

PAINTING BEYOND PAINTING

The Unseen Image

in Gandy Brodie's Last Self Portraits

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... If there can be a truly religious art in our time, it will be of hermetic icons like this - the gull the emblem of the Holy Spirit at an unseen baptism, the tree carrying an unseen crucified god...

William Tucker

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In the very first article ever written about the painting of Gandy Brodie, William Tucker intuitively grasped a phenomenon of which he was consciously unaware: the presence of the unseen. On short acquaintance with the particular works described, in which his focus was on the image as painted surface, Tucker touched upon a deeper level of imagery imbedded in the paint and not necessarily visible to the eye without prior knowledge or a change of the lighting. For the tree, in fact, carries "an unseen crucified god": a portrait of the artist in the ultimate act of self-effacement.

Such is the power of the artist's confession that the work of art can act upon the receptive viewer in the same spirit of suggestion that the creative process works upon the artist himself. Without resort to conventional symbols, the effect of this work, as of "truly religious art" is demonstrable. The artist's vision fulfills Emerson's epitome of religious perception:

The first and last lesson of religion is, "The things that are

seen, are temporal, the things that are unseen, are eternal,"

By reading backward, as with the fossil record to which the cumbrous appearance of these paintings curiously corresponds, it is possible to trace the cumulative stages of a trio of paintings which are something of a revelation in the artist's oeuvre. Clearly no longer painting in the pictorial sense, this is not to imply either failing or evasion on the part of the artist. Neither are these works of willful innovation. Quite the contrary. The evolution of these last paintings is just that: a process of accretion - and sacrifice - in the service of survival. These works bear witness to an unswerving dedication to the timeless human tradition of painting, above all, a commitment to the doing at the historic moment which the artist interpreted as demanding an exploration of paint. For painting, Gandy insisted, is about paint! And the works in progress - they were always in progress - he called "experiments".

Through the medium then, its bounds are dissolved, a paradox literally heavy with thought. The more paint, the less material the effect of the whole, as veil over veil congealed upon itself to record its presence and passing in a stroke of the brush. Not by omission is this world overcome. More is less.

The last self portraits of Gandy Brodie culminate this contradiction. I believe they are in a class by themselves. Only the "Last Gull" exceeds their intensity for sheer etherialization. It is already beyond the pale of the material. While the portraits, in their years long build-up of paint - and time - wrestle with here and now, the human condition, appearance and reality, bearing all the lumps of life, to the edge of eternity.

Three self portraits, holding an open book, were at the end of Gandy's life, transformed. I had received one in 1973 for my birthday. A year later I received it again. This time it was a tree. To my expression of horror, Gandy just laughed and said, "But I am a tree!" There were still two other self portraits in progress. Not taking any chances, I picked a fresh new sketch off the studio floor, one day in October, 1975. It attracted me because of its jewel-like resemblance to medieval manuscript painting. The figure had seemed very far away, being quite small. The painting was only ten by eight inches, the size of an average book page.

on October 22nd, (the same date as Cézanne's death) 1975, Gandy dropped to the sidewalk on Madison Avenue. For some time afterward, I was convinced that the self portraits did not exist. One had become an upright chartreuse tree, the other stalactite and lichen.

In the course of living with the birthday version of "I Am A Tree", I became familiar with the woven intricacies of its greyed turquoise tonality, pierced with blood red under hints of major arteries and overlaid with rust branching of sap coursing through the

tree column. At twilight, I began to notice the shadowed contour of the portrait emerge around the tree. Of course, I knew it was there and just dismissed the phenomenon. The other two "portraits" had gone into storage. When these paintings finally saw the light, a process of discovery began.

In the metamorphosis of Gandy Brodie's last self portraits, the connection with Cézanne is made explicit in a late drawing of the chartreuse tree. In a slide of 1971, the title of the book the artist is holding is "P. Cézanne". The book, in a later working photograph of Gandy in the pose, has been identified as "Principles of Knowledge" by A.J. Ayer. The transition is striking.

The Cézanne book reminds us that "The Louvre is the book where we learn to read." This, too, is Gandy's school of painting: he learned to read at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (in the days when Cézanne's "Bather" - also painted from a photograph - guarded the entrance to the permanent collection). And just as Cézanne, the former prize classics student, wanted to do Poussin over from nature, so Gandy, the former delinquent Hebrew student, turned the book of Cézanne into the living tree.

