

# Ali Banisadr

SELECTED PRESS

# **BOMB**

## Finding Hope in the Chaos: Ali Banisadr Interviewed by Osman Can Yerebakan

Paintings that blend and blur the world together.

OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN

JANUARY 28, 2021



Ali Banisadr, *The Caravan*, 2020, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

When Brooklyn-based painter Ali Banisadr visited the Benaki Museum in Greece last year, he came across a blue-and-white Ming Dynasty–era vase in its collection. Much to the Iranian-born artist’s surprise, a closer inspection revealed that his favorite poem by Persian poet Attar of Nishapur was inscribed on its surface. Besides being the artist’s Instagram handle, Simorgh is the protagonist in Attar’s circa 1177 poem, *The Conference of the Birds*, about thirty birds in search of the legendary namesake bird “with all the answers.” When the flock reaches where they believe Simorgh resides, the poem climaxes with an epiphany: they, in fact, together make up the bird of the birds. “I’ve always loved the metaphor of thirty birds going on a journey together to learn that they are the very answer they were in search of,” says Banisadr.

Banisadr’s paintings are oftentimes large-scale panoramas of life—of yesterday, today, and the future. They look hauntingly erratic, yet they contain warm hues as soothers. There is exile, excess, greed, hunger along with pockets of hope, color, and jubilation. Figures blend into their surroundings, and environments create masses; his tones are bold, and occasionally splashy, with skies and lands coalescing through his arm- or wrist-length brushstrokes. Chaos prevails, but hope echoes overall. As someone who fled the Iranian Revolution at an early age, Banisadr is no stranger to tumult; however, he, too, admits that this past year prompted him to make discoveries over the canvas.

—Osman Can Yerebakan

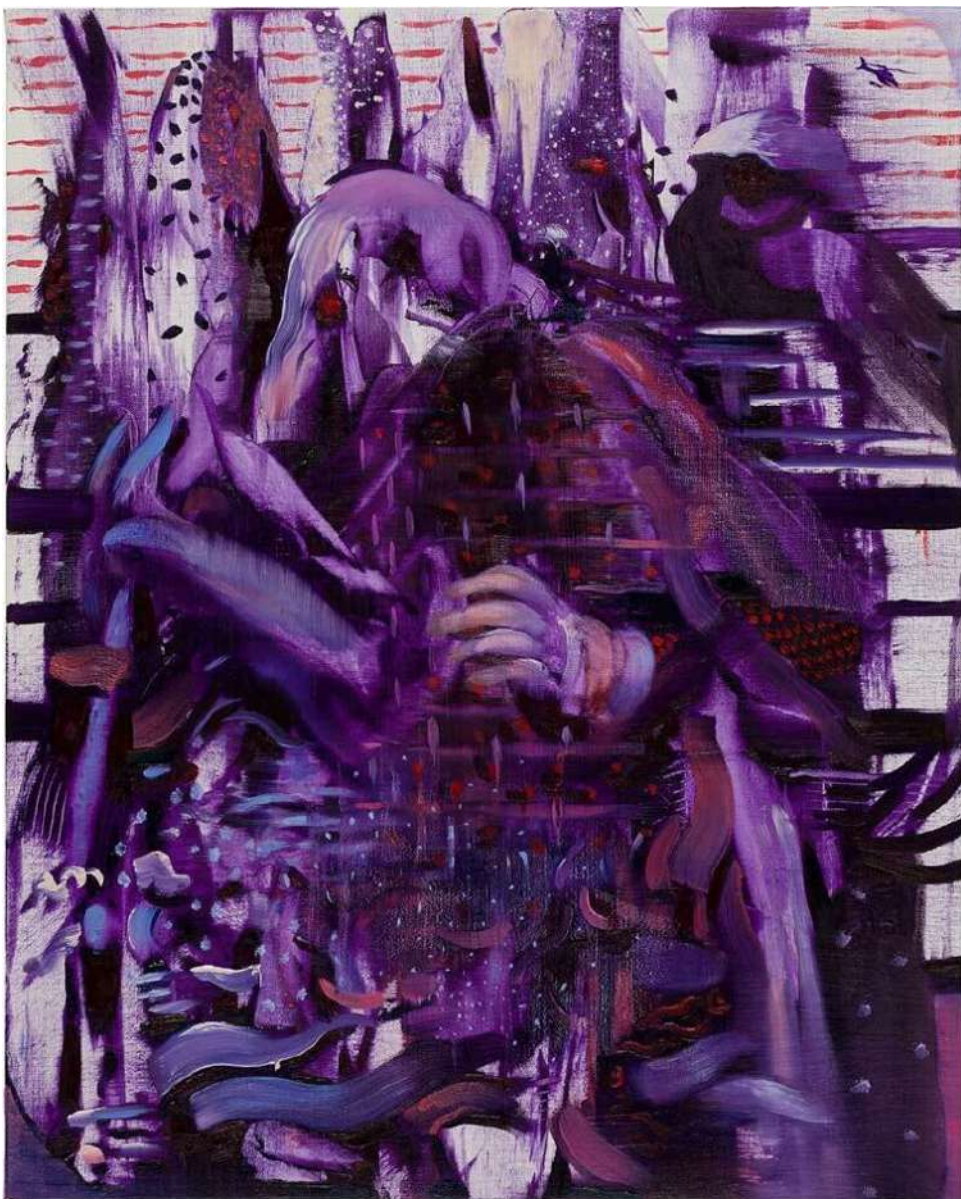
### **Osman Can Yerebakan**

Let’s start with the Ming Dynasty–era vase. What was so intriguing about this discovery for you as a painter?

