

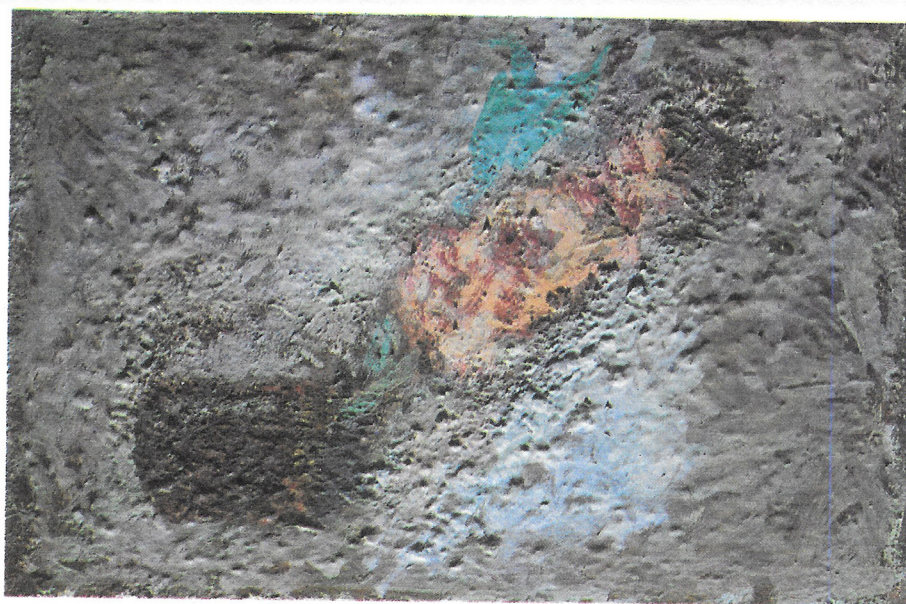
THINKING ABOUT GANDY BRODIE

DORE ASHTON

Proud and contentious as an outsider, Gandy Brodie sought separation to judge and to understand with the mix of passion and dispassion that is the matrix of his art.

Gandy Brodie, who died in 1975 at the age of fifty, was a proud and contentious outsider. His apartness was, paradoxically, a function of his curiosity, which was boundless. Holding himself aloof from movements, and from groups, and from prevailing attitudes, he was better able to stand back and judge. And judge he did. His was a critical intelligence that was often at war with his deeper emotions, and that kept his soul in a state of perpetual restlessness. I had many chance encounters with Gandy, and they always left me unsettled. His strenuous thinking, his naked questions, his exhausting probing for the truth could be extremely disturbing, but in the proper way. (I was not surprised when I learned many years after he died that Gandy had had an orthodox Jewish upbringing, in which the meanings of life are endlessly examined.)

I saw Gandy on and off for years, always by chance, and always for long enough to have an intense conversation. Several of those meetings remain strong in my memory. The first was in the early 1950s. I was in one of the newly established Tenth Street cooperative galleries when Gandy entered carrying a small portfolio, dog-eared and smudgy. He came up to me and without further ceremony offered to show me his drawings. Somewhat embarrassed, I looked hastily at a wild group of ink drawings and watercolors brewed in the soul of what I took to be a stubborn expressionist of the old order. Undaunted by my uncertain response, Gandy invited me to his studio—a dingy cold-water flat about a block away, its walls stained with water



Gandy Brodie, Thomas Mann Gladiola, 1975. Oil on masonite, 35¼ x 39". Courtesy M. Knoedler & Co.

streaks, and with splintered, unpainted floor boards. In a small room his hundreds of drawings were scattered on the floor. Most of them were ink drawings in black and red, and, to my surprise, were unmistakably crucifixions. The effect was both chaotic and powerful. No doubt I was taken aback by Brodie's otherness. There he sat on East Tenth Street, where the great heroes of Abstract Expressionism were creating some of their most abstract, and most expressionist masterpieces, and Gandy was doggedly pursuing the most conventional theme in the history of Western art.

The next encounter that stands out in my memory occurred during the brief sojourn of Op Art. I was at the Janis Gallery looking at a Vasarely show when Gandy appeared, his deep-set eyes blazing beneath a determined scowl. "What are you looking at?" he said accusingly. I rather lamely explained that in the old days Vasarely had done some distinctive work and that . . . I soon faltered. Over coffee, Gandy expostulated, bullied, cajoled, lectured, analyzed, taught: he did everything possible to bring the full force of his disapproval, and he was amazingly eloquent. All this with a frowning mien that could turn quickly into a most charming, even tender smile. Anyone exposed to one of Gandy's impassioned outbursts, or rather, lectures, would be impressed, and yes, unsettled, by his intensity and the wide-ranging culture beneath it.

