Canada, these are ancient buildings.

My reason for being there was usually to visit friends who occupied the second, third, and fourth floors above the tavern. Yves Gaucher's studio was on the second floor, Charles Gagnon's was on the third floor, and the top floor was all Jean McEwen's. This was a trio of remarkable artists, all born in Montreal, each of them singular in their talents, their originality, and their ability to create distinctive works of art that influenced students, impressed critics, and drew curators from institutions across Canada, the United States, and Europe. Jean was born in 1923 and 11 years older than Charles and Yves, but they learned from each other, made helpful comments about each other's works, and became a powerhouse of the artists who represented the best that was to be found among the significant artists of Montreal in their generation.

One wintry afternoon in the 1960s, I crunched my way through the snow along Rue St-Paul West until I got to the corner of St-Laurent. I climbed the stairs (no elevators) to Yves's studio but he wasn't there, nor was there evidence that he had been there recently, except for the whiff of his cigarette smoke, which filled the air, paintings leaning against the wall. Some prints, only partly complete, were lying on a large table.

After five or ten minutes expired, I decided to see if Charles was in the studio he had moved into in 1965, perhaps at work on one of his large canvases. Charles was not at home either. I knocked three times and got no reply. The door was slightly ajar, however, and I let myself in. A very large, powerful, and compelling canvas was leaning against an easel. One of his movie cameras was on a tripod humming away, filming a huge seven by twelve foot and largely black, gray, blue, and brown canvas.

Suddenly, Charles appeared riding his bicycle in front of the large canvas. With a welcoming wave, he said "Hi. I'll be right back," and with that he disappeared and came around the corner again and then dismounted. I told him I was knocked out by the painting and thought it was great. The title is ***Miroir***, he said. "But when I get it finished, I will think of it as my answer to the film *Apocalypse Now*.

"Let's go up and see Jean," he said, changing the subject quickly. "He's done some of his best work over the past year." And with that we climbed the stairs to McEwen's studio. I'd never been in Jean's studio. He and Yves had followed Charles as tenants. I got a shock as we stepped inside. Along the west wall was a stacked row of large stretchers, but not a painting in sight.

Charles was more dumbfounded than I was, since he had seen a large number of paintings within the last month or two. "Jean, where are all your paintings?" he asked. Jean replied, somewhat laconically, "You and David are standing on them. I took a good long look at them yesterday, and decided that it was so cold here that they would be better used as insulation. So there they are, face down, stapled to the floor, and keeping the place warmer than they would as paintings. And besides, it's really hard to paint in this cold, since the pigment doesn't flow easily, and I paint with my hands, not with a brush." This was likely not a financial decision because Jean, rather than attending art school, had studied pharmacology at the University of Montreal and worked in the field until 1973.

We chatted about other things for another twenty minutes or so, until Charles said he had to get to an appointment he had, and Jean said he wasn't going to be working in the studio that afternoon: it was too cold. And with that we all trekked down the stairs to the street.

I didn't see Jean as often as I saw Yves and Charles, but did run into him from time to time. I found him a sensitive, intelligent, and principled person and you could tell that in just a few minutes after meeting him. His character was deep and quiet and he was instantly someone you could trust. His painting was also more than just different from his colleagues' in Montreal. He was in another world and moving on a track far from the work of Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant, whose works were hard-edged and hard-coloured too; or Yves Gaucher and Charles Gagnon, for that matter. Yves's philosophy, aesthetically, tended to follow the contemporary composers of classical music, and his titles were homages to Anton Webern, John Cage, Terry Riley, Alban Berg, and other cutting-edge composers and song writers. He was always sending me home with tapes or records of Aretha Franklin, John Cage, and other artists of note.

Jean had become close friends with Paul-Émile Borduas, who also provided artistic inspiration. A year in Paris, in 1951, also exposed McEwen to the work of Jean-Paul Riopelle. American artists such as Jackson Pollock, who had his first solo Paris exhibition in 1952, also entered into McEwen's aesthetic experience. His time in Paris and travels in other European cities would have exposed him to the great depth of historical paintings hanging in museums across the continent and been a thrilling contrast with the Montreal Automatistes or Abstract Expressionists of the day.

Jean's way of applying pigment to large canvases not only set him apart from other artists of his generation, it also gave his work an obvious and profound quality that Gagnon also was able to achieve when he decided to. I think it was because both of them painted only when they had an idea to give a painting a strong statement to express. The large Gagnon I saw that day in his studio was one I purchased many years ago, and having studied it closely on a daily basis, I came to realize that McEwen's paintings had the same secure sense of purpose. I sometimes think that the rigour of becoming a pharmacist, and having a scientific mind, must have influenced how he approached painting, although painting would have offered much more freedom. One can let go when mixing colour in a way that you can't, or shouldn't, freely do with pharmaceuticals.