William Tucker referred to formal contradictions in Gandy's painting that may make them appear "inconsistent and unsophisticated considered as a classical modernist oeuvre". At issue is the artist's strict adherence to the plastic principles of modern art that spring directly from the totality of Cézanne's contribution. It is the source itself that may appear contradictory in its range, as Meyer Schapiro has observed, in the light of the fragmented formalism to which the Master had early been reduced.

In Gandy's self portraits, the architecture of flat space had been internalized, setting up vibrations of awe as if the viewer trespassed on the limits of mortality. Physically, the space around the figure of the original portrait is in relief, much higher than the figure itself. This "modelling" around the visible tree is what Tucker questioned, without knowing its reference to the self portrait. The effect is of an aura around the tree, in certain light of a shadow cast by an absent object.

In building up the space around the portrait, it is as if Gandy were illustrating by exaggeration his oft repeated lesson, "There is no background in painting." Thus he made the convention of a background, literally foreground, creating an inversion of ordinary expectation. Hans Hofmann's term "negative space" was too negative for Gandy's tactile reality. Or was it a double negative? Gandy expressed the idea affirmatively, in paint, almost sculpturally.

Carroll Janis has pointed out that Gandy proceeds exactly the opposite of a primitive or child artist who would imitate nature physically and build up a nose or other protuberance. Gandy is

building up an idea, thereby de-building, de-materializing the image in space, the apparent subject of the painting, in this case, the self image, to haunting effect. In Emerson's sense, we are witnessing in Gandy's procedure a learned truth which the child does not at first apprehend. Gandy piles it on for good measure, to make us see - between the lines, as it were. The formal and the subjective tensions of the pictorial process have fused. This is the way of "a primitive of a new art" as Cézanne announced himself, each artist following in his footsteps perpetually beginning the steep ascent toward self realization.

Gandy Brodie's last painting is a product of the artist's deepest reserve energies: the realm of "entheos", the god within: the creatively unique. To this god and his divine gifts, the individual's last reserve is sacrificed. The life of the painting consumes the artist.

"Do you paint the painting or does the painting paint you?" Gandy's characteristic approach to the canvas was a loaded question. At a certain level of absorption, rarely reached, a dialogue ensues in which everything is risked on the answering response: a leap in the dark. And so it came to be.

Subsequent events reveal the depths out of which the process unfolded. The artist as an instrument of higher - inner - purpose seems to be natural to the momentum of creative synthesis. The testimony is ample. So Roualt saw himself, so Stravinsky said, "I am the vessel through which the 'Sacre' has passed." In Shelley's view, prophecy was an attribute of poetry, not the reverse as gross superstition but revelation of the organic development of events: the future contained in the present as flower and fruit in the seed.

The organism "knows". But how does it know it knows? Gandy Brodie, year after year, had probed through painting the path to self knowledge. One day the man with the book became the tree.

When the final image was superimposed on the self portrait, the original sum of images could not be removed from the surface, nor was any attempt made by the artist to do so. He never worked by scraping away paint. More than in any other works of his whole career, the earlier stages continue to be present, not only as surface build-up: an intricate network of arteries and accretions, through deliberate scattered gaps in the painted fabric: "I always let a little come through", Gandy would say as he painted out a layer, or along the edges like the congealed fringe of a tapestry, revealing the separate threads: a key to the process and serving as a transition and integral frame.

The earlier stages of the portraits remain as another dimension entirely. They function in a new way, the sum being not "more" than the parts- as in the past imparting a sumptuous surface quality that

has been compared to Rouault - but "less": they now disappear in depth. It is as if the sum of images had effaced itself from the surface. A process of building up by accretion (as stalactites are formed) had simultaneously been breaking down. Is this not a living process - in paint - at one with the subject: beginning in self scrutiny, culminating in self effacement?

The physical structure of the sunken portraits is akin to nothing else I am aware of in the history of art than the "sunk relief" portrait sculptures of Tel El Amarna, the brief moment of monotheism in ancient Egypt. The final addition of the tree - and the primitive growths - are likewise in character with the symbols of life and fecundity which are intrinsic to Egypt's embodiment of immortality. The element which overwhelmed Mary Cassatt in Egypt, made her stop painting and question the value of her own images of mothers and children; Power! (at the very moment Henry Adams mourned that the Dynamo had replaced the Virgin) was just the opposite of the evanescence of Ikhnaton's reign to which Gandy's creation corresponds: an evocation of man's spiritual birth in the oneness of eternal life.

