

The Image as Emblem

Based in perception and its recollection, the canvases of the late Gandy Brodie demonstrate that it is still possible to paint an image and a surface at the same time, with the same care and intensity.

BY WILLIAM TUCKER



Crossed Trees, 1975, oil on canvas, 40 by 30 inches.

Gandy Brodie died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1975 at the age of fifty. His last New York show was in 1970, and his name and his work are probably unfamiliar to many of the younger artists who have been returning to the image in recent years. I think Brodie's exhibition this past fall at Knoedler's will have been a revelation to them.

These paintings show that it is still possible to paint an image—something in the world, a tree, a bird, a vase of flowers—and to paint at the same time a surface, with the same care and the same intensity: that neither the image nor the painting is the excuse for the other, that there can be a perfect balance between them. Philip Guston's paintings of the last seven years, seen recently in the splendid retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, demonstrate this also, but Brodie's paintings have a completely different impact from that of Guston's: Brodie is quiet and gradual where Guston is immediate and aggressive; his work has none of Guston's irony and quotation, none of that harsh contrast between a banally schematized imagery and the sensuous bravura of paint handling and color. Brodie's approach is modest but totally straightforward: his images are not processed; he paints what he has seen and remembered, not things flat in themselves or having the given flatness of popular, primitive or mechanized images.

There are no horizons in these paintings, though most are of outdoor subjects. The image is isolated, emblematic, but its representation is faithful, even conventional. The painting *I am a Tree* (1975), for instance, shows nothing but the bare shaft of the upright trunk slightly displaced to the left of the canvas. This was the first picture of Brodie's I saw, and my first impression was that it was abstract and quite unexceptional—a small, sticky and vague Barnett Newman. As soon as I recognized the subject, it was transformed. It is a painting, it is a tree, it is the artist. The drawing of the image as a representation is not important, nor is the compositional design of the painting.



Seagull in Flight, 1973, oil on canvasboard, 12 by 24 inches. All works estate of Gandy Brodie, courtesy of M. Knoedler & Co., New York.

Even the color is subordinate. All this is the skin, what you see first. Beyond or behind or through this skin, and very slowly, the picture emerges as marvelous fusion of matter and light and thought.

"What sort of an age is this/ When to talk about trees/ Is almost a crime? . . ." (Brecht, tr. C. Salvesen)—how can you paint trees, seagulls, fawns, flowers, in our time, without irony, without embarrassment, without guilt? It is the hardest thing to do, and it was necessary and purgative for Brodie to do it.

If you look harder at this painting, or, say, the *Seagull in Flight* (1973), you can see that the image has not moved on the canvas since the artist started the work. What was in his mind was a tree, a gull. He set himself to paint the thing. The paintings are small, rarely more than 2 feet in either direction, and the paint is built up to at least a half-inch thick. What you see, the outer skin, the last marks, seem thin, almost a wash. The ground behind the trunk or the bird seems built up higher than the figure, like the white areas in a Mondrian. What are we to make of this? Either the painting is virtually a relief, conceptualized in advance, the surface texture faked up in wax or acrylic medium and washed over then in thin color, the whole process perhaps taking a few hours. Or the whole thing consists of layer after layer

In our time, how can you paint trees, seagulls, fawns and flowers without irony, without embarrassment, without guilt? This is the hardest thing to do, and it was both necessary and purgative for Brodie to do it.