Almost every article about McEwen quotes his analysis of the two ways to judge a painting: *"One is based on criteria and theories of art. The second is based on the sensations we get before a picture. I paint the second way."* The sensations that McEwen responded to are one of the things that made and still make his art feel new. If a work of art is not new, or newly invented, or a discovery, it really has little value. How could it? It has broken no fresh ground, or opened new possibilities, or discovered something not previously known or made.

McEwen's paintings are uniquely his and they stand as a body of work that is coherent, articulate, and resonant—good indicators that they will have an enduring value and presence for many years to come. McEwen's works are created by a mind that is akin to that of the great painter Mark Rothko. At the same time, Jean has cultivated a different set of visual ideas, and his ideas would have continued his remarkable stream of works that are compelling and memorable, to judge from his work up to his untimely death in 1999, at the age of seventy-six and at the peak of his career.

In 1943, Mark Rothko wrote that "**All of art is the portrait of an idea**." In McEwen's work, I see a kindred spirit that Rothko would respect and appreciate, although McEwen's world does not have the angst and sorrow in it that Rothko's world presents to his viewers.

Mentioned earlier is my belief that McEwen was a man of principle and that he was honest with respect to his work and with respect to dealing with others. I said to him once that I saw and much admired the show he had at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York one fall. To which Jean replied: *"I don't show there any more. She asked me to paint some small paintings since Christmas was coming soon. I didn't answer her. I just left the gallery and I'll never go back. It's not a dealer's job to tell the artist what to paint, or when to paint."*

Artists are artists, whether they dance, act, paint or draw, write film scripts or direct films, write novels, create poetry, or invent new kinds of art (cubism). Often they use elements from one form of art to create or enhance the quality of another form of art.

When we assess the richness or the superior aspects of, say, a Rembrandt portrait, we find new and original details in the painting, just as we do in a film or a novel in which the novelist has invented a new kind of situation which has rarely, or never, been part of the traditional devices found in fiction.

Yves Gaucher used a special glue to create his laminated prints and in the case of a print titled ***Sono***, the glue turned to, or attracted, a mould that ruined the wonderful print he had created. "Stick with rabbit glue," I should have made him promise!

Paul-Émile Borduas used a bad black house paint that deteriorated and spoiled a number of his most important canvasses. In McEwen's case, there were experiments with a red pigment that simply dried up and then would no longer adhere to the primer or the canvas on which it was painted. This failure could have been averted if steps had been taken to provide more humidity in his studio, or in the home the painting was hanging, or if the canvas had been given a light spray of water on the back of the canvas every two or three days.

McEwen worked with a particular range of colour that I find to be a signature of his genius. His monochromatic white paintings are striking, but it is red and yellow that are frequently used in different compositions, different formats, and with different companion colours. Those in which the colour is brown or green or purple are more challenging for some collectors, although I often don't understand their reason. McEwen's choice of colours are filled out with blue, purple/mauve, and brown. These constitute a lesser-used palette, and I have seen relatively few executed in this trio of colours, attractive as they can be in the hands of someone with McEwen's skills and sensitivity to extract the deepest impact from them to the same intended degree that he is able to do with red and yellow.

I don't know why red and yellow can be so much more powerful than any other set of pigment colours, but in McEwen's world they are. Whether it's a personal bias of his, or something that he simply loved; perhaps the case is easier to look at as a random selection that changed into a profound, deep, and enduring image as McEwen threw himself into a kind of dervish dance in the process of applying paint to canvas. It's a product of an inspiration that emerges from McEwen's familiarity with Old Masters paintings, and with "contemporary" twentieth-century Masters painters. I'd be willing to bet that Rothko would respond immediately to McEwen's powerful and memorable canvases. Rothko himself was a man with a curiosity for mathematics, physics, languages, art, and music. The same is true of Jean McEwen, whose curiosity was always searching for anything that might set off a complex invention of some sort and would add a major chapter to McEwen's total œuvre.

Like several other artists I know, McEwen always had an idea behind every painting he creates. For him it was not a matter of simply making something that may find a happy owner, but a matter of working to

create a deeply thought-out idea, which may require a strong emotional response from whomever acquires the painting. For McEwen it was a matter of giving the world an idea that has a life intended to be long and enriching.

