

B R O D I E T H O M P S O N



cover: Bob Thompson. *Gandy*, 1965, ink on canvas, 12 x 9 inches

martha henry and steven harvey present

Pairings:
Gandy Brodie/Bob Thompson
“The Ecstasy of Influence”

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essay by Judith Wilson

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Pairings

Gandy Brodie & Bob Thompson

“The Ecstasy of Influence”

by Judith Wilson

When asked about literary critic Harold Bloom’s theory that innovation derives from “the anxiety of influence,” Meyer Schapiro is said to have declared, “‘It just isn’t true! We feel an ecstasy of influence!’”

At first glance an unlikely pair, Gandy Brodie and Bob Thompson shared a love of jazz, deep reverence for the Old Masters, and impatience with the aesthetic orthodoxies of their time. When they met in Provincetown in 1958, the 34-year old Brodie was a seasoned Tenth Street painter who showed regularly at an illustrious midtown gallery, while Thompson was a 21-year old art student from Kentucky. By summer 1965, when they shared a studio in Provincetown, the two artists had changed places on the career ladder. A few months away from his triumphant second solo show at the Martha Jackson Gallery, Thompson was near his professional peak. Meanwhile Brodie had his last Durlacher Brothers show in 1961, then decamped to Vermont, his intensely painterly style deemed obsolete by an art world enthralled with Op, Pop, and Minimalism.

Ironically, Bob Thompson’s success was partly based on Brodie’s early influence and continued inspiration. The affectionate inscription on the 1965 portrait “Gandy” advertises Thompson’s personal regard for his subject. But he registers his artistic debt more circumspectly by spelling the older artist’s name in a Klee-like string of letters that ripples down the right side of the canvas. Although Brodie frequently proclaimed his own allegiance to Klee, the evidence of this influence is subtle. The division of the canvas into large rectangles of contrasting light and dark areas in Brodie’s 1958 “Penetration of a Thought,” for example, vaguely recalls Klee’s checkerboard patterned grounds. While the monumental solidity of Brodie’s “Young Bather” (1956) seems more akin to Picasso’s Neoclassical Period figures, there’s something wistful about the hulking boy and the awkward, snapshot-like angle of vision that’s reminiscent of the frequently noted childlike quality of Klee’s work.

We see a version of the Klee-via-Brodie compositional strategy in an early Thompson, “Differences” (1958), painted in Provincetown the summer he met Brodie. But, the obliqueness of Thompson’s reference to Klee in the Brodie portrait should also remind us of the larger scope of the older American’s influence on the younger. Like Klee, whose Bauhaus teaching was as influential as his idiosyncratic art, Brodie was both a gifted pedagogue and an inspiringly individual painter. Among the chief lessons Thompson and others learned from Brodie was the importance of embracing influence, staying open to great art of the past and present, diligently mining it not only for technical resources, but for personal connections—moments of recognition and self-discovery in which artists’ souls or intentions meet across boundaries of space and time.

For Thompson, this idea was reinforced in an uncanny way by his contact with the art of Jan Müller, who had died several months before the University of Louisville art student arrived in Provincetown. Like Brodie and his fellow New York School figurative expressionist, Lester Johnson, Müller was revered by a group of younger artists who gravitated to Provincetown’s Sun Gallery. Through his friendship with the late artist’s widow, Thompson gained intimate knowledge of the German-born painter’s work. “The Funeral of Jan Müller” (1958), however, bears little resemblance to Müller’s brightly lit, tessellated landscapes inhabited by blocky white figures. Instead its lugubrious palette and silhouetted figures evoke Johnson’s work at the time. Similarly, Thompson’s thick layers of knifed-on pigment recall Johnson’s paint handling rather than Müller’s translucent, brushy surfaces. The painting’s design—with its big, rectilinear, contrasting dark and light zones—echoes Brodie’s “Penetration of a Thought.” Yet, as indicated by the loose brushwork, pastel hues, and chivalric theme of the 1960 gouache “Search for the Unicorn,” Thompson would continue exploring avenues suggested by Müller’s art for years to come.

Electric personalities fueled by intense curiosity, irrepressible enthusiasm, and exceptional energy, to a great degree Brodie and Thompson possessed matching temperaments. But while their paths crossed fruitfully, their art and lives ultimately followed different courses. Roughly a generation older than Thompson, Jewish, and a native New Yorker, Brodie was shaped by a different history than the young Southern-born African American. Both artists spent significant portions of their careers in Provincetown, New York, and Europe. But in each case, having got there first, Brodie initially experienced each site at a different time, under different circumstances, with a necessarily different milieu than what greeted Thompson. Brodie’s portrait of his wife Jocelyn reflects both the extent and limits of these disparities.