### **Ali Banisadr**

The Attar poem has always been a part of me: I made a painting in 2018 titled *Language of the Birds*, which was also blue and white. When I talked to the Benaki Museum director, he said the vase was in cobalt blue which China at the time imported from the region of Iran and Iraq. I am intrigued by this intertwined journey between Europe where they commissioned these vases, China where they made them, and the Middle East where they sourced the paint. Moreover, they were heavily collected by the Dutch and Iranians, and, now, they’re exhibited in Greece. I could see this as an alternative Silk Road running through geographies, from Asia toward Europe through the Middle East. From there, I see a link to my paintings which, in my opinion, slip out of visual, geographical, and historical categorizations, especially in the world today where we live somewhere between the digital and the analog.

The exhibition in Greece is titled *Ultramarinus*, and in Latin *ultra* is beyond and *marine* is blue, which can also mean sea. Back then in Europe, they had to go beyond the Mediterranean to source this blue color, so it was a highly regarded, sparse dye that was typically used for depictions of the Virgin Mary. Also keep in mind that the show opened on November 3, and the first painting greeting visitors is called *Hypocrisy of Democracy* (2012).



Ali Banisadr, *Only Breath*, 2020, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

**OCY**

What does it mean to make paintings today when we are stuck between URL and IRL?

**AB**

I ask this to myself all the time, and painting saves me! I'm able to tap into a place above thinking, a place of intelligence that can only be accessed through painting. I haven't witnessed this other type of consciousness conveyed by any other medium in such a spiritual way. There's a mystical aspect to painting in which it creates a portal to a place smarter than what I could possibly reach. Every time I tried other mediums, I felt limited—they didn't mesh with my nature. Painting takes me back to an ancient way of thinking when people understood what they imagined through painting. It was basically magic that drove them to paint. They didn't do it to show in an

exhibition or to sell. When I look at paintings from five hundred years ago from Northern Europe, I am able to communicate, and that is pretty powerful. The only other experience where I can see this possibility is in poetry.

**OCY**

How do you see poetry being experienced in Iranian culture which is predominantly lived indoors as opposed to Western culture where life is more outward?

**AB**

I could think back to my upbringing in Iran where culture revolves so much around visiting other families. And when you go to someone's place, it's not a two-hour visit—you're there the whole day. There are long conversations and books are always brought up. With my folks, we somehow always ended up at my uncle's library and started opening books. All of this in a way affected the core of my being.

**OCY**

A passage between past and present runs through your paintings, almost in a Proustian way. Timelessness is dressed with contemporary accents. For example, political turmoil or migration are topics relevant now as much as they were centuries ago.

**AB**

Think about the pandemic right now. When it first hit, I started to research its history and read about the Black Death and the Spanish Flu. I looked at paintings and read novels created in response to them. As much as research speaks to my brain, when I paint, I don't use any references. The painting itself ends up telling me about all those references, and I just have to digest them. In a way, I become the servant of the painting: I've accumulated information that I'm interested in, and this information somehow finds its abstract ways into the work.

**OCY**

Your figures are forward-facing, always in a processional and transient gesture. This could be the passage of time, cycle of order, or sign of change. If paintings are chronicles of their time, what do you think about leaving paintings for the future?

**AB**

One of the paintings in the Benaki show is *Rise of the Blond* from 2016, with a blond figure in a purple robe. He's entering the canvas with his entourage while another group is exiting the scene. Next to it is one of the two newest paintings in the show, titled *SOS*, from 2020. I almost called this painting "fall of the blond," but I figured it would have been too obvious. The painting came out of anxiety over the systems—political, racial, social, and financial—when everything peaked over the summer and we didn't have a clear picture. There is another painting I made for the Wadsworth exhibition this summer, *The Healers*, in which the predominant color is a fiery orange, almost a fire. I wanted to create an underworld, an inferno, where heat exists because of the anxieties. Two months after I finished the painting, my family in Northern California started to send me pictures of the forest fires where the scorching color was the same.



Ali Banisadr, *Red*, 2020, oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

**OCY**

How was making new paintings during the pandemic?

**AB**

The Wadsworth show has a painting titled *Red*, which I finished in January, and the plan was to unveil it at Art Basel Hong Kong. The painting initially communicated with me from a place of anxiety that I did not want to move toward; instead, it wanted to be heavily red. I'm quite sensitive to colors, which can get inside of me and make me feel a certain way. The red occupying the canvas started to make me feel anxious, and I felt a danger in not knowing why.

Another one is a small painting, titled *Only Breath*, which came out quite urgently during the summer when helicopter noises had become a norm. That intense energy reminded me of my childhood in Iran during the war-fueled uncertainty. Fireworks recalled the sounds of explosion and bombing. The idea of breath first came in with the protesters who were using their breaths to express their voices; however, this later expanded to the virus that transmits through breath and even George Floyd whose killing happened through taking away his breath. *Only Breath* is also the title of one my favorite Rumi poems in which he talks about not wanting to be categorized or contained in any way.

**OCY**

How about the ongoing rise of pixilated abstraction against the waning of visual reality? We see people through screens, which have glitches inside and dust on the outside. How does Zoom reality affect your approach to painting?

**AB**

I find our generation fascinating because the initial half of our lives started out analog and we slowly transitioned to the digital. We are the witnesses who experienced both at great lengths. My understanding of abstraction and figuration now comes out of this duality. They both echo in whatever world we feel to be a part of at that moment. There is a rhizomatic idea in which roots and centers can go from one portal to another. A friend compared this to having multiple tabs open on the computer, and each one takes us to a different world. I see my paintings have that potential to serve as time machines which, in a way, the internet also is. I've always been interested in creating not a landscape but a worldscape, some kind of a new stage where the world is seen in the way we see it: blurred and blended together.



Installation view of *Ali Banisadr: MATRIX 185*. Courtesy of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

## OCY

What if chaos left the universe and everything was pleasant around us. What would you paint?