The issue of colour brings us to the matter of McEwen's relationship to the work of Claude Monet, with whom I believe he had much in common. Claude Monet was fascinated with snow, and then with the water lilies at his place in Giverny. McEwen was, like Monet, an emotional painter, not an illustrator. There is between them both an idea that can be spun out as a metaphorical statement, or read as a deeply poetic image, that needs considerable thought to extract a meaning. The same may be said of David Milne's paintings: He also painted with a sharp, metaphorical statement behind every canvas he finished. Although, according to Jean's wife Indra, Jean rarely felt that a painting was finished, to my eye his paintings almost always look as complete as they could ever be.

What emanates from McEwen's art are thoughts that often trigger an emotional response from the viewer. McEwen titled a series of paintings ***Miroir sans image*** in the early 1970s. He was then at the point of painting without the hand-applied pigment that he had been using steadily from the mid-1950s. As a shock to many of his admirers, he suddenly began to paint large canvases with rectangular shapes in different colours and in formats he hadn't used with such vigour and variation up to this time.

Through the mid-1960s McEwen followed this pattern until he started painting canvases that were deliberately straight-line patterns; he didn't follow this path for long: He was back to painting with his hands and fingers again, and the treatment on the canvases shows that he was back to the ideas he wanted most of all to present to himself and to his growing and admiring audience.

From this point forward, McEwen was on track with a determination that saw him at his very best form—without work that seemed a little off his expected signature canvases, but with paintings that were stunning and strong. One can't argue with something that strikes a chord immediately and sends one off to the bank to arrange an overdraft to purchase a painting one wants to live with for as long as one lives.

There is another side to Jean McEwen, and that shows up with a painting like ***Élegie criblée de bleu*** (1968). Here we encounter McEwen with an ambiguous image: one that mourns for the loss of someone who was much loved; and yet a royal tribute to someone worthy of being honoured with the colours of royalty, which are rich and enduring, as any *Elegy* should be.

What this kind of painting should tell us about McEwen is that he was from start to finish a master of many ideas, many emotions, and many ways of presenting a visual statement that spoke with clarity, presented an idea poetically, and gave viewers a profound image that has metaphorical possibilities and that could stay in one's memory for a very long time. One could not expect an enduring gift to be so well-meant as a painting like Jean McEwen's ***Elegy*** series. Just one of them would keep me very happy.

As one assesses the whole of McEwen's impressive production of paintings, one sees that his message

is one that is rich in ideas, full of references to the art of the Old Masters, and the sensations stirred by poetry, music, and the other arts.

I like to think of a hypothetical room full of McEwen's paintings as a sort of aesthetic Paradise. Imagine, to your left, a very large painting: five feet by seven and a half feet. It is not only large, but it is in black and white and looks very much as if it had been prepared for Halloween. After a little thought, however, the painting smiles back at you and you see a plan of order and clarity in it. The size now seems to make a lot of sense, for there is a both a plan for its shape and structure and you know that those factors will be constant for the very long life of the painting.

Then your attention pivots to a small but attractive painting that is not quite one foot square. There is clearly a cross painted mostly in orange and red and dated 1963. Next you look at a painting that is perfectly square but a large canvas painted in 1981 and titled ***Les champs colorés #1*** (page 69).

Your attention now switches to a painting that is a vivid colour of orange. It stands five feet high and is four feet wide. The audacity of it is striking and it was painted the year before McEwen, sadly, died. McEwen's ability to paint such a work shows his versatility and his ability to change directions if he saw an opportunity to create something different from the works he had been executing in the course of the year just ending.

Now you walk into another room and your eyes are instantly taken by a series of watercolour paintings. These are all small compared to the large oil canvases, but the combination of watercolour and paper creates quite a different character for each of these paintings. They are delicate, full of light, strong, and compelling to look at.

Watercolour paintings are among the most difficult of mediums to render successfully. Even the most adept painters in watercolour flinch at the difficulties the medium can conjure up. The combination of white paper and translucent watercolours creates a kind of effervescence that doesn't come easily, even to experienced artists like David Milne, Emily Carr, and American giants like Winslow Homer, Milton Avery, John Marin, Charles Burchfield, and John Singer Sargent.