My last meeting with Gandy was the most memorable. I was in Boston to give a lecture and had managed a quick visit to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. I was contemplating the endlessly mysterious Piero della Francesca painting of Hercules when a quiet voice behind me said: "Yes, yes, you are right." Gandy took my elbow, drawing me close to the canvas, and, in spite of my surprise at seeing him there, so far from our old haunts, I found myself listening intently as Gandy expatiated on the painting. It was a time that was rather sad for him. His moment of success in New York had waned, and he was isolated in his Vermont fastness, more than ever an outsider. Yet, his intense enthusiasm for the art of painting was greater than ever and it was conveyed dazzlingly before the Piero. I remember thinking that this Hercules, so graceful with his lion skin draped about him, had endured many trials, and that Gandy could easily understand that. But even more, I was moved by Gandy's ability to see in Piero's calm manner a passionate temperament. Gandy himself always strived to curb the expressionism in his expression, and to reach the dignified pathos of the old Italian masters. "I believe the painter to be an instrument expressing the untold visions of the world," he wrote for a Whitney catalogue; "his responsibility is the search for an articulate objectivity encompassing the particular visual need of his time, clarifying the visual need of the past and prophesying the art of the future."

When I think about Gandy, these three encounters seem to epitomize significant aspects of his development. In the clutter of Tenth Street, where, as he wrote, "the derelicts lay about the



Gandy Brodie, Crucifixion with Stars, 1952. Oil on canvas, 50 x 44". Courtesy M. Knoedler & Co.

sidewalk like dead warriors, small crucifixions in themselves," Brodie was already separating himself and preparing himself for the introspective quarrying that was to mark his life's work with determined sincerity. Those were the days when Existentialism was a real philosophy that many artists tried to live. The quest or "authenticity" was authentic. It remained, for Brodie, the ultimate criterion, the only *raison d'être* for the artist. These hundreds of essays on the predicament of Christ were the visible evidence of a Calvary reenacted in the soul of an artist who would never submit to the confines of his own physical life. Not on 10th Street, not in America, not in the 1950s. At that time there was something wildly urgent in Brodie, a rage to express everything he had ever felt. It was a time when irrepressible energies were striking New York like random bolts of lightning. One of those energies was Dylan Thomas, holding court at the White Horse Tavern, and sometimes in the artists' bar, the Cedar Tavern. Brodie understood Thomas, adored him, was inspired by him, and could easily forgive his excesses. This Dylan Thomas wrote of himself during his New York rampages:

Remember me? Round, red, robustly raddled, a bulging Apple among poets, hard as nails, made of cream cheese, gap-toothed, balding, noisome, a great collector of dust and a magnet for moths, mad for beer, frightened of priests, women, Chicago, writers, distance, time, children, geese, death, in love, frightened of love, liable to drip."
[letter to Mr. and Mrs. John Nims, July 17, 1950]

Probably Brodie was one of the few "moths" who understood the tragedy enacted in New York; who felt the pathos of Thomas' secret, revealed in another letter about his forays to America:

I buried my head in the sands of America: flew over America like a damp, ranting bird; boomed and fiddled while home was burning; carried with me, all the time, my unfinished letters, my dying explanations and self-accusations, my lonely half of a loony maybe-play, in a heavy, hurtful bunch . . . [to Madame Caetani, Nov. 6, 1952]

Brodie haunted the same places as Thomas and listened intently. He was a kindred spirit, and I think had a sensibility close to Thomas'. Gandy's foggy colors—mood colors—were so close to Thomas' light, the places Thomas foraged in the soul and described so often:

Light breaks where no sun shines;

Gandy Brodie.
Fallen Bird,
1975. Oil on
plywood. 71 1/2 x
47 1/2". Courtesy
M. Knoedler
& Co.