## AB

Let me refer to a section from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. In the conversation between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, one of them talks about two ways to flee suffering. The first is easy, they say, because for many people the inferno becomes such a part of life that they can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance, apprehension, and learning to recognize that in the midst of the inferno is *not* inferno. I'd like to find those parts that could lead us to a better place. I have those areas within the painting where I could find hope through chaos. Within the chaos, there are elements of hope. In one painting, for example, there is a ladder leading upward. There is transformation and freedom there. *The Healers* can be considered hopeful and optimistic; there are figures with tentacles cleansing the earth of bad energy. The air is showered and cleaned.

Ali Banisadr: *Ultramarinus* is on view at the *Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece, through February 21*; *MATRIX 185* is on view at the *Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford through February 14*.



# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Worlds Within Worlds

Artist Ali Banisadr reflects on our moment in paintings that combine the hellish and the miraculous.

PETER SAENGER  
OCTOBER 23, 2020



Ali Banisadr, 'The Prophet' (2020), courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

As a boy in Tehran in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, Ali Banisadr had a friend whose apartment building was sliced neatly in half by a bomb, revealing a cross-section of its interior. From the street, he could see the room where he had played, complete with wallpaper and children's toys.

Born in 1976, Mr. Banisadr was 12 years old when his family moved to the U.S., but his tumultuous childhood still fuels his work as an artist. That is clear in his new show, which opened this week at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn., and includes a dozen paintings and prints made over the last five years. The references are as current as Covid-19 and the George Floyd protests, but Mr. Banisadr's work is also rooted in art history. He often evokes the world of Hieronymus Bosch, creating large canvases thickly populated with creatures that are mixtures of human, animal and robot. The work of Bosch "never stops giving," says Mr. Banisadr, "He had this way of zooming out and looking at the world from...a macro level," showing "the folly of humanity in general. I'm in tune with that."



Mr. Banisadr, born in 1976, came to the U.S. from Iran at the age of 12, photo: Diego Flores, courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, New York

The new exhibition is part of the Wadsworth's Matrix series, which has given major contemporary artists like Gerhard Richter, Carrie Mae Weems and Barbara Kruger their first solo museum shows in the U.S. Patricia Hickson, a curator of contemporary art at the Wadsworth, observes that Mr. Banisadr's work has a special mixture of timeliness and timelessness that puts him outside the mainstream: "I don't really see him fitting into current trends," she says.

To accompany his paintings, Mr. Banisadr has curated a small exhibition of works from the Wadsworth's collection, reflecting his deep awareness of art history. Among the items he chose are "The Temptation of St. Anthony," by an unidentified 16th-century artist who used Boschian imagery; fantastic images by Francisco Goya and the Surrealist Max Ernst; and a woodblock print by the 19th-century Japanese artist Hiroshige. Mr. Banisadr says that he turns to these works for guidance, noting that when he makes a painting he wants "to see many different ways of painting...worlds within worlds."

Mr. Banisadr's canvases can be large—the most recent in the show is 10 feet wide—allowing him to contrast a hellish scene in the lower half of the painting with benign, even miraculous events in the upper half. In "The Prophet" (2020), a tiny inset at the bottom right—almost a picture in a picture, he says—shows crucified figures. Nearby, two creatures face off: One holds a stick covered at one end with what could be water or solid white material, while the other, the artist says, may have "some kind of mold or vegetation growing out of their body."

Another part of the painting reflects its birth last spring, as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in the U.S. A figure decked out in porcupine-like spikes is coughing little red droplets; next to it, candles seem to dance. In the top half of the picture, gold material explodes like a firework against a serene, blue background. Suspended above the convulsive scenes below, it looks like a "a sort of miracle," Mr. Banisadr says. "I thought maybe that's the prophet...something that's going to change everything."



Ali Banisadr, 'Red' (2020), Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

Mr. Banisadr has been making art since childhood. After high school, he joined a group of young artists in San Francisco who inspired him to experiment. He went on to attend art school, and today he lives in Brooklyn, where he had a front-row seat for last summer's unrest following the killing of George Floyd. The title of one of the new paintings in the show, "Only Breath," echoes a plea for universality by the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi: "Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen...first, last, outer, inner, only that breath breathing human being," in Coleman Barks's English rendering.

The title also evokes the breath that can transmit Covid-19, cries of protest and Floyd's dying plea that he couldn't breathe. The painting's main figure is purple and threatening. The picture "wanted to come out right away," Mr. Banisadr. While he was working on it, the sounds of fireworks and chaos filled his home. When he glimpsed a police helicopter through his window, he immediately put it into the painting's upper right corner.

Another painting in the show, "Red," was completed before the pandemic struck but evolved in response to events. Originally intended for the Art Basel Hong Kong art fair, which was canceled in February because of Covid-19, "Red" had always depicted a perilous world, with a fire-alarm red sky and an eerie blue moon or sun. When the painting was returned to him from Hong Kong, Mr. Banisadr added a red-eyed figure, possibly made of coal, holding a shovel with a crown symbol—an allusion to the coronavirus.

Sound has an important place in Mr. Banisadr's work. The memory of vibrations from bombs falling outside his basement shelter in Tehran started him on a career-long effort to translate sound into visual equivalents. In "Red," for example, he imagines one figure's head chiming like a bell, emitting little yellow crowns. Mr. Banisadr's paintings begin with abstract colors, he says: "I know a figure needs to come out when I actually can hear it breathing."

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# ARTFLYER

## Ali Banisadr: When the Simorgh paints

ALEXIA ANTSAKLI VARDINOYANNI

JANUARY 25, 2021



Detail from *The Builder* (2019) showing a feathered hatted working-class figure holding a hammer.

