

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 Noël*, 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.

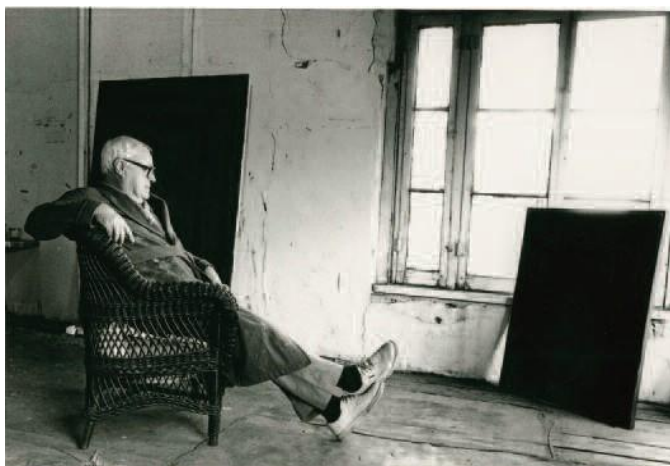


Indra and Jean, 1490 Sherbrooke Street West, November 1975

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*!



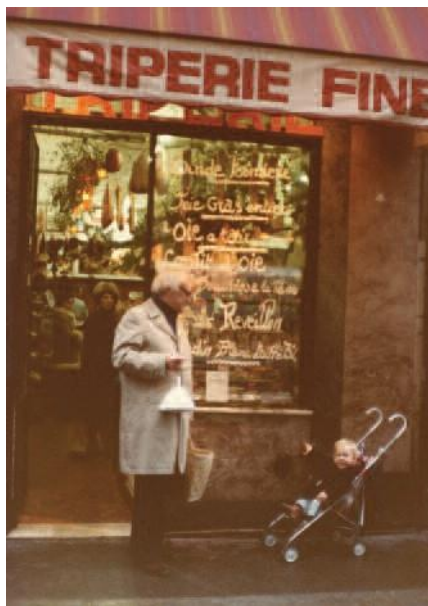
Studio, 18 Rue de l'Hôtel de Ville, September 1977

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'Hôtel 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 *pâtisserie*, 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, J r mie, 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 Th berge (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)

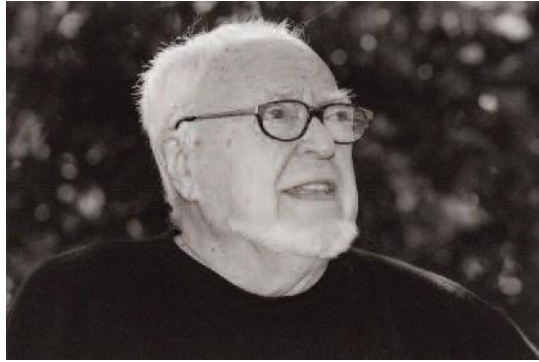
For all that Jean's work, once produced, is instantly recognizable to those who know it (*je peins toujours le même tableau*), new paintings, when they first appeared, were rarely what you could have called predictable. It was, in other words, virtually impossible to guess what he would do next. Such 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 Quebecers 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 ^{de la table au 1^{er} prix. Tu fermes les yeux et je ne vois plus rien} dans ma vie. Merci aussi à Simon Blais et son épouse Sylvie qui n'ont pas sursauté (devant moi en tout cas) à ~~ce~~ combien de fois reprendre les photos de l'exposition en cours à Montréal maintenant, parce que je ~~ne~~ 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 ^{en tant que} et dont le deuxième travail sur mes oeuvres vient d'être publié. ^{si la pauvre s'en va}

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 espérer. 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.

© Indra Kagis McEwen

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