McEwen's fearless step into watercolour painting was smooth, informed, and almost ecstatic. There is an energy that watercolour painting emanates because of the combination of pure white paper and fragile, frail, and hyper-delicate watercolours that can bring one to tears, or create an image that has an enchantment about it that imbeds itself in one's memory as strongly as any painting possibly can. The watercolour can carry a powerful message or it can bring a distant scene into a close perspective. The range of colours can be wide and incredibly varied. Every watercolour painter of note and ability can vouch for the way in which a watercolour painting can lift a figure or a scene into a much stronger image overall, because of the nature of the medium itself and the way it affects the viewer of a well-executed painting. Jean McEwen's works in watercolour are a revelation. He was able to make a delicate medium into a powerful statement that can fill an hour's attention by someone fixed by the first glimpse they get of the whole image.

There is little doubt that had Jean McEwen lived a few years longer, he would have produced even more works that we would be discussing today. He was a productive artist, an original artist, and someone whose work can stand beside that of artists like Claude Monet, Mark Rothko, and others of that calibre, just as he stands now as an artist who has produced so much of a high calibre.

David P. Silcox has received the Order of Canada and a Governor General's Award for his many contributions to all the disciplines of the arts in Canada. He has written several award-winning books including: Painting Place: The Life and Work of David B. Milne, Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm (with Harold Town), The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson, and Christopher Pratt, as well as numerous articles, catalogues, and reviews on artists and the arts.

Colour Plates

Belle île #20
1954
watercolour on paper
28 3/4 x 23 inches

Sans titre
1956
watercolour on paper
13 3/4 x 10 inches

Untitled
1956
watercolour on paper
13 3/4 x 10 inches

Jaunes, marges pêche
1957
oil on canvas
75 x 60 inches

Les amours jaunes
1960
oil on canvas
75 x 120 inches

Collection: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Gift of Lise and Xavier Briand in honour of the
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' 150th anniversary

Fer de lance
1961
oil on canvas
39 x 39 inches

Private Collection

Untitled
1961
watercolour on paper
12 1/4 x 9 inches

Private Collection


McEwen

Plumb Line in Yellow
September 9, 1961
oil on canvas
60 1/4 x 60 1/8 inches

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel J. Zacks

Fenêtre sur deux textures
March 1, 1962
oil on canvas
45 3/8 x 57 3/4 inches

Collection: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.
Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966