At the Benaki Museum's top floor gallery with its walls of a muted shade of aquamarine, Iranian born American artist Ali Banisadr pairs his paintings with some of the museum's celebrated Chinese porcelains for a show entitled *Ultramarinus – Beyond the Sea*. The playful display that oscillates between East and West crystallized when Banisadr discovered in the museum's permanent collection a sixteenth-century ceramic incense burner with a Persian inscription. Not only is the writing in Persian, it is from the thirteenth-century poet [Farid ud-Din] Attar's book called *Language of the Birds*. "I had actually made a painting with this blue in the past called *Language of the Birds*. And then also I loved this story. It's about this legendary bird named Simorgh, which is actually my Instagram name." Banisadr first discovered the story as a young boy. "I don't know. It somehow stayed with me." The tale recounts the journey a flock of birds takes in order to find their ideal sovereign, the great Simorgh. "They want to find him because he has all the answers." The journey is long and perilous and only thirty birds reach their destination, a lake where they see the great Simorgh in their own reflections. The divine leadership they were seeking was within them all along, as the name Simorgh reveals. "Simorgh in Persian means thirty birds. And so conceptually it [the vase] worked, and then visually I thought it's very similar to my blue and white paintings, so why not include it in the show somehow. And then it became a larger thing, to include other vases."



Iranian artist Ali Banisadr photographed at the Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece.



Tripod incense burner with reign and Persian poetic inscriptions. Ming dynasty, Zhengde reign (1506-1521).

The incense burner is cleverly placed in the center of the gallery making everything conceptually orbit around it. Looking at it from different angles gives different interpretations. For instance, when viewed with Banisadr's painting *SOS* (2020) in the background, the incense burner gives the false impression that it has been lit and is producing an orange-colored flame. "For me, *SOS* is channeling every anxiety we might be having right now: political, climate change, natural disasters, pandemic ... Because I am sensing all these things and feeling all these things." The way Banisadr documents these anxieties is with warm colors and thrusting organic forms that inspire an emotional response. "I always imagine myself standing back and viewing human activity as if I were an alien seeing the human folly, observing and making notes. I see myself, in that role, similar to let's say Bosch or Bruegel or Goya. I like that place. I feel comfortable there."

One painting that offers a Hieronymus Bosch kind of panorama is Banisadr's early painting *The Gatekeepers* (2009). "I feel like there is this element of atmosphere and landscape, water and nature and so on." From a distance the panorama looks inviting with its soft palette giving a bird's eye view of a land overflowing with abundance, but as we linger and gaze, the painting grows ever more layered revealing a cast of tiny peculiar characters in the most remarkable vignettes. "I have always been trying to guide the viewer towards those costumed hybrid figures, because this is where the action is for me. A place where you have these sorts of meetings and celebrations."

Preoccupied with the idea of scale and how to make the figures more noticeable, he switched from an elevated to a street level perspective, so that rather than floating above the figures, in the newer paintings we are walking among them. "I kept thinking, 'How do I bring them more to life?' The figures take so much of my time. So, in a way, I thought, 'I need to zoom in on them.' And that's what happened over the years." With the figures pushed to the



*The Gatekeepers* (2009).



Detail from the *The Gatekeepers* (2009) showing the rich detail and the tiny figures.

foreground, the canvas becomes a theatrical stage where the ambivalence of its protagonists instantly attracts. “We don’t know if they wear a costume or who they are really. Think of (Mikhail) Bakhtin’s *Carnival and Carnavalesque*. The idea of the world seen upside down. In the carnival, the lower-level people could sort of dress up and be high and the high could be low. So, it’s this sort of juxtaposition I am interested in.”

This exploration of ambivalent figures led Banisadr to conceive a wonderfully detailed group of birds that serve as protagonists in some of his paintings. For instance, in *The Rise of the Blond*, a painting created around Donald Trump’s election, a bird with blond hair and a long beak in a spread-wing posture leads a parade of other peculiar figures. “If I am taking in information about politics, I will for sure let that come out. However, I don’t try to make political work.” In *The Builder* the leading character is a boxy, feathered-hatted figure holding an orange-colored hammer. “It’s a working-class figure and you don’t know if he is sculpting or... making sounds. For me, it’s like a metaphor for the artist. You are using these primitive tools that have been used for thousands and thousands of years and you are trying to make sense out of what’s happening during your time.”



Detail from *The Rise of the Blond* (2016) showing a bird spreading its wings leading a parade of other peculiar figures.



Ali Banisadr in front of his painting *Selection* (2011).

What all the paintings have in common is a vocabulary of rhythm, vibration and musicality drawn from the artist's synesthesia. Like Wassily Kandinsky, Banisadr is a synesthete who experiences the environment through multiple senses. "It's like the colors, the shapes, the lines, the textures, like every little thing in the painting is like notes. And then, there is a sound of something metal, but I can also taste it in my mouth. Which is hard to explain. But it's like all your senses are super heightened." This unusual quality allows him to concentrate on one painting at a time. "When I start working on a new painting, the sounds are loud and not in tune with each other and then it ends up becoming about me taming the painting in a way, harmonizing the sounds and making the orchestra, finding a rhythm."

No study precedes his visual compositions because, as he says, he wants to be surprised. "It is like jumping into the abyss. I don't know what I am going to come back with when I work on a painting." He does, however, feed his visual vocabulary by researching the things he is interested in. "Let's say I become interested in the pandemic, for example. I want to research it. I want to read *The Plague*, to see from a literature perspective how somebody was able to construct this thing that was happening in a novel. But then I also want to see how painters, artists in the past, showed this idea of the plague. And then I am kind of ready to let these things come out. But it is not forced. It doesn't have to be about those things. If they come out, they come out. If not, it's OK."

