

# *UNTITLED* (1966), Jean McEwen

This is the seventh stop of the Public Art, Nature and the City tour.

McEwen's glass work *Untitled* was commissioned in 1966, at the time of the Henry F. Hall Building's construction. As the Hall building was a project of Sir George Williams University, the artwork therefore predates Concordia University which was founded in 1974. The work was produced with the glass art studio Art Kaleiray, which had developed a new technique they referred to as "kalerisme". Thanks to a new thermochemical formula, kalerisme allowed the technicians to fuse glass without the need for lead ribs. This technique not only allows unbroken light to reflect across the entire work's surface but also allows the glass to be layered, adding the potential for rich sculptural depth in these glassworks. Several public artworks produced with Art Kaleiray exist across Montreal, including Alfred Pellán's *Cosmos Musical* installed at Place des Arts.

If you can, take a moment to look closely at the texture and layering in this glasswork or imagine how it looks. Then move back, perhaps taking a seat in the lounge area. How does the layering technique contribute to the artwork's feel? How does this use of the material differ from other stained glass works you may have come across before?

McEwen was born in 1923 in Montreal to a Scottish father and French-Canadian mother. He began his working life as a pharmacist after earning a degree from the Université de Montréal. During his studies, McEwen developed a deep interest in poetry, which brought him into a circle of students surrounding the writer François Hertel. In 1946, McEwen saw the film *The Moon and Sixpence* about the life of painter Paul Gauguin — a painter who also began his professional life in another career. Inspired by the idea that he could pursue painting as an expressive form while working as a pharmacist, McEwen purchased art supplies and books on the leading artists of the moment and began to teach himself to paint. In 1949, one of McEwen's paintings was accepted to a juried exhibition at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. He was then introduced to Paul-Émile Borduas, who became an important mentor. When his first solo exhibition received praise in the newspaper *La Presse*, the artist finally decided to quit his job as a pharmacist and travel to Paris to pursue his study of painting. There, McEwen was introduced to such figures as Jean-Paul Riopelle, Georges Mathieu and Sam Francis, and had a chance to tour art museums and galleries throughout Europe.

McEwen was close friends with Borduas, Riopelle and other signatories of the famous *Refus Global* — a manifesto penned by Borduas against the Duplessis government and its increasingly conservative and religious policies. However, McEwen himself did not view his artwork as political. Instead, McEwen was deeply engaged in material and aesthetic experimentation in his work, viewing his practice as more of a spiritual endeavour than a political one.

McEwen's principal medium was painting, and his works are characterized by his deft use of colour. The painter often worked with many thick layers, using a palette knife, impasto, pouring techniques and the layering of raw pigment. This resulted in dynamic and luminescent compositions that seek to create a work where the viewer experiences the beauty of colour. In these untitled glass works, we can recognize many of the strategies McEwen used in his paintings applied to this medium — playing with colour, light and layering to create a richly textured experience of colour.

To continue this tour, click on *Untitled* by Nicolas Baier and Cabinet Braun-Braën.