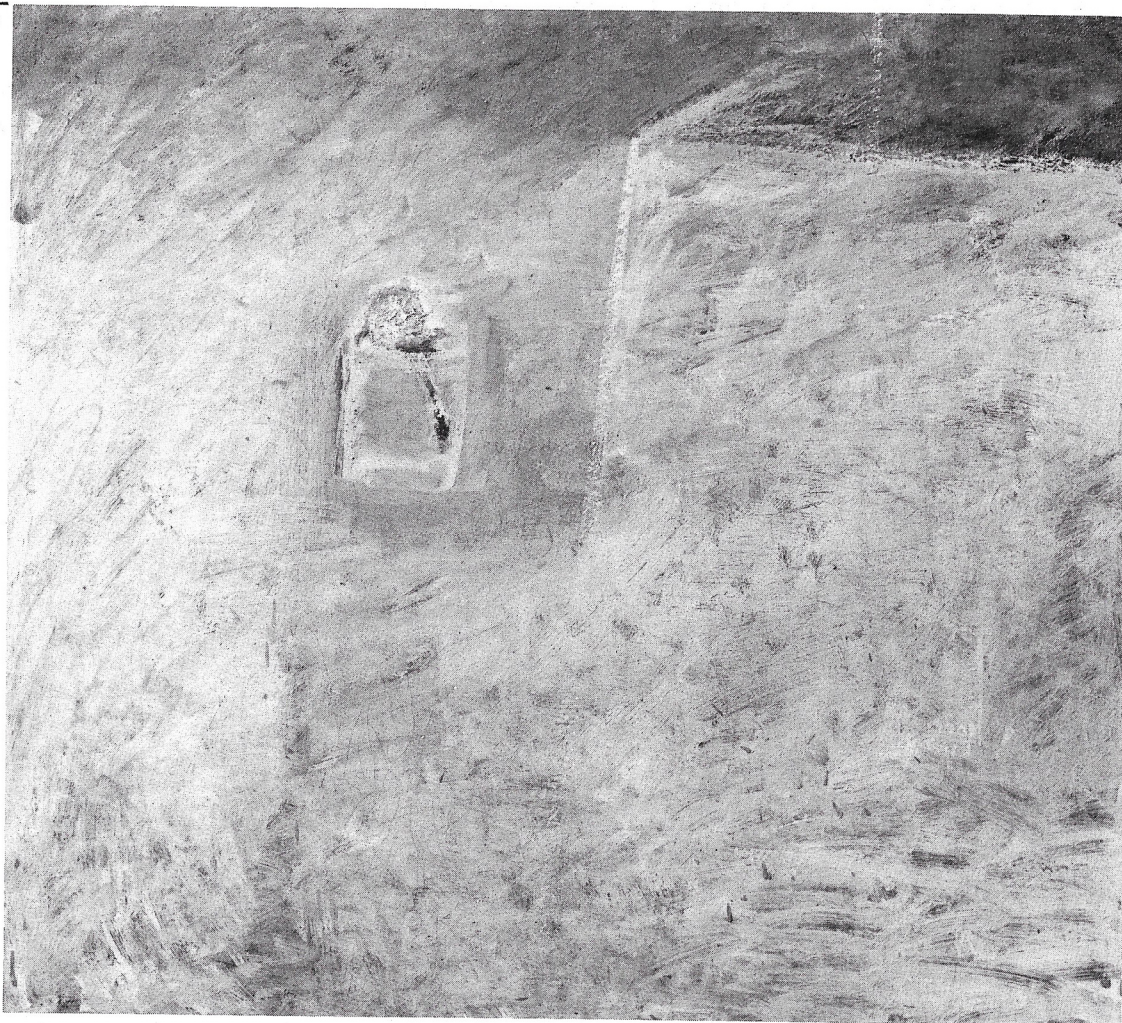
Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart
Push in their tides . . .

Turbulent spirits were all around in those days and Brodie knew them. He was, as his widow says, a kid brother to the Abstract Expressionists, and among them, he was drawn most to the one who had a sadness in his eye, a gentleness in his demeanor for all his vividness and humor, Franz Kline. The light in Kline's paintings always seemed to me to be "the last light breaking" of

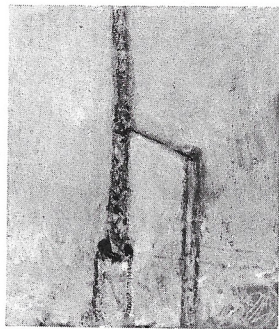


Gandy Brodie,
Red Onions,
1966. Oil on
masonite, 24 x
36". Courtesy
M. Knoedler

Gandy Brodie, *Intrusion of Light*, c. 1956.
Oil on masonite, 35 1/4 x 39". Courtesy M. Knoedler & Co.



Gandy Brodie, *Tree in the City* (#41), 1975. Oil on masonite, 55 1/2 x 48". Courtesy M. Knoedler & Co.



some of Thomas' poems.

