

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 oeuvre.

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 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.