Unforcedly, *Thought Police* is reflected in reverse on a glass case containing a flower vase from the Qing dynasty (1736-1795) bringing together past and present, East and West, beauty and threat. The painting has a densely built lower part with wondrous and terrifying details like teeth, a serpent's tongue and threatening bird beaks all to signify chaos, and an airier upper part that leaves room for hope and transformation. "I am thinking about social media and technology and algorithms and how all these things are affecting us and controlling us in a way. So, I am fascinated by that, because I am also, I am dealing with it and I want to know what is it doing to us. It's a very new thing. George Orwell's *1984* is always on my mind. More and more so now." In a similar way the vase gives a sense of rising with the plant moving from the ground up. "The paintings don't want to be contained. They just want to shift all the time. They are ambivalent. And so are the porcelains. They were made in China, but the color blue came from

Iran. And then they were exported to Iran. And then later of course, this line traveled to Europe.” As Banisadr might say of himself, they traversed the East and the West.”



Detail from *Thought Police* (2019).



Detail from *Thought Police* (2019) reflected in reverse on the glass case displaying a vase from the Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign (1736-1795).



# Ali Banisadr and the art of 'Visual Thinking'

A combination of harmony, chaos and unique Interpretations

OMID MEMARIAN  
OCTOBER 22, 2020



Red, 2020, Oil on Linen, 48 x 60 inches (Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery)

Ali Banisadr's *MATRIX 185* exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is the Iranian-American artist's first solo museum exhibition in the US. The exhibition opened on October 22, 2020, and will run through February 14, 2021.

Ten paintings and two prints by Banisadr join a selection of works from the Wadsworth collection chosen by the artist, as well as a video collage that Banisadr created to show additional works from the museum's collection. The visual and narrative content of his works is shaped by his exposure to war, pop culture, cinema, graphic novels and European painting. He told *The Met* that he paints the sounds and sights of war.

Banisadr was born in Tehran in 1976, and moved to the United States when he was 12, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). In 2000, he moved to New York, earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts, and later

his Masters from the New York Academy of Art.

At 44, he is one of the most promising and successful artists in the US, and his paintings are collected by major museums around the world, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Centre Pompidou in Paris, and The British Museum in London.



*The Caravan*, 2020, Oil on Linen, 66 x 88 inches (Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery)

Banisadr's paintings are aesthetically beautiful and conceptually mesmerizing and multilayered. They invite the viewer to visit an imaginary world with familiar and unfamiliar elements that create a labyrinth of meaning, form and color. His paintings might also be reminiscent of giants like Francisco Goya, Pieter Bruegel and Hieronymus Bosch, although in many ways his energy, symbolic language, environments and characters, as well as the cryptic and coded world he creates, make him stand alone. He creates a magical combination of harmony and chaos that keeps the viewer outside the door, and invites a personal and unique interpretation.

Excerpts from the interview follow:

Omid Memarian: You work on one painting at a time. Why and how does that work?

Ali Banisadr: When I begin a new painting, it becomes a very involved process. Once I start a painting, we open up a dialogue that leads to a lot of research, reading, looking at art works in relation to the painting in progress, etc. My mind becomes very much occupied by the painting and if I opened another dialogue with another painting, it would just become overwhelming.

OM: You spent your childhood in Iran and moved to San Diego when you were 12 years old. How did your experiences in Iran affect what you did later, particularly in pursuing art, painting, and life in the US?

AB: It's hard to say. Of course, everything you experience in some way affects your work. One thing I can say is that it is helpful to be able to think about things through the lenses of two different cultures at once. Instead of having just one point of view, you can listen to different voices which may sometimes be in opposition. I feel it's a healthy way to understand the world and I've always liked the idea of multiple points of view. There is never just one way or a single answer.



The Prophet, 2020, Oil on Linen, 66x88 inches

OM: In 2000, you moved to New York to study at the School of Visual Arts, and later you received your Masters in Fine Arts from New York Academy of Art. How did school change or shape your vision and contribute to your creativity and work?

AB: When I went to school I was ready to learn as much as I could. I was thirsty for it because I had spent a lot of time experimenting on my own to get an understanding of what lies inside of myself and what it wants. Then I just had to learn some structure to be able to unveil it.

OM: You are one of the most talented and also successful current artists in the US, and your works have been exhibited/collected by major museums/collectors. How has this level of success affected your work?

AB: When I am painting, my goal is to turn off my rational thinking—"the voices of others," as Guston has said—and to think in a different way—visual thinking. So I don't think these external forces factor into my practice of painting.

OM: What's your definition of success for art and artists?

AB: Each work should be better than the last one; each work should teach me new things.



Only Breath, 2020, Oil on Linen, 16 x 20 inches (Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery)

OM: How do you describe your technique and style of storytelling in your paintings in relation to others whom you might have studied or been influenced by?

AB: In this case, I would just refer to the paintings themselves. It is a hard thing for me to try to break down words; one has to simply look at the paintings, and all those traces of past, present and future can reveal themselves, but they come and go like dreams, not easy to grasp and pin down.

OM: How about the Iranian 19th-century tradition of coffee-house painting? How much did you know about this tradition when growing up and after? Was it part of your visual imagination at all?

AB: It is a very interesting way to be able to tell a story; what I like about it is that they are worlds within worlds. You can have the same person shown in the story when they are young and then when they are old. It's a bit like a time machine, which I appreciate and think about within my own work.

OM: Good music and novels have been two of your sources of inspiration. How have they found a way into your painting?

AB: Music goes inside of my body and it turns into visual worlds. Novels and poetry can also provoke powerful imagery but also create a musical orchestra. Films can have a combination of sounds and imagery, but also movement. They are all a point of reference that comes and goes as I am painting. Since I don't use any references, they sort of become a part of my visual vocabulary to refer to when I am working.

OM: What's your intellectual and creative process in setting the scene that makes every painting share common characteristics and, in particular, the highest level of symbolism?

