

As the art historian and friend Meyer Schapiro said at the artist's memorial service, Gandy Brodie (1925-1970) "was entirely self-taught, and in an innocent aspiring way."¹ He wanted most of all to make oil paintings that would hold their own in a room in which the works he admired were hung on adjacent walls. He loved the paintings of the past and those of his contemporaries. His pantheon included works by Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Rembrandt, Vincent Van Gogh, Corot, Soutine, and Piet Mondrian, as well as of the preceding generation, particularly Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, both of whom he knew. Born on New York's Lower East Side, Brodie began painting when he was 20, inspired by Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889, Museum of Modern Art, New York). By the time he was 30 he had hit his stride. Although Henri Matisse made the following statement, Brodie could have just as well made it: "For my part, I have never avoided the influence of others, I would have considered it cowardice and lack of sincerity toward myself. I believe that the artist's personality affirms itself by the struggle it has survived."²

Brodie's work forms an eloquent and noble testimony to the possibility of making something that, metaphorically speaking, does not crumble before great art. Instead of trying to escape the past, he was able to embrace it on his own terms. He not only overcame the lack of a formal education in painting, but he also quickly found his way to his subject matter. In his paintings and drawings of seemingly disparate things—an astronaut floating in space, a tenement building, a slanting tree trunk, a seagull, and a blossoming branch—there is a profound and touching recognition that we are all solitary travelers vulnerable to the effects of time. He had a deep feeling for paint and the material nature of his subject matter. His *Apple Blossom Branch* (1975) is both a heartbreakingly delicate image and an enduring and renewing thing made of tactile paint. That he could make something new and fresh out of something familiar and, in this case, often reproduced in the mass media, is most poignantly apparent in his painting *The Astronaut* (1967-1974).

Brodie's astronaut is a profound metaphor for the height of human aspiration as well as the inescapable isolation each of us endures as we are borne along by time. We are secure and vulnerable, brave and alone. Here, one encounters the basis of Brodie's greatness; he makes paint, subject matter, image, and a complexity of feelings inseparable. For him, painting and drawing are the only means by which he can honor both the common and uncommon, the lone

seagull in the sky, the blossoming branch of the apple tree, and the astronaut floating all alone in space, connected to others by the most tenuous means.

“It is absurd to look for perfection,” the Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro declared. “In art, everything is good enough to do! The whole aim is to learn to see forms with one’s eyes and one’s faults.”³ This was the dilemma Brodie faced when starting out, later than many of his peers; he had to discover what was his, to see the world with his own eyes. That he did so in ways that remain fresh, remarkable, and moving is undeniable.

—John Yau, “Gandy Brodie: Paintings and Drawings,” Gallery of the College of Staten Island, November 10 – December 16, 2008

¹From a text that was originally delivered at a memorial service for Gandy Brodie held on November 10, 1975 at the New School for Social Research, New York. Reprinted in *Gandy Brodie* (New York: Salander O’Reilly Galleries, 2000)

²Joachim Pissarro, *Cézanne and Pissarro: Pioneering Modern Painting 1865-1885* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 71

³*Ibid.*, p. 71