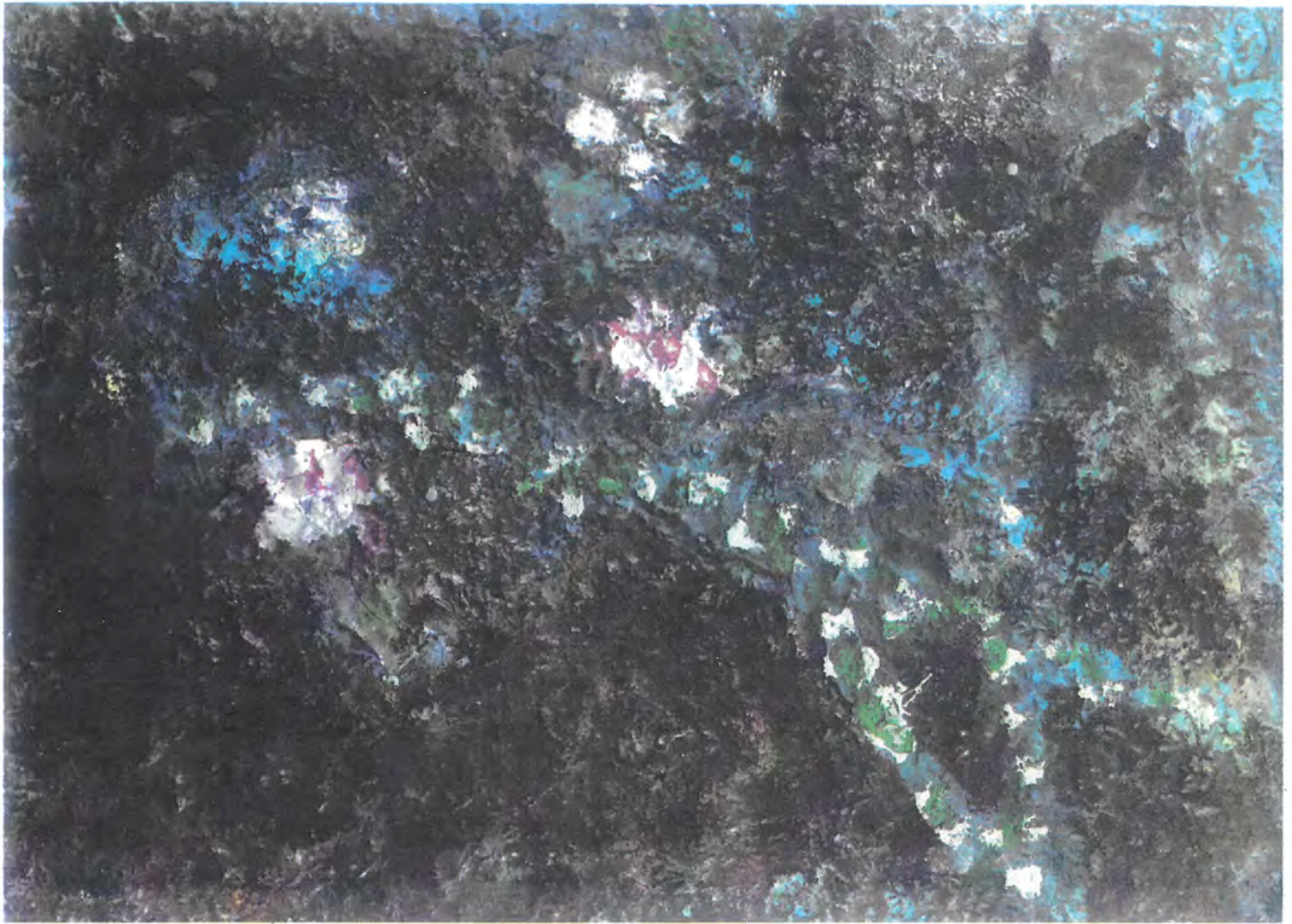
of thin oil paint, applied over months or years, the same image there from the start, repeated day after day, questioned and confirmed—but not searched for, adjusted with the conscience of the eye as in Cézanne or Giacometti: the initial image seen, remembered, then painted and painted and painted; the subject the last, the preceding image, and of course this is concealed by the next day's work, so that the image we see has been buried and recovered a hundred times.

Brodie was the child of Rumanian immigrant parents, and one senses his kinship with Brancusi, who also and continuously trod the dangerous line between the sentimental and the essential, the profound and the merely pretty. Brodie's tree evokes Brancusi's "world tree," the *axis mundi*, the *End-*

less Column, stretched between earth and sky and terminating at neither end; Brodie's gull recalls Brancusi's birds, though the gull hovers rather than soars. 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.