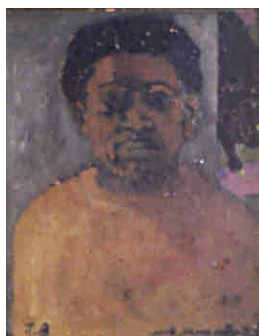
Although he briefly attended Hans Hofmann's New York school in 1950, Brodie had already begun exhibiting the year before and, in terms of formal training, was largely self-taught. A 1954 encounter with Meyer Schapiro led the artist to become a regular at the art historian's Columbia University and the New School lectures. The distinguished scholar, in turn, critiqued and collected Brodie's work and became perhaps its staunchest champion. Thus, when Brodie arrived in Florence in 1955 (for his second European stay), he was well-primed to take in the city's Renaissance glories. But his first stop was the studio of a young American painter, Jocelyn Levine, a Brooklyn native and Bennington graduate he'd been told to phone by Schapiro. In addition to painting, Levine was engaged in literary pursuits, corresponding with noted author Thomas Mann and producing a brief essay that year on Mann's views of James Joyce. That Brodie and his future wife shared interests in literature as well as visual art is attested by his inclusion in a 1954/55 number of Folder, a short-lived journal meant to foster collaboration between poets and painters. The issue, to which Brodie contributed a color serigraph, also featured a silk-screened wrapper by Grace Hartigan, poems by John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, and Kenneth Koch, and an essay by Frank O'Hara.

Brodie's bust-length portrait of Jocelyn combines the forthright air of a Renaissance madonna with a subtle, Modigliani-esque, play of serpentine curves. Like the slight tilt of her penetrating eyes, these contrapuntal rhythms and the artist's vigorous brushwork animate what might otherwise become a rigid, lifeless mask. Brodie's palette is equally striking. The warm golden tones that offset cool terracotta pinks, while mauve shadows tint splashes of limpid cerulean and forest green, suggest the sunny, but rich, jewel-like color schemes of Paolo Uccello or Piero della Francesca. Although Bob Thompson would eventually base a number of canvases on compositions by Uccello and Piero, nothing in his oeuvre evokes these sources in the same, elusive way Brodie manages here. Instead, Thompson's 1958 "Portrait of Carol" veils his future wife's features in the bold, non-naturalistic color that would become a hallmark of his style.

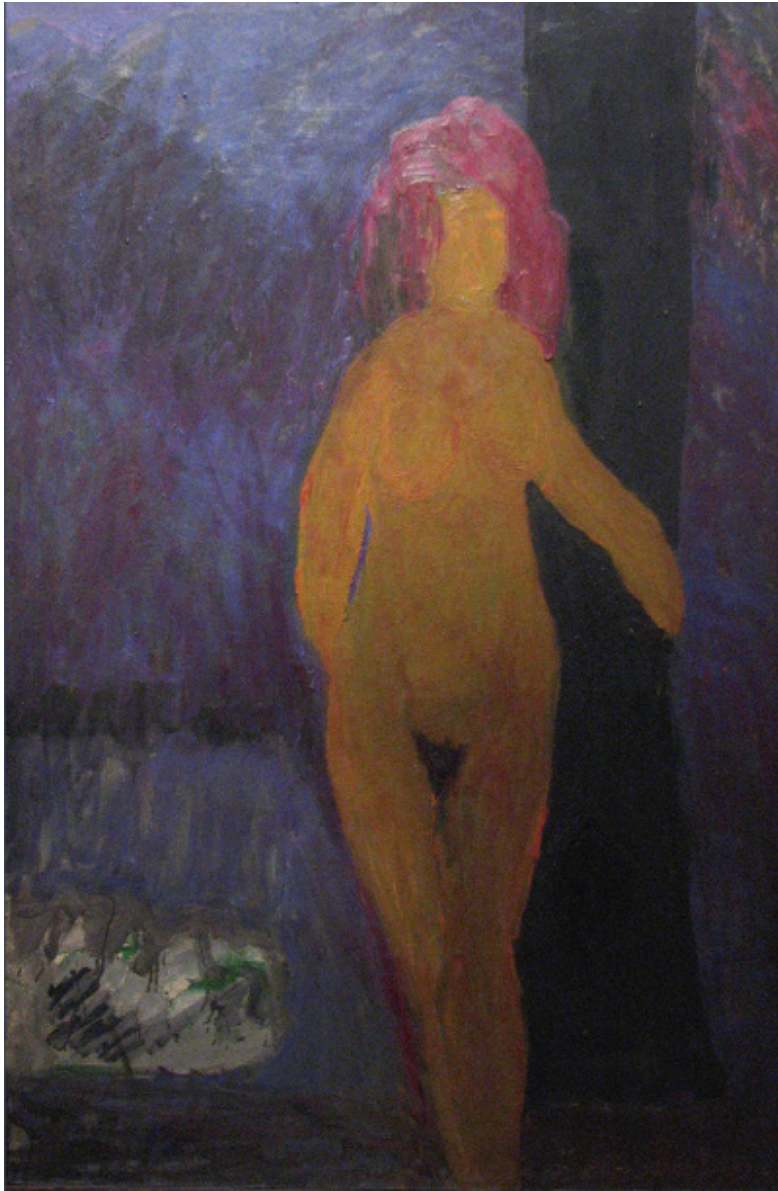
Ultimately, what Brodie and Thompson shared throughout their careers was an impassioned obsession with painting's history and process. At the heart of their relationship as artists and friends was a mutual capacity to achieve a unique vision through the ecstasy of influence.