But it was a darkness of the soul that Brodie apparently associated with the great Christian mystics that he was struggling to articulate in those crucifixions. A strange coming for a boy from the Lower East Side, reared among the clamoring aspirants to the largesse of America, trained to revere the word. He wrote movingly of his spiritual journey in a memoir he called a novel:

I was an artist unborn to the word, sheltered by pushcarts and Hebrew lessons, the scent of ancient texts and pained chanting, St. Theresa on the corner where I wondered about Jesus on the way home to Friday night candles, soup and chicken and the soft dutiful sadness in the reticence of my mother's face

He battled his way out of the orthodox structures of his childhood, venturing forth into unknown territory—the world of Martha Graham with whom he studied for a year in 1946, and the world of the great jazz artists in Harlem whose authenticity could never be doubted. Still, in the early 1950s, it was Jesus on his mind, and not the Jesus of the gospel singers he heard uptown. This Jesus came up with Brodie from the Lower East Side and was transformed perhaps by his immersion in art history. Or rather, his voluntary apprenticeship to Meyer Schapiro with whom several out-of-step artists sheltered. (Another was Jan Müller who, like Brodie, stubbornly starved in a Lower East Side hovel while painting his heart out in an expressionist style that few could fathom at the time.) Brodie faithfully attended Schapiro's lectures, and remained a reverent pupil all his life. But not even Schapiro could have given him the impetus for these paintings. That came first of all from Brodie's background and the strong feelings he harbored from early childhood—feelings unlocked by the discovery of painting, Van Gogh's *Starry Night* above all. Van Gogh didn't do crucifixions, but the starry night is a Calvary. Brodie wrote that he had always wanted to dare to paint a crucifixion:

Every path I had walked in life, openly or in secrecy, had

led me to this moment in my attic. Was I committing a murder myself, to re-enact the mob, the cross and his pain? I doubted the validity of my right to begin. It must have been the fact that in my liberation to do so, the problem of creating Jesus, the man, still held a fury somewhere unknown to me. I could only create him with the guilt of once having denied him and having to deny him still . . . I had grafted the eye of St. Theresa floating above the heroic tenements, repeated siamese twins growing from each other's loins—and the window of the little synagogue with the innocent boys obedient to the stress of their parental stasis

The only other artist who grappled with the Judeo-Christian conflict in similar terms was the slightly older Stephen Greene who also burst through the screen of the word in the Jewish ghetto of New York.

Brodie's most memorable oil painting of the period is the *Crucifixion with Stars* of 1952, with Jesus drawn out of the gray obscurity like a Dogon figure, his head a mere skeletal mask—red, wispy lines; a scheme of pain emphasized by the gray stars: the pain of Van Gogh, the pain of the mystics, the pain of a young artist straining to be true. Elaine de Kooning saw it and wrote, "It's almost impossible to paint an authentic crucifixion in the twentieth century, but he did. It wasn't an assumed sentiment. The feeling about the subject came through in the way he painted it—forged it." Forge is a good word for it, calling up the heat and the beating and the hammering, and the labor, and the gesture upon gesture. Brodie had already established a work pattern that promised to relieve him of his deepest feelings, a way of building, stroke upon stroke, and then shaping, with different densities, the nature of his feelings. He wrested the palpable qualities from the matter of oil paint and made them the vessels of his feelings.

By the time I met the indignant Brodie at the Janis Gallery in the mid-1960s, Gandy had emancipated himself from the urban

and theological themes of the early 1950s. He had gone to Italy, married, settled into Florence, and begun to paint the wistful landscapes and still lifes in which he could release a fund of sadness and, oddly enough, delectation. He had had a few good years of sales from one of the older, Waspish galleries, and had known praise from good quarters. All that was past, however, when we met. The art world, with its usual insouciance, had dropped him out. For a determined outsider, the blow had its compensations, and Gandy took himself off to Vermont where he struggled to maintain a private art school. He still made regular forays into the city, and kept abreast of everything, if only to burn with indignation. By this time he was well upon his way as a painter, knowing what he wanted to do and never flagging. He wanted to choose moments of his everyday life to enshrine forever in the thick matrix of his painted surfaces. He wanted to be moved and to move. He wanted to speak of things the way a poet speaks, with simplicity but in a way never spoken before.