It is strange that, for an art so obvious in its appeal, Brodie's work reveals itself so slowly. We have learned to distrust so direct a claim on our senses and our emotions. We look for irony where there is none intended. It would be possible to make an argument out of the formal contradictions in these paintings—for example, between the delicate color and the dense clotting of the surface, or between the frontality and symmetry of the image and its implied modeling in depth in a space that is treated as more substantial than the figure—but that would be to miss the meaning of these pictures, although they are very well made. Considered as a classical modernist oeuvre, Brodie's work may appear inconsistent and unsophisticated; but experienced painting by painting, each piece presents itself as emotionally unified, each a patient and loving recovery of an old, if lately degraded, truth. □

Author: William Tucker is an English sculptor.



Last Apple Blossom with Lichen, 1975, oil on masonite, 18 by 24 inches.

Gandy Brodie, In Memoriam

by Meyer Schapiro

I met Gandy Brodie around 1946 when he came to my door and rang my doorbell. I hadn't heard of him at all. He wanted me to look at some pictures of his, a few drawings and one or two paintings; we became close friends through that meeting. I loved his work. It seemed to me of the best by painters of his age, his generation; I was impressed particularly by the fact that he was entirely self-taught, and in an innocent and aspiring way. But Gandy's self-education runs, of course, through all you have heard about him: he was a witness to the power of the human being with an authentic thirst for knowledge and love of the beautiful.

I believe that his work is not yet really known sufficiently. When properly exhibited in its whole range, I think it will surprise us and will appear stronger and deeper than has been recognized. While his paintings make us aware of his tenacious personality, what was most responsive, delicate and humane in his nature may have escaped the notice of some who knew him without having seen his work intimately and in its fullness.

Characteristic of Gandy and most essential in his self-awareness as well as in his vision of nature was his haunted sense of the fragility and solitude of living things. He saw the city as dark, hard and burdensome, as in his pictures of the tenements, of gloomy buildings, while cherishing at the same time what was young, fresh, growing and aspiring in his surroundings: in fidelity to those feelings and to a poetic attraction, he painted not only dark slum walls and strata of hard rock, but also the little bird, the eggs in the nest, the young deer, the fallen branch, the wilted flower, in a long patient effort to realize their mysterious qualities through a painted surface as material and as exposed to time as the objects themselves.

I do not hesitate to speak about the choice of subjects. Baudelaire wrote many years ago: "The choice of the subject is half the work of a true

artist." It has a significance, a resonance of its own, and in the process of art it generates much that we value as pure form or color without attending to the theme itself. But when known more intimately, the qualities in the conception of the subject reveal to us how an artist is moved and grows. Gandy's subjects were a commitment far from the trends of the artists around him; they made his work seem to many observers untimely, refractory, even eccentric in the clamorous, often dogmatic world of the art of our day. He never cut himself off, however, from that art. He felt himself very much a part of it, and was keenly attentive to what was going on around him, while holding in a most convinced and stubborn way to his own perceptions and goals, sustained by his loving knowledge of great art that had outlived the fashions of its time. He responded with joy and reverence to whatever in human life and nature, as well as art, satisfied his longing for a purer, more authentic existence. A brooding soul, painfully conscious of the incomplete, the antagonistic and destructive in human beings and most of all in himself, he strove to surmount these, with a dolorous feeling of his own weakness. He sought redemption through both his art and his tender concern for the young—his family and his students. He knew, and how well, the ravages of egoism in his own soul and was all the more deeply moved by the selfless in art, in music, in poetry, in thought, in spiritual life in general, above all in love and friendship.

Very early when I first met him he yearned for the noble in art as a model of self-transcendence. Of this personal goal his art, I believe, is a true fulfillment.

This text was originally delivered at a memorial service for Gandy Brodie held on November 10, 1975.

The Image as Emblem

Based in perception and its recollection, the canvases of the late Gandy Brodie demonstrate that it is still possible to paint an image and a surface at the same time, with the same care and intensity. Through his endless reworking of the painted surface, Gandy Brodie sought a transfiguration of subjects taken from nature.

Gandy Brodie died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1975 at the age of fifty. His last New York show was in 1970, and his name and his work are probably unfamiliar to many of the younger artists who have been returning to the image in recent years. I think Brodie's exhibition this past fall at Knoedler's will have been a revelation to them.