Gandy Brodie *Self Portrait*, 1955, oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 24 inches (not included in exhibition)



Bob Thompson *Self Portrait*, 1958, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches (not included in exhibition)



Bob Thompson *Nude Reflection Naught*, 1960, oil on board, 60 x 40 inches



Gandy Brodie *Young Bather*, 1956, oil on masonite, 49 x 46 ½ inches



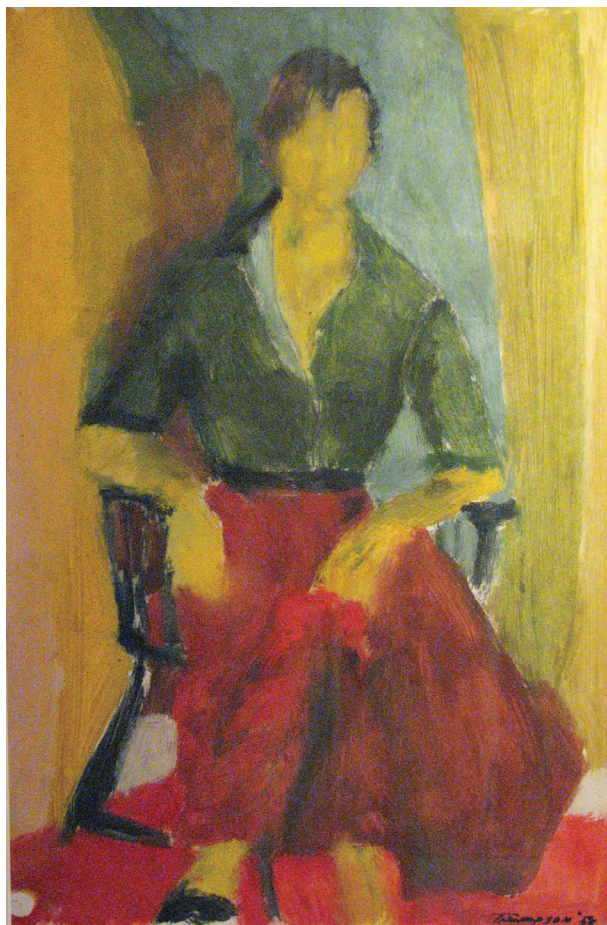
Gandy Brodie *The Penetration of a Thought*, 1958, oil on canvas, 47 ½ x 47 ½ inches



Bob Thompson *Differences*, 1958, oil on canvas, 62 x 46 inches



Gandy Brodie Portrait of Jocelyn, 1955, oil on Japan paper, , 25 x 20 inches



Bob Thompson *Portrait of Carol*, 1958, oil on paper, 17 x 11 inches



Bob Thompson *Search for the Unicorn*, 1960, gouache, pastel and charcoal on paper, 25 ½ x 39 ½ inches



Gandy Brodie *Florentine Wall and Trees*, 1957-59, gouache on paper board, 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 37 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches



Bob Thompson *Jan Muller's Funeral*, 1958, oil on board, 36 x 42 inches



Bob Thompson *Dawn*, 1964, ink & gouache over print, Image size: 4 7/8 x 6 9/16 inches; Paper size: 6 5/8 x 11 1/4 inches



Gandy Brodie *Child in a Blue Chair*, 1959, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



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