How could a painter who, in 1956, painted *Intrusion of Light*, a tribute to the fragile life of a single flower in a glass, at the mercy of a vast field of melancholy light, possibly accept the crisp designs of Vasarely? Vasarely, with his scientific bag of tricks, his blunt juxtapositions of color, his chronic sense of design. Brodie could only feel contempt for the unfelt. Thin surfaces meant thin thoughts and feelings to him. Morandi, Modigliani, Soutine—those figures apart from mainstream modernism—were respectable, but the new international heroes had little to say to him. In the era of Pop Art and Op Art, Brodie burrowed into himself with a wry smile. His opinions were expressed pungently to whomever he thought he could sway. He told a student who was reading Sartre on Genet that “Andy Warhol was the turd Genet laid in America and forgot to flush.”

Brodie's relationship to the past was not separated from his presence in the present. If he could admire Piero in Boston, he could also admire de Kooning in New York, for he brought the same ideals to bear. Whoever could pass beyond his “self” to a realm Brodie deemed universal won his respect. He had his peculiar sense of dignity and he was drawn to all that bespoke dignity. I often thought that his rather somber light—those purpled grays or misty aquamarines—was derived from his deep attention to the Italian old masters. Both Giotto and Massaccio, for all the glorious Florentine light, cast their figures in oblique light, and sometimes, especially in Massaccio, even in the dusky tones that Brodie loved so well. Brodie's *Red Onions*, lying humbly in a shaded space—five simple shapes in a lonely place—have more to do with those Italian memories than with Matisse's *Red Onions*. But these onions also tell of something Brodie found in his own century: the increasing emphasis on process. This painting is built, mass upon mass of stroking, from purples and grays and blues until Brodie could reach his climactic reds. The sense of experience in time is implicit in its encrusted surface. For him the paint had to become real, the surface had to be a final shelter for all that lay beneath. Even these onions had to be embedded in the reality of paint, and they are literally hollowed out.

Certain subjects were for all seasons. They revisited Brodie, haunted his studio—the solitary flower, a single tree, a bird, a fawn, a twig. Even the light, which for him had a definite existence, a tangible being. Brodie did not flinch at making his images metaphors for the human condition, but he was not a common anthropomorphizer either. He really meant to make metaphors the way a poet does, the way Rilke did when he alluded so often to creatures and living things other than man. The association, the kinship, was deeper and more abstract than even the description of the individual animal or tree. And the longing. When Brodie painted birds, which he did so often, they were the eternal birds that the poets again and again have woven into our psyche as warm-blooded creatures but also as symbols—grand symbols of the soul that flies toward solace, more certain of infinity than grounded man can ever be. Perhaps Brodie, with his orthodox education, had read the poetry of the Old Testament, the psalms:

I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert.

I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.
(Psalm 102)

Or:

Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we are escaped.
(Psalm 124)

Brodie, I feel, was as a sparrow alone upon a house top, and was singularly able to convey the feeling. One of his most poignant images was painted during the last year of his life: *Fallen Bird*. The poetic pathos of it—a genuine pathos, not bathos—lies in its simple suggestion of the slender upwardness of the tree as opposed to the grounded huddle of the finished bird. There is a hint of red underpainting, covered by grays, white-grays, blue-grays. This red fundament, with all its associations, emerges only once, but unforgettably, in the delicate touch of pure red on the corpse of the bird. When I saw this painting it sent me back to my childhood when I had witnessed a sudden tempest at the seaside. The winds were unbridled, and I watched as a bird, probably a seagull, obstinately tried to fly into the wind, struggling mightily, beating his wings, and remaining, incredibly, suspended in one place for long minutes. Then, vanquished, he plummeted straight down into the sea. Brodie's paintings are like that. They activate associations that seem primal; that occur to men throughout their inner history. Probably his last paintings of gulls, sometimes vanished into the dimmed blue light, emerged from such feelings.

And there are the trees. For some, trees are eloquent. Rilke, for instance, invested much emotion in trees; once, when his favorite tree was brutally cut down by town authorities, he virtually mourned for days, and the tragedy made its way into his greatest last poems. Brodie's trees are matchless. Who can fail to be moved by *Tree in the City*, with its inevitable support, its spindly presence, its vertical line, like a channel through dense, corrupted air. But like all other trees, it moves upward, and Brodie here, as in many of his tree images, allows it to move beyond the canvas. Again, such trees inspire authentic associations. For the sculptor William Tucker, Brodie's tree recalled Brancusi:

Brodie's tree evokes Brancusi's 'world tree', the *axis mundi*, the *Endless Column*, stretched between earth and sky and terminating at neither end