That this was the Pharaoh of Thomas Mann's "Joseph in Egypt" is no doubt fitting to Gandy's self perception as Joseph in his own family: Joseph-Narcissus of the self portrait, peering into the well as the Artist, the man with the book, peers into the bottomlessness of the past. And so it was and is: the well becomes the pit - of provocation, of purgation, of redemption. This, too, is the Joseph pattern of Gandy's persona.

The transitions of the painting follow the course of what Mann calls life as "lived myth" as the individual merges into the mythic, the typical. This is the essence of Cézanne's so-called "anonymity", for example, which has nothing whatever to do with formalism, everything to do with the enduring, elemental mountain of man's maturity: Myth! An early expression in the history of the race, late in the development of the individual.

Beyond the Egyptian precedent, more like Mann's modern juxtaposition, Gandy's reliefs are not only internalized. They are unmistakably paintings of appearance, the paint strangely translucent as if with eyes of pearl it had suffered a sea change. This indefinable substance which defies perception is a graphic demonstration of Goethe's observation that "Nature has no core or skin, it is both inside and outside at once."

In Gandy Brodie's superimposed self portraits, there are two images simultaneously: a painted one on the surface - a tree or stalactite and lichen - and an image compounded of paint, many layers of paint, that is surrounded by high relief. An object, part painting, part "something like" sculpture, but not anything like painted sculpture to which paint is applied; if anything sculptured painting

in which, unexpectedly, the center is void. This void is the original image of the artist now deeply imprinted, as it were, in the striated layers of hardened paint: a genuine fossil. Thus a double image has been created, unique in that it exists on different planes of the material: visual and tactile. Both are perceived at once as the eye may choose to extricate one kind of image from another or to fuse them into a single whole as the artist has done. Past and present are one.

There is a third image. I discovered it quite by chance - after seven years. One evening I came home late to the city apartment where I was staying with the friend who had acquired the painting, " I Am A Tree" (II, 1975). There was no light in the living room where the painting was hanging but a hint of light entered from a scattering of windows opposite. I walked into the room toward the light and when I turned back and looked at the painting, the figure was fully visible. The tree had disappeared. The shadows of night had filled the painted void with substance. In the morning, the painting was a painting of a tree again. The figure was gone leaving only tracks of its midnight escape.

There is an old Vermont saying that Gandy loved, "You don't know a person 'til you've summered and wintered with 'im." Or a flower; you see it applied to Gandy's paintings of wilted blossoms, as desirable objects of contemplation. How much more true this extended season turns out to be for discovering a complex work of art, a self portrait, to be sure! With what a trail of meaning it returns to the orbit of one's consciousness from the moment of having seen the painting whole!

The third image, inked in by the night, beyond our daily sight, supercedes the double image of past and present - the solid base where it securely rests, a perfect fit. This is the future. This is life everlasting. Beyond the vanity of all desire. Release. True liberation. No wonder the impalpable image in the painting eluded one's ordinary perception for seven years!

Yet who would have thought of looking at a painting in the dark, or almost dark? There is New England precedent for this experience, too. Thoreau, in his "Journal", describes an almost identical phenomenon as I had witnessed:

I saw by the shadows cast by the inequalities of the clayey sand-bank in the Deep-Cut that it was necessary to see objects by moonlight as well as sunlight, to get a complete notion of them. The bank had looked much more flat by day, when the light was stronger, but now the heavy shadows revealed its prominences. The prominences are light, made more remarkable by the dark shadows which they cast.

The parallel with the surface of Gandy's painting is the more remarkable if one recalls that in "Walden", the Deep-Cut of the railroad in spring is the scene of an unforgettable evocation of original creation: "...I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me, - had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank..." The material quality of the painting strongly suggests some original stuff of creation: layer after layer of thin paint, somewhat analagous to the primal broth, building up in eons of time to the life containing clay which biologists say may give credence to the Biblical matter. Out of this element evolves the ephemera of forms existing in time, all peripheral, "merely parasitic", Thoreau says, to the great flow of the living earth,

As I reread the passage now, I see how essential it is in the experience of Gandy's painting, how American thereby is this link with a universal mind. For what was America ever, in the consciousness of world culture, but the epitome of the fresh start! The land - not merely the landscape, a pictorial concept - does still act upon the artist in touch with its vital rhythms. How much more strongly perhaps is it embraced by one who had "long been city pent", a child of a New York tenement, further distanced by the twentieth century's ominous rootlessness! That the railroad made the cut releasing the rites of spring was an irony equivalent to the substitute moonlight cast by a tenement wall that excavated the unseen being of the built-over portrait.