Les icônes #2
1963
oil on canvas
12 x 11 inches

Private Collection

Le Drapeau inconnu
1964
oil on canvas
80 x 77 1/4 inches

Private Collection

Untitled (Aquarelle)
1964
watercolour on paper
16 x 12 inches

Miroir sans image: bleu #10
1971
oil on canvas
40 x 40 inches

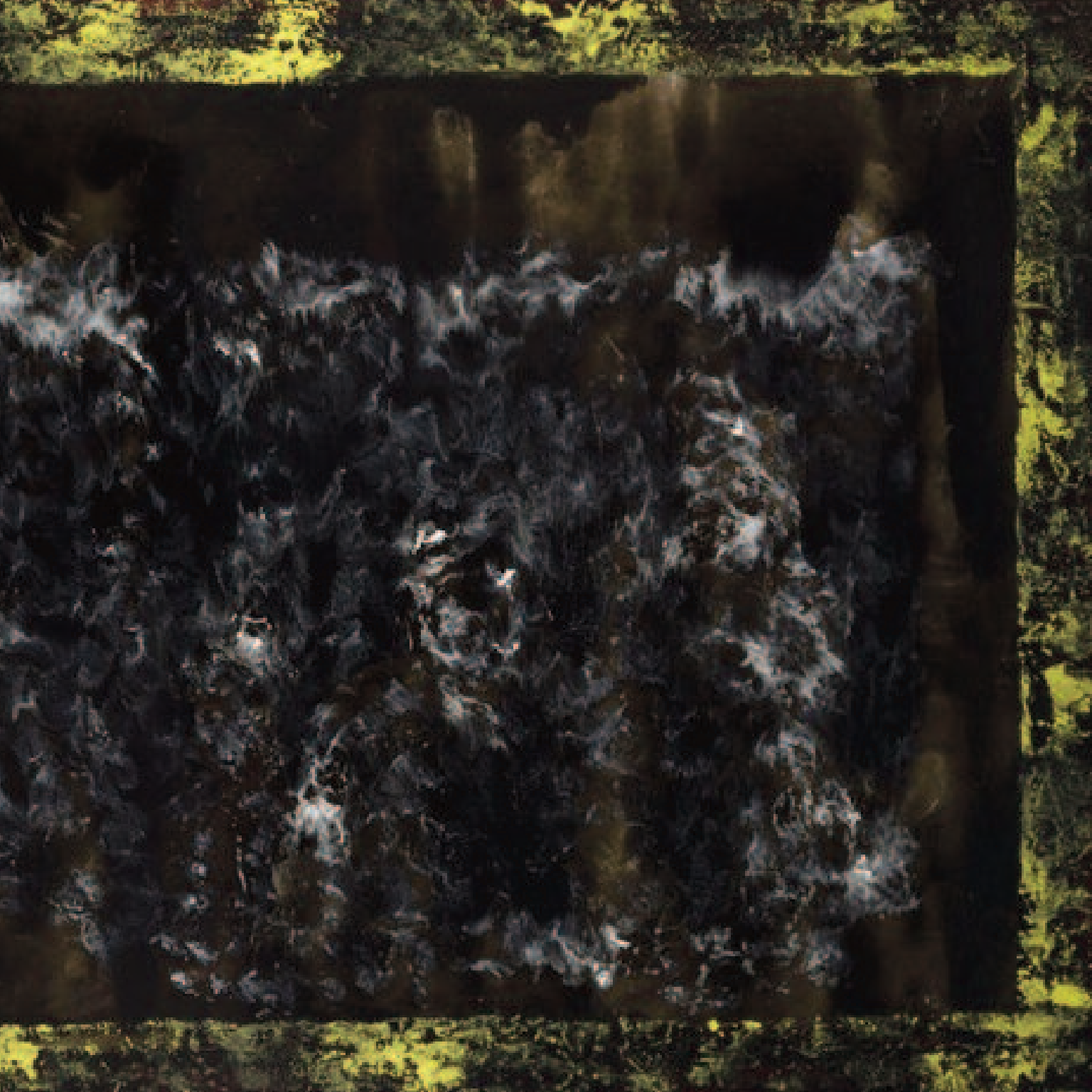
Private Collection

Compagnons de silence
1973
oil on canvas
39 x 39 inches

Aquarelle de jour
1974
watercolour on paper
20 1/4 x 14 inches

Aquarelle de jour
1974
watercolour on paper
20 x 14 inches

Les temps assassinés #1
1974
oil on canvas
60 x 90 inches



Épithalame
1976
oil on canvas
72 1/4 x 60 inches

Collection: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Gift of Dr. Line Chevrette in honour of her grandchildren, Alexandra and Nicolas Cossette

Les fiançailles #10
1976
oil on canvas
40 x 36 inches

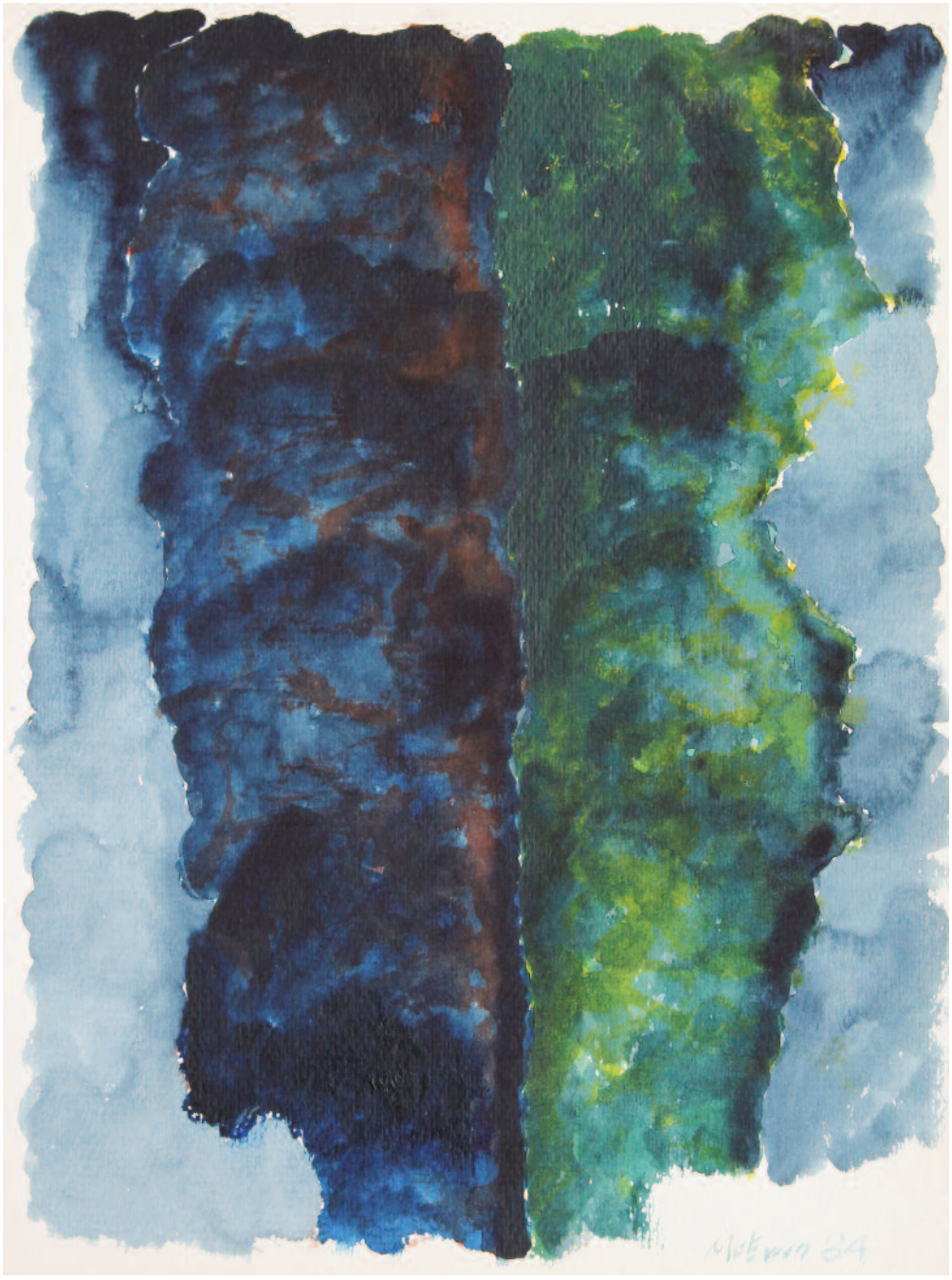
Les jardins d’aube
1977
watercolour on paper
26 x 20 inches