AB: Each time I start working, it's like a dive into the abyss and the unknown. When I am not painting, I am doing a lot of research based on the content I am interested in at the time—this can be triggered by a current event topic, but I am not just satisfied with that immediate topic. I like to research its history, see echoes of it in the past, in books written about the subject, art which was made about the subject, so, in a way, I fall into a rabbit hole of research with each painting and these contents may or may not work their way into the painting.



Fields of Energy, 2019, Oil on Linen, 66 x 88 inches (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac)

OM: In an interview, you recently said, “I want my paintings to have that feeling of metamorphosis, where you're looking at things becoming something else. Because that's the truest mirror of imagination and memory and dreams—things are always changing.” How did such a philosophy grow within you, and what elements helped shape it?

AB: I was always interested in how imagination, memory, dreams and hallucinations work. All these elements have shaped our world and connect us with things that go beyond our rational thinking. This fascinates me.

OM: What is the title of your 2019 painting, Thought Police, refer to?

AB: The title refers to George Orwell's 1984 novel which I have been thinking a lot about lately, such a prophetic novel, especially for our time!

*Ali Banisadr has also curated part of the Wadsworth's collection (Goya, William Blake, Hiroshige, Max Ernst, etc). He has a solo show coming up at the Benaki Museum in Athens, Greece, from November 3 until January 30, 2021, and also has an upcoming monograph, published by Rizzoli, to be released next spring, to coincide with an exhibition at Kasmin Gallery in New York.*

*Photo Credits: Jeffrey Sturges and Adam Reich*

# New York-Based Artist Ali Banisadr Presents The Beauty in Chaos

The work of New York-based artist Ali Banisadr is an evocative symphony of sounds intertwined with vibrant colours, giving rise to worlds which blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality

AYESHA SOHAIL SHEHMIR SHAIKH

JANUARY 14, 2020



Ali Banisadr. *Fields of energy*, 2019. Oil on linen. 167 x 223 cm.

For American-Iranian painter Ali Banisadr, creating art is beyond a pure hobby or a choice, it's a necessity. Growing up amidst the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war during a time of upheaval, art became not only a coping mechanism, but a way to understand the world around him and organise his thoughts. "At a young age, the only way I could process that chaos was in a visual manner," Banisadr says. "That same habit continued throughout my life. There are so many abstract thoughts that for me, can only be expressed visually."

As Banisadr grew older and reflected on his youth, he started believing more and more that there was a reason he experienced what he did, a deeper meaning behind it all. "This idea of what lies beyond the story on the surface is very interesting to me," he says. For Banisadr, art now served another purpose than to understand his environment: to show others his vision of the world.



Left: Ali Banisadr. Right: Ali Banisadr. *The Serpent and the Key*, 2019. Oil on linen. 40.6 x 50.8 cm

Gifted with synaesthesia, a trait which the late Russian painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky is also believed to have had, where colours and sounds are linked, the movement of the artist's brushstrokes is guided by the sounds he hears. "As soon as I apply the brush, the sound begins," he says. "It is the force that drives the whole painting and helps me compose the work and pull everything together."

When his brush meets the canvas, there are vibrations which shape the lines, colours and textures seen in his sensorial works. "If I listen to good music, I can see a parallel visual world or if I read a novel, there will be a very intense feeling of a place, the characters, smells and colours," he explains. "This also works for when I view art that speaks to me – it has a particular sound, which is not to be confused with music, but more like notes, or even the sound of something that is heavy or light, falling or rising, sharp or soft."



Ali Banisadr. *The Builder*, 2019. Oil on linen. 167 x 223 cm.

Banisadr's works are housed within numerous public and private collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Saatchi Gallery in London and Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles. *Ordered Disorders*, a recent exhibition held at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris, unveiled a new body of work by the artist.

The hybrid abstract-figurative figures which render themselves through the evocative paintings, as seen for instance in *The Builder* (2019) and *Thought Police* (2019), allude to the conflicts in art history and reference the rising state of unrest in the world. The hidden lyrical forms which appear on canvas act as humans, gods, goddesses, monsters, animals or a relic from the ancient past. "The figures, first of all, are about trying to stay true to my own memory of things, almost like a dream that is constantly shifting and just out of my grasp, a metamorphosis of transforming into some other element," expresses Banisadr. "I see my canvases as playgrounds for things from different times to dwell in; a sort of time machine where these figures can meet and exchange ideas."

The mythological creatures are intended to speak to the viewer, to share stories of a hidden past or an unknown future. "They embody a secret, they hold within themselves a certain magic that can be made contemporary over and over again based on the viewer who is able to create a dialogue with it," says Banisadr. "They have a message, we just have to listen."

Growing up, the artist was always skeptical about the history of art he was taught at school. "I think things are improving a bit now but even a few years ago, we had a very narrow way of looking at art history, at least in the western civilizations as they did not consider other parallel art histories," he shares. "But once we look at these histories closer, one can see the influence of other cultures on artists and how much of an impact that had on this linear cannon." Through his work, he hopes to create a space where these parallel worlds can coincide with each other, a space where there are no cultural limitations. He hopes to show, for example, the influence of Eastern cultures on the Venetian painters of the renaissance when colour was introduced in their work; the influence of Japanese art on impressionists and post-impressionists and the influence of Persian Miniature on Henri Matisse. "I try to let the paintings move towards the direction they want to go, to help them develop naturally."





An installation view of *Ordered Disorders* at Galerie Thaddeus Ropac Paris.

There are multiple narratives within each painting; each one never the same when viewed twice. “I think about many things within my paintings, there is never a particular message; it’s a way of exploring and shining a light on things that are on my mind,” says Banisadr. “It is also a way of seeing the world, a chaotic place with many voices coming from different directions, being able to filter all this information that we have access to now and to make sense out of them.”

