

The gandy dancer

THIS IS a story about the artist Gandy Brodie when, in the early 1950s, with

my encouragement (and a loan of \$75), he had hitchhiked to the West

Coast and back to see what the rest of the United States was like. I can hear him tell it now, in his high, jesting, mock-elegant voice:

"The only person I really wanted to see in Los Angeles was Charlie Chaplin, so I found out where he lived and walked out there and rang the bell. A butler came to the door. I said: 'Would you tell Mr. Chaplin that Gandy Brodie is here from New York.' The butler said: 'Mr. Chaplin is not at home, sir,' and shut the door in my face, so I started walking back downtown, past all those palm trees and wide boulevards.

"After a while I realized I hadn't brushed my teeth that morning, so I took my toothbrush and toothpaste out of my pocket and did that while I was walking along. A little later I began to notice this police car prowling slowly down the street, following me. Then it stopped, and one of its two very tough-looking cops barked at me: 'Hey, kid, come over here.' It took me about an hour to explain who I was and why I was in Los Angeles and all that, until they finally decided I was okay.

"As they were driving off I suddenly thought to ask: 'Could you tell me why you stopped me?' — so I did. 'Well, kid,' said the cop, 'what would you do if you saw this strange young guy walking down the street at 10 o'clock in the morning foaming at the mouth?'"

Gandy Brodie came out of the Bronx to Greenwich Village, taking his first name from a movie he'd seen about railway workmen — "gandy dancers." His first work was marvelously imaginative child-like drawings done with crayons on the backs of postcards, selling for a dime apiece in Bob and Rosetta Reitz's bookstore on Greenwich Avenue opposite the Women's House of Detention.

Gandy Brodie died in New York City of a heart attack in October 1975, at the age of 50. His later paintings — anguished, beautiful abstract impastos, worked over and over and over —

are at the Knoedler Gallery, 19 E. 70th St., through Election Day. Among the painters of his generation, Meyer Schapiro wrote in 1967, "Gandy Brodie stands out by his stubbornly personal poetic art . . . the arrested metaphors of insecure and frustrated existence . . . the purity and perfection of emerging life." Keep the 75 bucks, Gandy.

— JERRY TALLMER

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