Temple heureux
1977
oil on canvas
72 x 39 inches

Collection: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Gift of Constance Naubert-Riser

Les champs colorés #1
1981
oil on linen
72 x 72 inches

Sans titre
1984
watercolour on paper
15 x 11 inches



L’envers du paysage
1989–91
oil on linen
90 x 60 inches

La légende du oui et du non
1990
oil on canvas
38 x 56 inches

Untitled
1991
watercolour on paper
12 x 9 inches

Sans titre #2 (Cantate des colonnes)
1996
oil on canvas
50 x 50 inches

Poème barbare
1998
watercolour on paper
29 3/4 x 22 1/2 inches

Poème barbare #5
1998
oil on canvas
54 x 48 inches

List of Works

Aquarelle de jour 1974
watercolour on paper 20 1/4 x 14 inches Page 56

Aquarelle de jour 1974
watercolour on paper 20 x 14 inches Page 57

Belle île #20 1954
watercolour on paper 28 3/4 x 23 inches Page 29

Compagnons de silence 1973
oil on canvas 39 x 39 inches Page 55

Épithalame 1976
oil on canvas 72 1/4 x 60 inches Page 61

Fenêtre sur deux textures March 1, 1962
oil on canvas 45 3/8 x 57 3/4 inches Page 45

Fer de lance 1961
oil on canvas 39 x 39 inches Page 39

Jaunes, marges pêche 1957
oil on canvas 75 x 60 inches Page 35

La légende du oui et du non 1990
oil on canvas 38 x 56 inches Page 75

L'envers du paysage 1989–91
oil on linen 90 x 60 inches Page 73

Le Drapeau inconnu 1964
oil on canvas 80 x 77 1/4 inches Page 49

Les amours jaunes 1960
oil on canvas 75 x 120 inches Page 37

Les champs colorés #1 1981
oil on linen 72 x 72 inches Page 69

Les fiançailles #10 1976
oil on canvas 40 x 36 inches Page 63

Les icônes #2 1963
oil on canvas 12 x 11 inches Page 47

Les jardins d'aube 1977
watercolour on paper 26 x 20 inches Page 65

Les temps assassinés #1 1974
oil on canvas 60 x 90 inches Page 59

Miroir sans image: bleu #10 1971
oil on canvas 40 x 40 inches Page 53

Plumb Line in Yellow September 9, 1961
oil on canvas 60 ¼ x 60 1/8 inches Page 43