The style in which Dutch painters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder have shown their critiques of society has influenced Banisadr throughout his lifetime. His technique is inspired by Venetian masters of the renaissance such as Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese, as well as Spanish painters Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya. Japanese prints and Persian Miniature paintings are also a perpetual inspiration and Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) oil painting is another such work which deeply resonates with Banisadr.

Beauty and chaos meet simultaneously within the artist’s work; the ethereal figures flow freely with grace while other mysterious forms elicit an unsettling aura. “From my own experience, I believe that art makes the world a better place, can provide a clarity through the confusion and pollution of the world,” says Banisadr. “We are in a state of emergency and live in apocalyptic times – man-made and natural disasters, violence and conflict. I think we can heal, but we have to have the vision to see what lies beyond all the confusion and I think artists can play a part in this.”



Installation view of *Ordered Disorders*. Courtesy of Galerie Thaddeus Ropac.

*Thought Police* (2019), a highlight from *Ordered Disorders* challenges our perceptions of the mind, questioning, are we free to think for ourselves or are we being watched closely and steered in a certain direction through an outside force? “I have been thinking about the digital age, internet, algorithms, cyber-attacks, which are all part of this new parallel man-made world that we have created, which is shaping our minds for the future,” says Banisadr. Also of note is *The Builder* (2019). “I have been thinking a lot about workers and people that still build things with their hands like homes; something that we have been doing throughout human history. It’s such an ancient idea and to me, watching construction workers build homes makes me think of how ancient this is,” he shares. “It is about the artist, the creator, making something with your hands, or making a sound.”

The more time we spend with Banisadr’s evocative works, more questions arise than answers: are we really free to wander? Can parallel universes exist? Is there a meaning behind each adversity we are subjected to in life? The reality is in the eye of the beholder.

# ELEPHANT

## This Artist Channels the Vicious Sounds of War in Paint

The eight-year Iran-Iraq war had a profound effect on Ali Banisadr's childhood, and the sounds and vibrations stayed with him long after. He talks about the paintings that have sprung from this experience, which silently form rhythms and, for the artist, a sense of calm.

RAJESH PUNJ  
AUGUST 12, 2019



Hold the Fort

Sound is not something people tend to connect with painting. The countless museum canvases that celebrate modern and contemporary icons are, for the majority, silent symbols of their artist's original actions. Yet Tehran-born, New York-based artist Ali Banisadr explains his works as coming from vibrations that are embedded in his mind. Less violent than the tremors that tormented his adolescence, the noises that come to him now are more

consoling, symphonic even. His paintings—currently showing at Het Noordbrabants Museum, in Hertogenbosch, Holland—are, as he explains them, born of the animated insides of his mind, that seem ready to riot.



Installation view by Joep Jacobs.

Can you explain the nature of this show? Given the choice of works, are we looking at a retrospective here in Holland?

This exhibition is my first museum retrospective in Europe. It brings together a decade's worth of paintings and drawings from 2008 until now. It's been great for me to have this chance to reunite with some of the older paintings that I haven't seen since they left the studio. The catalogue that accompanies the show includes an essay by the art historian Robert Hobbs.



The Wretched of the Earth

I want to understand the location of the exhibition. It might initially seem to be a mismatch, but the more one comes to understand your work, the greater the synergy is with the institution and its remarkable collection. How important was that to you when we can see traces of Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Snayers and Sebastian Vrancx in your work?

The location was important for me because of its history—I made a visit to the fantastic Bosch exhibition a few years ago now, and was immediately taken by the museum, and the quality of its collection, and also found the city to be a very special place. So I was delighted to hear that the museum was interested in doing a show, and it only felt natural to exhibit there. To have the chance to be in the city where Bosch painted centuries before, and to visit his original studio, was an honour. Also having the show in Holland where a lot of my favourite painters come from was another plus, from Bosch to Rembrandt to Willem de Kooning.



Bandit

In the accompanying exhibition video you talk about the invasive sounds of war from your adolescence in Iran, and about how noise has become the nucleus of what appears on canvas. Are the sounds violent or much more visceral, as reflected in the overall atmosphere of your paintings?

The sounds and vibrations from the explosions during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war had a profound impact on my childhood, and the way I dealt with the destruction was to retreat into my own world to try to make sense of my surroundings. At the time with my having to take refuge in the makeshift shelters, the isolation drew attention to the sound—of the vibrations rather than the visual experience. Such viciousness tormented me for years after, but not necessarily in a violent way. Since those memories were based on sound, they were, as you observe, more visceral. So when the noises manifest themselves in the work it's more of a guiding force that enables me to draw everything together, becoming almost orchestral. And the sounds don't solely reflect a particular time or place—they inform a combination of many experiences.



Homo Deus

If sound is your spark, how do you deal with it becoming entirely silent in your paintings?

I seek a silence that is achieved by having a flow of air through the paintings without any obstacles. When I finally achieve that on canvas, there is a quietness to the overall feeling of the painting, and when I arrive at this point I know the painting has reached its conclusion. The work ends up being an ordered disorder, and although there are still notes of sounds as the eye moves over the painting, since there is a rhythm, the sound becomes quiet and is contained within itself.



The Fall of Icarus

Does beauty belong in your work, or are these scenes more brutal?

As with anything in the world, you have to see both sides of the coin in order to get the full picture. Beauty and brutality often need to exist together, and I want to see them side-by-side. I always think about that quote from the actor Bruce Lee where he talks about emptying your mind, and being formless and shapeless like water. Having said, “Water can flow or it can crash, be water my friend.”

## Art Out: Foreign Lands by Ali Banisadr

AMANDA RYAN

JUNE 19, 2019



© Julia Niebuhr

A buffet of colors. A rhythm of lines. Poetry as mise-en-scène.