Brodie managed to wring similar feelings from his images of flowers. In *Thomas Mann Gladiola* (the title alone points to his synoptic intentions) he offers thick matter, built up into a closed world in which the single, somewhat wilted flower is the light. Its diagonal pattern of rose-orange evanescence carries intense emotion. This flower, like the onions, is slightly recessed, as though its struggle to burrow through a dense atmosphere was the drama which the artist responded to most keenly. The reference to Thomas Mann reminds me that Brodie was never embarrassed to defer to his heroes. Sometimes, as in the last year of his life, he painted their portraits—his portrait of *Stravinsky*, for instance. This is a true portrait, no mere rendering of assorted features. At first glance, it seems to be painted in the 20th-century Expressionist convention, with restless brushstrokes and heightened color. But on close inspection, this portrait has more in common with Rembrandt than Koschka or Kirchner. The whole process of building impastos is aimed at the expression of the most important feature—the eyes. Stravinsky, behind his double eyeglasses (the doubleness unavoidably associated with the mirrors of Symbolist poets and painters) is there ensconced in his soul, brooding and generating, gazing inward as creators do.

Brodie grappled with the double-life of painting and emerged whole. He knew it had its central being in the matter itself, but he also knew that shaping the matter and creating illusion were essential. The subject was to be called up within the matter of paint, but it had to be a subject about which he could feel. And it had to come from his life experience upon which he ceaselessly cast his critical intelligence. Everything was weighed and compared. Daniel Sherry, one of Brodie's students in Vermont, recalled that “he compared Modigliani portraits by the way the heads approached the top of the canvas. Which one does it in the most subtle way? Comparing paintings Gandy expanded his lesson by comparing blades of grass, automobile hubcaps, or two of anything.”

Brodie was a proud outsider, as I said, but he managed to endure. I think Meyer Schapiro was probably right about him—that when his whole oeuvre will be known, “it will surprise us and will appear stronger and deeper than has been recognized.”

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I saw Gandy on and off for years, always by chance, and always for long enough to have an intense conversation. Several of those meetings remain strong in my memory. The first was in the early 1950s. I was in one of the newly established Tenth Street cooperative galleries when Gandy entered carrying a small portfolio, dog-eared and smudgy. He came up to me and without further ceremony offered to show me his drawing. Somewhat embarrassed, I looked hastily at a wild group of ink drawings and watercolors brewed in the soul of what I took to be a stubborn expressionist of the old order. Undaunted by my uncertain response, Gandy invited me to his studio--a dingy cold-water flat about a block away, its walls stained with water streaks, and with splintered, unpainted floor boards. In a small room his hundreds of drawings were scattered on the floor. Most of them were ink drawings in black and red, and, to my surprised, were unmistakably crucifixions. The effect was both chaotic and powerful. No doubt I was taken aback by Brodie's otherness. There he saw on East Tenth Street, where the great heroes of Abstract Expressionism were creating some of their most abstract, and most expressionist masterpieces, and Gandy was doggedly pursuing the most conventional theme in the history of Western art.

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But it was a darkness of the soul that Brodie apparently associated with the great Christian mystics that he was struggling to articulate in those crucifixions. A strange coming for a boy from the Lower East Side, reared among the clamoring aspirants to the largesse of America, trained to revere the word. He wrote movingly of his spiritual journey in a memoir he called a novel:

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He battled his way out of the orthodox structures of his childhood, venturing forth into unknown territory--the world of Martha Graham with whom he studied for a year in 1946, and the world of the great jazz artists in Harlem whose authenticity could never be doubted. Still, in the early 1950s, it was Jesus on his mind, and not the Jesus of the gospel singers he heard uptown. This Jesus came up with Brodie from the Lower East Side and was transformed perhaps by his immersion in art history. Or rather, his voluntary apprenticeship to Meyer Schapiro with whom several out-of-step artists sheltered. (Another was Jan Müller who, like Brodie, stubbornly starved in a Lower East Side hovel while painting his heart out in an expressionist style that few could fathom at the time.) Brodie faithfully attended Schapiro's lectures, and remained a reverent pupil all his life. But not even Schapiro could have given him the impetus for these paintings. That came first of all from Brodie's background and the strong feelings he harbored from early childhood--feelings unlocked by the discovery of painting, Van Gogh's Starry Night above all. Van Gogh didn't do crucifixions, but the starry night is a Calvary. Brodie wrote that he

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The only other artist who grappled with the Judeo-Christian conflict in similar terms was the slightly older Stephen Greene who also burst through the screen of the word in the Jewish ghetto of New York.