Poème barbare #5 1998
oil on canvas 54 x 48 inches Page 83

Poème barbare 1998
watercolour on paper 29 3/4 x 22 1/2 inches Page 81

Sans titre 1956
watercolour on paper 13 3/4 x 10 inches Page 31

Sans titre 1984
watercolour on paper 15 x 11 inches Page 71

Sans titre #2 (Cantate des colonnes) 1996
oil on canvas 50 x 50 inches Page 79

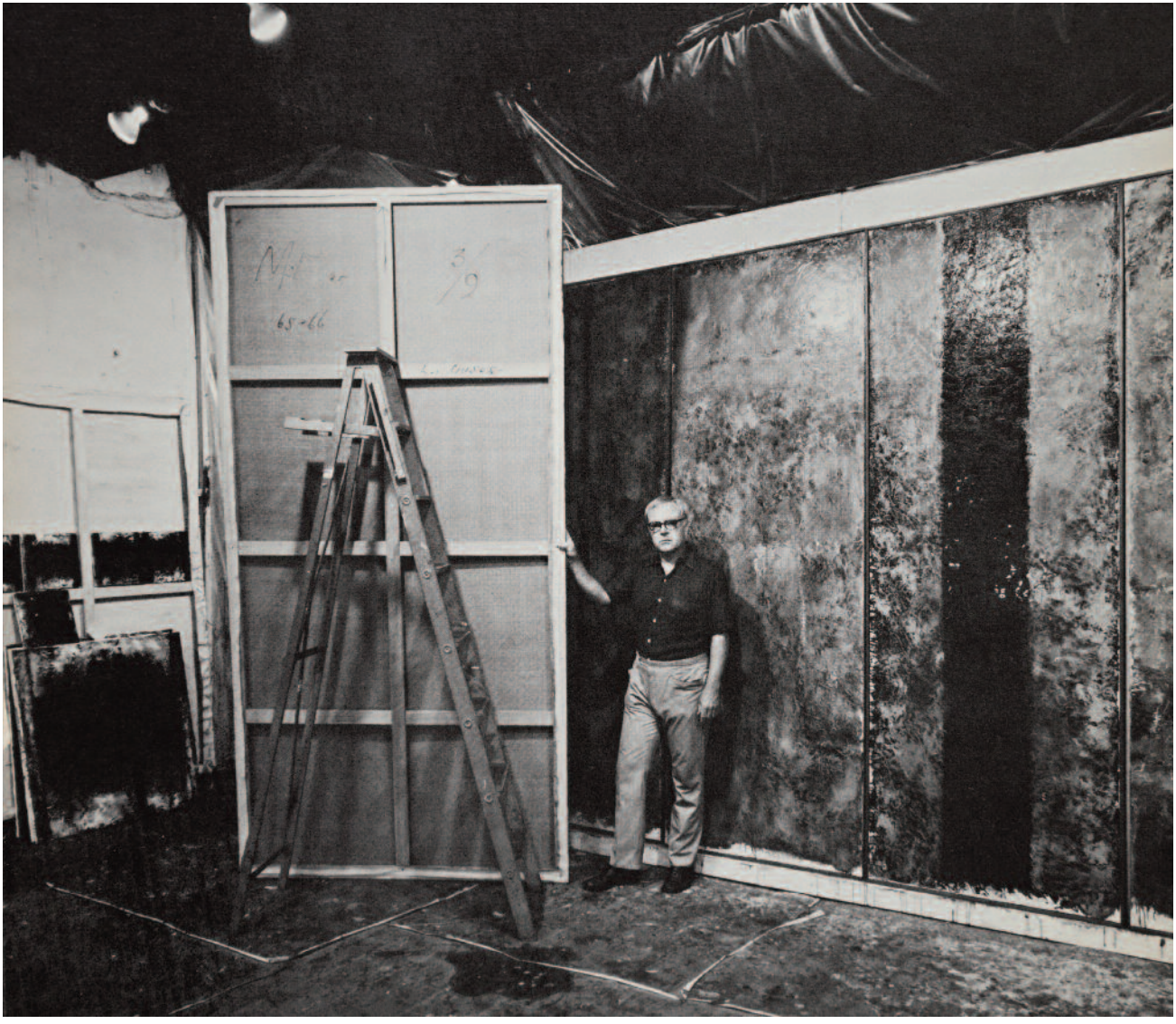
Temple heureux 1977
oil on canvas 72 x 39 inches Page 67