Standing before a sequence of Rembrandt's "Hundred Guilder Print" one day, I noticed deep hatchings that darkened print by print, and eventually obliterated much of the image for dramatic effect. These slashing lines were very similar to those dug into the paint of the first "I Am A Tree". It struck me then that Gandy's laborious painting process was comparable to the working of an etching plate, particularly as the procedure allowed and absorbed the artist's changes in the development of the theme. Gandy always kept a copy of the complete Rembrandt etchings around him.

But what was the relation of the visible stages of the printing process to the compressed layers of the painting: the sequential to the simultaneous? Can it be that the change of subject - metaphor - from the book to the tree, evolves out of the painting process itself: that each layer of the painting is a page, a "leaf", of the open book that ultimately closes on the spine that is the tree, the final plate?

Where and how on earth could such an anomaly ever be printed? The phantom image had indeed been inked in by the night. Thoreau provided the practical answer. When he wrote of arrowheads raining down on America, he called them "mindprints." Exactly. The invisible, tactile

image of Gandy's self portrait was created, in time, to be printed in the mind: a leap of the imagination into the timeless.

"What is man" asks Thoreau "but a mass of thawing clay?" In one of his most lyric passages, Thoreau actually enumerates as parts of the human body, Gandy's last subjects: the ear, "fancifully, a lichen", " the nose a congealed drop or stalactite". We are given a clue to the curious transformation that became "Stalactite and Lichen" when he writes, "The whole cut impressed me as if it were a cave with its stalactites laid open to the light." The prominences of the clay bank seen in the moonlight correspond in the painting to the very wall of a cave: the womb where painting originated.

This is an organic outcrop of the flat surface of the picture plane that Cézanne bequeathed to his heirs. Not a hole in the canvas, not a window. Reversing the direction of Renaissance perspective, physically and spiritually inseparable, the exploration is within. The sacred flatness of modern perception has ceased to be theory, to be literal: profaned as an art school exercise or a skyscraper curtain. It follows inexorably the flow of living energy to the source, to its original beginnings: the cave wall where a suggestive protuberance signalled a world of images in the flickering firelight of awakening man. We still use the word "capture" of a likeness in deference to the spiritual freedom of this elusive prey, in projection of the deepest human knowledge, reconsecrated in Gandy's art on Thoreau's hallowed ground: the "fane of the mind".

A constant echo in Gandy Brodie's awareness and expression was Baudelaire's confession, "I am the knife and the wound." It may be that this is the real subject of the painting "Stalactite and Lichen", perhaps the subtext of " I Am A Tree": a paradigm for Art as a second self - the world of culture - inching its way beyond the bounds of nature's sublime, not always benign, indifference.

The knife we know - all too well. It is the active principle, the history maker. The wound, more obscure, overlaid with associations as bandages on mortality, extends far more remotely in human consciousness than the blood red flower or the man on the cross. Loren Eiseley has identified - not the physical scars of evolution - but man's unbearable burden of knowledge as "the wound of time", a cosmic dimension, annihilating to mortal flesh and human dignity. It is the curse as well as the gift of continuing creation. Man's history is an instant in time - but not for man. He carries it whole, its glory and pain, in his unravelling. Eiseley, a physical anthropologist and educator, observes from the summit of his profession the ebb and flow of individuals and cultures:

In the end the mind rejects the hewn stone and rusting iron it has used as the visible expression of its inner dream. Instead it

asks release for new casts at eternity, new opportunities to
confine in fanes the uncapturable and elusive gods.

Look at the lichen creep along a branch of apple blossom like a
snake, scatter at random over the hidden rocks of a brook, spot the
walls of the cave with unseeing eyes as if to obliterate - or
embellish afresh - the traces of man that leaped there! We see in
Gandy's last paintings this rootless symbiotic organism, flower of an
ice age, advance upon our life-threatened world: a lichen is an index
of pollution, killed by the smoke and gases of cities. Whether we died
for beauty, or for truth: a tree of light or cave of night, this is
the poet's moss that "covers up our names".

A great player with words, to whom no single thing was without
significance, Gandy must have inwardly delighted that these last works
were consummated when he closed himself up in a barn in a place called
Newfane, as he was releasing from "fanes", (a sanctuary, place of
worship), "the uncapturable and elusive gods."

Jocelyn Brodie

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