

It is irresistible to tell the backstory of these two coolly bounteous paintings, *Epithalame #10* and *Temple Heureux No. 6*, 1977. The paintings come from two successive eponymously titled series from 1976 and 1977. These are in turn preceded by another, *Les Fiançailles*, from earlier on in 1976. The three series, in all their diverse variations, have in common their all-over, loosely brushed, vertically divided, white-dappled surfaces. It is as if they were conceived in a kindred state of mind, the three titles, like book-chapter headings perhaps, when read chronologically, unfolding as a simple narrative: *Les Fiançailles* (or *The Engagement*), followed by *Epithalame* (*Epithamamium* or *Bridal Song*), and concluding with *Temple Heureux* (or *Temple of Bliss*). Hence a tale of courtship and marriage leading to a happy future, one that also happens to coincide with the biographical events of McEwen's second marriage in the mid-1970s, just as the three series were being executed.

Jean McEwen was married in September 1976 to the architect and author Indra Kagis. They had first met in 1974 when she was working at the Mira Godard Gallery in Montreal. An "intense courtship" followed—"He was irresistible," she remembers—which eventually led to their marriage.¹ The *Temple Heureux* may, in fact, have been the house they lived in then, on Parc La Fontaine in Montreal, but the title reads better metaphorically, as Indra suggests, "as a reflection on the 'temple of joy' that was Jean's experience of life as a fifty-year-old newlywed."²

But maybe we should tread lightly with titles. It is interesting, even poignant, to follow where they lead. But from appearances alone it is not evident how much of McEwen's nuptial narrative can actually be seen as embedded in the paintings themselves or deduced from them. The titles perhaps serve rather as commemorative of felicitous events, historical correlatives rather than indices to the evolving internal life of McEwen's work itself. In that context these *White Paintings* from the mid-1970s are both retrospective, looking backwards into his early career, and fresh revivals and explorations.

The two paintings are clearly siblings, offspring of the same parental artistic vision, each with its own temper and personality. Or in musical terminology, they are variations on a theme, each with its unique articulation of shared forms and colours. They also, as it turns out, reconnect with a founding moment in McEwen's multivalent developments, an earlier touchstone from which all his other compositional modes and painterly processes evolved. This was the earlier series of *White Paintings* from the mid-1950s, entitled *Jardin de Givre* (*Frost Garden*), with which he first established his personal voice. When these were exhibited in 1956, what stood as unprecedented in Montreal at the time was how McEwen's autonomous and impersonal touch broke from the expressive gestures of then-dominant Automatiste painting.

The compositional constant of all the *White Paintings* is their loosely brushed, luminous white fields. The paint is brushed or dabbed in small patches that spread to fill the entire canvas but pulls back at the edges to expose underlying ground colours, sometimes acting like a veil—more open in *Epithalame #10*, finer and more tightly knit in *Temple Heureux No. 6*—through which other variegated colours glimmer like light emanating from within. The fields themselves, however, are not entirely all-over but framed and/or subdivided by vertical divisions, tree-trunk broad in *Epithalame #10*, and more like tender saplings in *Temple Heureux No. 6*. My evocations of natural forms are not mere similes but are prompted not only by the descriptive 1956 title of the *Frost Garden* series, but also by McEwen's own explanation to Fernande Saint-

¹ Indra Kagis McEwen, "Jean, a Memoir in Five Addresses", *Jean McEwen*, Mira Godard Gallery, 2020, p. 7.

² Indra Kagis McEwen, email to Roald Nasgaard, Aug. 30, 2021.

Martin of how he worked out his colour vibrations from looking at “the lattice of lights and shadows formed by the crossing of light through branches and leaves.”³

We should remember McEwen’s formative time in Paris in 1952 and 1953, when, in the company of Riopelle and Sam Francis, he not only first encountered Abstract Expressionism but also participated in the rediscovery of Monet’s long-ignored late waterlily paintings from Giverny. But more than the *Water Lilies*, what especially attracted McEwen’s attention was Monet’s *Weeping Willow* paintings from the late 1910s. Their subjects, rather than looked down upon, were upright, depicting a single flattened tree trunk running vertically from bottom to top of the canvas and strategically placed to bisect it into two wide vertical fields. These Monet filled in with a luscious profusion of amorphous, closely knit swirls of colour evoking the willow’s leaves and tangled branches, and the light penetrating from behind them.

Here is the original armature for McEwen’s own chromatic textures, painterly densities structured by vertical divisions, such as he would first fully realize them in the *Frost Gardens*. Here is a reminder that his work is always somewhere rooted in natural experience, even as it appears abstract, directly exploiting the sensuous effects of paint matter, colour and luminescence. Over the following years, colours intensified, compositions were complicated, paint bodies became thickened, textures were burnished and surfaces were mirrored with reflective varnish. Then in 1976, launching the three new series of *White Paintings*, it is as if he for a moment banishes all this, as if to return once again to core essentials. Were we to re-resort to the biographical narrative of the series’ titles, does a renewed life become an occasion for a renewed art? Are the *Frost Gardens* transformed into *Bridal Veils*?

Roald Nasgaard, O.C., Ph.D.

³ Fernande Saint-Martin, “Jean McEwen and Abstract Expressionism” *Vie des arts*, Autumn 1973, p. 98.