Brodie's most memorable oil painting of the period is the *Crucifixion with Stars* of 1952, with Jesus drawn out of the gray obscurity like a Dogon figure, his head a mere skeletal mask-red, wispy lines; a scheme of pain emphasized by the gray stars: the pain of Van Gogh, the pain of the mystics, the pain of a young artist straining to be true. Elaine de Kooning saw it and wrote, "It's almost impossible to paint an authentic crucifixion in the twentieth century, but he did. It wasn't an assumed sentiment. The feeling about the subject came through in the way he painted it-forged it." Forge is a good word for it, calling up the heat and the beating and the hammering, and the labor, and the gesture upon gesture. Brodie had already established a work pattern that promised to relieve him of his deepest feelings, a way of building, stroke upon stroke, and then shaping, with different densities, the nature of his feelings. He wrested the palpable qualities from the matter of oil paint and made them the vessels of his feelings.

By the time I met the indignant Brodie at the Janis Gallery in the mid-1960s, Gandy had emancipated himself from the urban and theological themes of the early 1950s. He had gone to Italy, married, settled into Florence, and begun to paint the wistful landscapes and still lifes in which he could release a fund of sadness and, oddly enough, delectation. He had had a few good years of sales from one of the older, Waspish galleries, and had known praise from good quarters. All that was past, however, when we met. The art world, with its usual insouciance, had dropped him out. For a determined outsider, the blow had its compensations, and Gandy took himself off to Vermont where he struggled to maintain a private art school. He still made regular forays into the city, and kept abreast of everything, if only to burn with indignation. By this time he was well upon his way as a painter, knowing what he wanted to do and never flagging. He wanted to choose moments of his everyday life to enshrine for ever in the thick matrix of his painted surfaces. He wanted to be moved and to move. He wanted to speak of things the way a poet speaks, with simplicity but in a way never spoken before.

How could a painter who, in 1956, painted *Intrusion of Light*, a tribute to the fragile life of

a single flower in a glass, at the mercy of a vast field of melancholy light, possibly accept the crisp designs of Vasarely? Vasarely, with his scientific bag of tricks, his blunt juxtapositions of color, his chronic sense of design Brodie could only feel contempt for the unfelt. Thin surfaces meant thin thoughts and feelings to him. Morandi, Modigliani, Soutine-those figures apart from mainstream modernism were respectable, but the new international heroes had little to say to him. In the era of Pop Art and Op Art, Brodie burrowed into himself with a wry smile. His opinions were expressed pungently to whomever he thought he could sway. He told a student who was reading Sartre on Genet that "Andy Warhol was the turd Genet laid in America and forgot to flush."

Brodie's relationship to the past was not separated from his presence in the present. If he could admire Piero in Boston, he could also admire de Kooning in New York, for he brought the same ideals to bear. Whoever could pass beyond his "self" to a realm Brodie deemed universal won his respect. He had his peculiar sense of dignity and he was drawn to all that bespoke dignity. I often thought that his rather somber light-those purpled grays or misty aquamarines-was derived from his deep attention to the Italian old masters. Both Giotto and Masaccio, for all the glorious Florentine light, cast their figures in oblique light, and sometimes, especially in Masaccio, even in the dusky tones that Brodie loved so well. Brodie's Red Onions, lying humbly in a shaded space-five simple shapes in a lonely place-have more to do with those Italian memories than with Matisse's Red Onions. But these onions also tell of something Brodie found in his own century: the increasing emphasis on process. This painting is built, mass upon mass of stroking, from purples and grays and blues until Brodie could reach his climactic reds. The sense of experience in time is implicit in its encrusted surface. For him the paint had to become real, the surface had to be a final shelter for all that lay beneath. Even these onions had to be embedded in the reality of paint, and they are literally hollowed out.

Certain subjects were for all seasons. They revisited Brodie, haunted his studio-the solitary flower, a single tree, a bird, a fawn, a twig. Even the light, which for him had a definite existence, a tangible being. Brodie did not flinch at making his images metaphors for the human condition, but he was not a common anthropomorphizer either. He really meant to make metaphors the way a poet does, the way Rilke did when he alluded so often to creatures and living things other than man. The association, the kinship, was deeper and more abstract than even the description of the individual animal or tree. And the longing. When Brodie painted birds, which he did so often, they were the eternal birds that the poets again and again have woven into our psyche as warm-blooded creatures but also as symbols-grand symbols of the soul that flies toward solice, more certain of infinity than grounded man can ever be. Perhaps Brodie, with his orthodox education, had read the poetry of the Old Testament, the psalms: \

I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert.