These paintings show that it is still possible to paint an image—something in the world, a tree, a bird, a vase of flowers—and to paint at the same time a surface, with the same care and the same intensity: that neither the image nor the painting is the excuse for the other, that there can be a perfect balance between them. Philip Guston's paintings of the last seven years, seen recently in the splendid retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, demonstrate this also, but Brodie's paintings have a completely different impact from that of Guston's: Brodie is quiet and gradual where Guston is immediate and aggressive; his work has none of Guston's irony and quotation, none of that harsh contrast between a banally schematized imagery and the sensuous bravura of paint handling and color. Brodie's approach is modest but totally straightforward: his images are not processed; he paints what he has seen and remembered, not things flat in themselves or having the given flatness of popular, primitive or mechanized images.

There are no horizons in these paintings, though most are of outdoor subjects. The image is isolated, emblematic, but its representation is faithful, even conventional. The painting *I am a Tree* (1975), for instance, shows nothing but the bare shaft of the upright trunk slightly displaced to the left of the canvas. This was the first picture of Brodie's I saw, and my first impression was that it was abstract and quite unexceptional—a small, sticky and vague Barnett Newman. As soon as I recognized the subject, it was transformed. It is a painting, it is a tree, it is the artist. The drawing of the image as a representation is not important, nor is the compositional design of the painting.

Even the color is subordinate. All this is the skin, what you see first. Beyond or behind or through this skin, and very slowly, the picture emerges as marvelous fusion of matter and light and thought.

“What sort of an age is this/ When to talk about trees/ Is almost a crime? ...” (Brecht, tr. C. Salvesen)—how can you paint trees, seagulls, fawns, flowers, in our time, without irony, without embarrassment, without guilt? It is the hardest thing to do, and it was necessary and purgative for Brodie to do it.

If you look harder at this painting, or, say, the *Seagull in Flight* (1973), you can see that the image has not moved on the canvas since the artist start, started the work. What was in his mind was a tree, a gull. He set himself to paint the thing. The paintings are small, rarely more than 2 feet in either direction, and the paint is built up to at least a half-inch thick. What you see, the outer skin, the last marks, seem thin, almost a wash. The ground behind the trunk or the bird

seems built up higher than the figure, like the white areas in a Mondrian. What are we to make of this? Either the painting is virtually a relief, conceptualized in advance, the surface texture faked up in wax or acrylic medium and washed over then in thin color, the whole process perhaps taking a few hours. Or the whole thing consists of layer after layer of thin oil paint, applied over months or years, the same image there from the start, repeated day after day, questioned and confirmed-but not searched for, adjusted with the conscience of the eyes as in Cezanne or Giacometti: the initial image seen, remembered, then painted and painted and painted; the subject the last, the preceding image, and of course this is concealed by the next day's work, so that the image we see has been buried and recovered a hundred times.

Brodie was the child of Romanian immigrant parents, and one senses his kinship with Brancusi, who also and continuously trod the dangerous line between the sentimental and the essential, the profound and the merely pretty. 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's gull recalls Brancusi's birds, though the gull hovers rather than soars. 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.

It is strange that, for an art so obvious in its appeal, Brodie's work reveals itself so slowly. We have learned to distrust so direct a claim on our senses and our emotions. We look for irony where there is none intended. It would be possible to make an argument out of the formal contradictions in these paintings-for example, between the delicate color and the dense clotting of the surface, or between the frontality and symmetry to the image and its implied modeling in depth in a space that is treated as more substantial than the figure-but that would be to miss the meaning of these pictures, although they are very well made. Considered as a classical modernist oeuvre, Brodie's work may appear inconsistent and unsophisticated; but experienced painting by painting, each piece presents itself as emotionally unified, each a patient and loving recovery of an old, if lately degraded, truth.

William Tucker (English sculptor)

Art in America, Jan. 1981

Gandy Brodie Exhibition, Knoedler Gallery, NYC, 1980

Last Apple Blossom with Lichen, 1975, oil on Masonite, 18" x 24"

Crossed Trees, 1975, oil on canvas, 40" x 30"

Seagull in Flight, 1973, oil on canvas board, 12" x 24"

All works estate of Gandy Brodie, courtesy of M. Knoedler & Co., New York