Untitled (Aquarelle) 1964
watercolour on paper 16 x 12 inches Page 51

Untitled 1956
watercolour on paper 13 3/4 x 10 inches Page 33

Untitled 1961
watercolour on paper 12 1/4 x 9 inches Page 41

Untitled 1991
watercolour on paper 12 x 9 inches Page 77

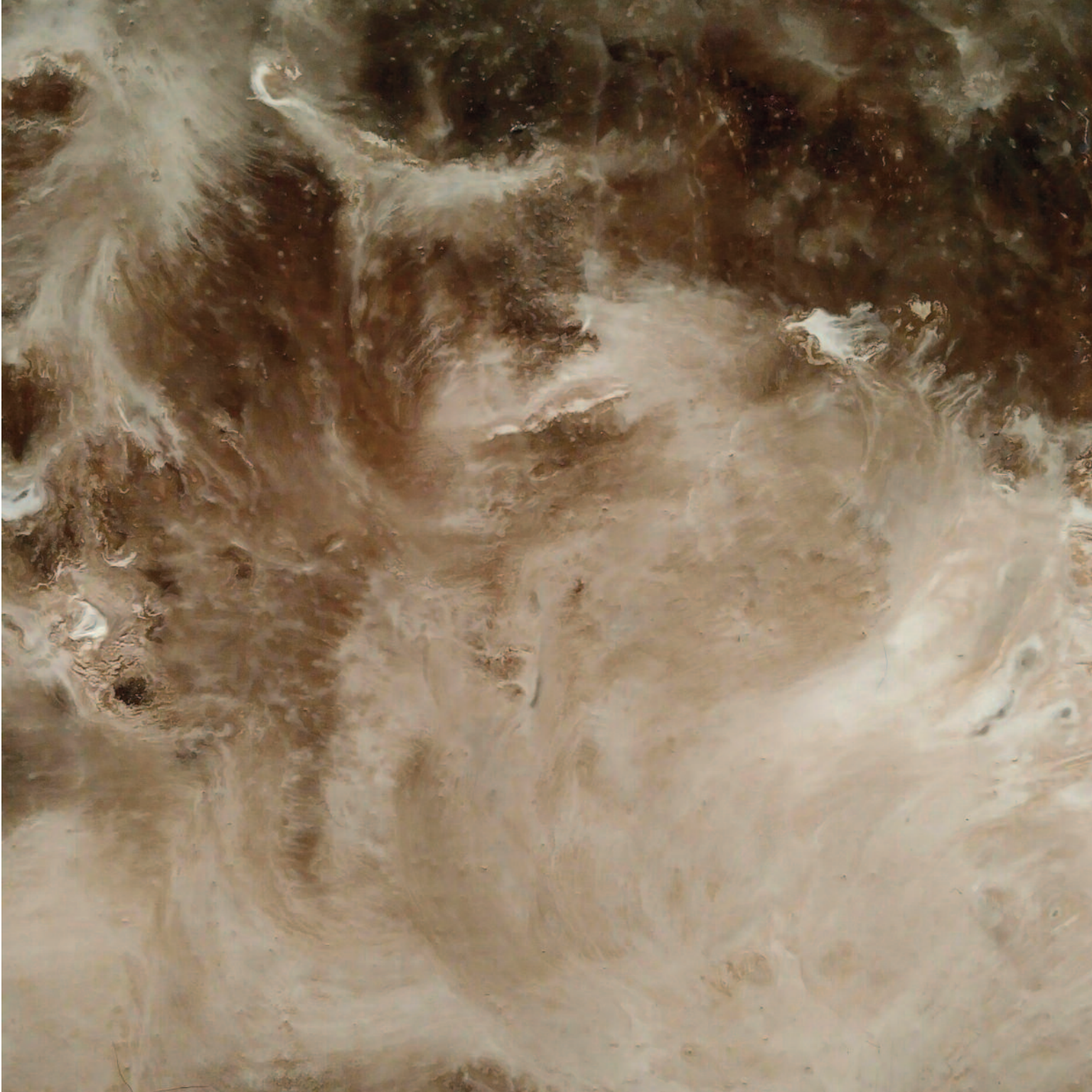


Jean in his studio, Rue St-Paul, 1973

Photography: Mira Godard Gallery
Michael Cullen
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, (Lee Stalsworth ©) - page 45
The Museum of Modern Art, Licensed by SCALA / Art Resources, NY © - page 43
Montreal Museum of Fine Art, (Christine Guest ©) - page 37
Montreal Museum of Fine Art, (Brian Merret ©) - page 61
Montreal Museum of Fine Art, (Jean-François Brière ©) - page 67
Printing: Springfield Graphics, Toronto, Ontario

ISBN# 978-1-7772693-0-2

Inside covers: Compagnons de silence (detail) 1973 oil on canvas 39 x 39 inches



22 Hazelton Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5R 2E2 (416) 964-8197
godard@godardgallery.com godardgallery.com