I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top. (Psalm 102)

Or:

Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we are escaped.(Psalm 124)

Brodie, I feel, was as a sparrow alone upon a housetop, and was singularly able to convey the feeling. One of his most poignant images was painted during the last year of his life: *Fallen Bird*. The poetic pathos of it—a genuine pathos, not bathos—lies in its simple suggestion of the slender upwardness of the tree as opposed to the grounded huddle of the finished bird. There is a hint of red underpainting, covered by grays, white-grays, blue grays. This red fundament, with all its associations, emerges only once, but unforgettably, in the delicate touch of pure red on the corpse of the bird. When I saw this painting it sent me back to my childhood when I had witnessed a sudden tempest at the seaside. The winds were unbridled, and I watched as a bird, probably a seagull, obstinately tried to fly into the wind, struggling mightily, beating his wings, and remaining, incredibly, suspended in one place for long minutes. Then, vanquished, he plummeted straight down into the sea. Brodie's paintings are like that. They activate associations that seem primal; that occur to men throughout their inner history. Probably his last paintings of gulls, sometimes vanished into the dimmed blue light, emerged from such feelings.

And there are the trees. For some, trees are eloquent. Rilke, for instance, invested much emotion in trees; once, when his favorite tree was brutally cut down by town authorities, he virtually mourned for days, and the tragedy made its way into his greatest last poems. Brodie's trees are matchless. Who can fail to be moved by *Tree in the City*, with its inevitable support, its spindly presence, its vertical line, like a channel through dense, corrupted air. But like all other trees, it moves upward, and Brodie here, as in many of his tree images, allows it to move beyond the canvas. Again, such trees inspire authentic associations. For the sculptor William Tucker, Brodie's tree recalled Brancusi:

Brodie's tree evokes Brancusi's 'world tree', the axis mundi, the Endless Column, stretched between earth and sky and terminating at neither end....

Brodie managed to wring similar feelings from his images of flowers. In *Thomas Mann Gladiola* (the title alone points to his synoptic intentions) he offers thick matter, built up into a closed world in which the single, somewhat wilted flower is the light. Its diagonal pattern of rose-orange evanescence carries intense emotion. This flower, like the onions, is slightly recessed, as though its struggle to burrow through a dense atmosphere was the drama which the artist responded to most keenly. The reference to Thomas Mann reminds me that Brodie was never embarrassed to defer to his heroes. Sometimes, as in the last year of his life, he painted their portraits—his portrait of Stravinsky, for instance. This is a true portrait, no mere rendering of assorted features. At first glance, it seems to be painted in the 20th-century Expressionist convention, with restless brushstrokes and heightened color. But on close inspection, this portrait has more in common with Rembrandt than Kokoschka or Kirchner. The whole process of building impastos is aimed at the expression of the most important feature—the eyes. Stravinsky, behind his double eyeglasses (the doubleness unavoidably associated with the mirrors of Symbolist poets and painters) is there ensconced in his soul, brooding and generating, gazing inward as creators do.

Brodie grappled with the double-life of painting and emerged whole. He knew it had its central being in the matter itself, but he also knew that shaping the matter and creating illusion were essential. The subject was to be called up within the matter of paint, but it had to be a subject about which he could feel. And it had to come from his life experience upon which he ceaselessly cast his critical intelligence. Everything was weighed and compared. Daniel Sherry, one of Brodie's students in Vermont, recalled that "he compared Modigliani portraits by the way the heads approached the top of the canvas. Which one does it in the most subtle way? Comparing paintings Gandy expanded his lesson by comparing blades of grass, automobile hubcaps, or two of anything."

Brodie was a proud outsider, as I said, but he managed to endure. I think Meyer Schapiro was probably right about him—that when his whole oeuvre will be known, it will surprise us and will appear stronger and deeper than has been recognized."

Dore Ashton

"Thinking about Gandy Brodie"

Arts Magazine, Oct. 1983

Thomas Mann Gladiola, 1975, oil on Masonite, 35¼" x 39"

Crucifixion with Stars, 1952, oil on canvas, 50" x 44"

Fallen Bird, 1975, oil on plywood, 71 ½" x 47 ½"

Red Onions, 1966, oil on Masonite, 24" x 36"

Intrusion of Light, 1956, oil on Masonite, 35 ¼" x 39"

Tree in the City, 1975, oil on Masonite, 55 ½" x 48"

All paintings Brodie Estate