Jean Albert McEwen was born on December 14, 1923, in Montreal, Quebec. Beginning at the age of 17, he was very active as a poet and was published in several reviews. He is largely self-taught in painting, though had some contact with Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatistes; rather than pursuing formal art training, he studied pharmacy at University of Montreal (diploma, 1948), but it was in 1947 that he decided he truly wanted to be a painter. He held his first solo exhibition in Montreal in 1951 at the Galerie Agnès Lefort, and then left shortly thereafter (September) to go to Paris; it was here where he became associated with three key artists who greatly influenced his artistic development: George Mathieu (FR), Sam Francis (US) and Jean Paul Riopelle (CAN). He exhibited with Riopelle and Francis at Galerie du Dragon in Paris. While in Europe, McEwen took the opportunity to travel to Spain, Holland, Austria and Italy – a trip that fueled his practice. After moving back to Montreal, he became a member of the “Association des Artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal” in 1956 and was later elected President in 1960. In 1961, McEwen won both the Province of Quebec Prize for Painting and a Canada Council award. In 1963, he had a solo exhibition at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York; a statement in review of this exhibition gave much praise to McEwen’s work:

“Here is an artist constantly probing into the mysteries of color, concentrating all his efforts and versatility of his color, color which is superbly underlayed, giving his canvasses a great luminosity. His blending of tone and texture is masterful… McEwen’s surging, vigorous painting remains always his own instrument, always under his authoritative control.”

In May 1965, McEwen was invited to share a rented studio in Old Montreal with Charles Gagnon and later with Yves Gaucher. Around this time, the “Group of Eight” was formed.

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1 The artist died in Montreal on January 09, 1999
2 Jean McEwen held his exhibition at Martha Jackson Gallery under the name “John McE.”
4 Ulysse Comtois, Charles Gagnon, Yves Gaucher, Jacques Hurtubise, Jean McEwen, Guido Molinari, Henry Saxe and Claude Tousignant
Jean McEwen was one of the first Quebec artists to push the major characteristic of the movement that followed Automatism – the *exploration of the dynamic possibilities of colour* – and his contribution to Quebec (and Canadian) art is important. McEwen, profoundly influenced by Borduas’ work, became a pioneer of abstract impressionism in Canada. Yolande Racine, then Curator of Contemporary Art, Montreal Museum of Fine Art, has stated the following about McEwen’s practice: “The original aim of his creative endeavour, like that of several of his contemporaries, was to move away from the Automatistes’ principles that still dominated most pictorial research in Quebec during the fifties. Through the gradual purification of the formal vocabulary, the rational organization of pictorial space and a sensitive experimentation with the colour field, the mature work of Jean McEwen has contributed significantly to the flourishing of abstract art in Canada.”

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