Ali Banisadr's paintings seemingly exist in a state of suspended animation—a brief moment of coherence and order poised to collapse back into a riotous cacophony. Thickly-laid strokes of expressionistic color blend with diaphanous washes produce spectral figures, shifting between abstraction and figuration as the viewer's eye moves around the canvas. Dot and dashes punctuate the composition between layers of paint like Morse code, providing a scaffold for the image that holds it between two and three dimensions, at times creating depth-of-field and at others flattening into pure geometry, depending on how you look at it.

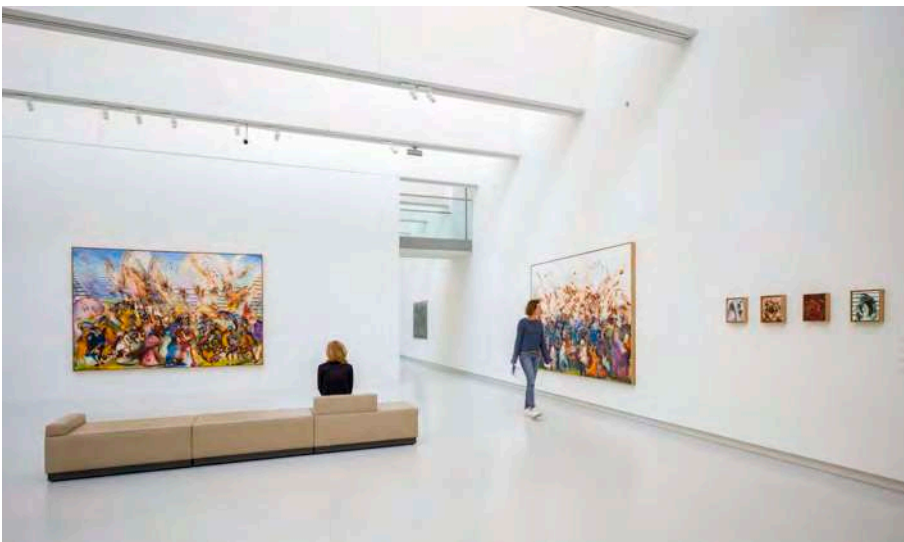
Recently opened at Het Noordbrabants Museum in the Netherlands, "Foreign Lands" is NYC-based painter Ali Banisadr's first retrospective in Europe. The exhibition brings together paintings and works on paper from the past decade of the artist's career, including a new painting created specifically for the exhibition, *Hold the Fort* (2019). The

tight selection of works allows Banisadr's expansive canvases ample room to breathe, and encourages close looking as new discoveries continually unfold in his shape-shifting works.

Banisadr weaves together a diverse array of influences from art, film, literature, music, politics, and history to produce frenetic mythological scenes reminiscent of a Bosch or Breugel painting. A lover of art history, Banisadr can cheerfully expound upon any number of subjects—from Old Master paintings to Abstract Expressionism, from Surrealism and Dada to Persian miniatures.



*The Gatekeepers* © Ali Banisadr



© Joep Jacobs





*Foreign Lands* © Ali Banisadr

Sound is of particular importance in his process—the artist has synaesthesia, in which one sense triggers another (for example, hearing a shape or tasting a color). He describes how the sound of the brush on the canvas guides the initial lines that structure his composition, and it becomes easier to understand how he creates this palpable sense of rhythm and motion, of static images in constant flux.

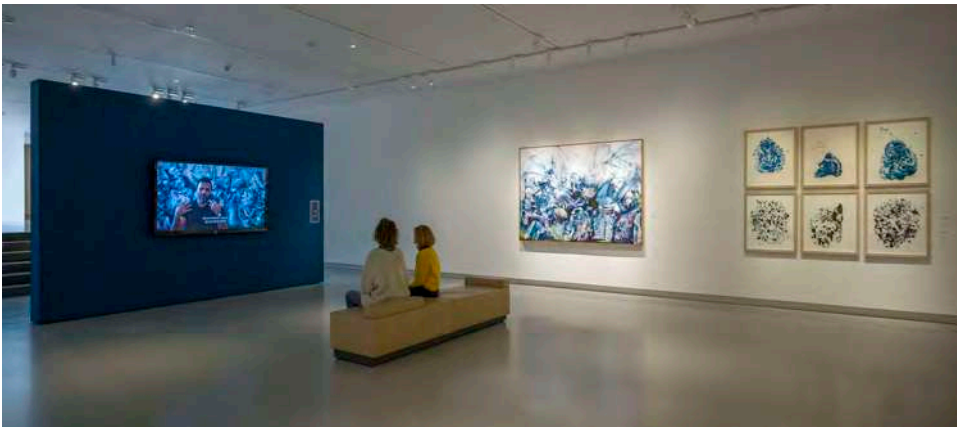
For Banisadr, his paintings are a form of visual poetry, representing those liminal spaces of dream, hallucination, memory, and myth that can't quite be put into words.



*At Once* © Ali Banisadr



*Bandit* © Ali Banisadr



© Joep Jacobs

## Ali Banisadr with Phong Bui

PHONG BUI  
OCTOBER 2018



Portrait of Ali Banisadr, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

One of the most poignant responses to the perpetual condition of being in exile is credited to Jonas Mekas, the legendary Godfather of American Avant-garde cinema, when he was asked, “Where are you from?” he offered, “I was born and raised in Lithuania, I live in New York, and now my country is culture.” Although the critical issue of how artists respond to the ongoing crises and challenges of the constant pressure to assimilate to their immediate and new environment has been with us since the beginning of time, it has become increasingly acute and urgent in regard to mass migration, especially from the Middle East and Africa. Ali Banisadr is one exemplar of this feat, following many of his fellow artists from a generation earlier, including Nicky Nodjoumi, Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari, Y.Z. Kami, among others. Banisadr left Iran at the tail end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, moving first to Turkey, then to the U.S. where he participated in the Mission School of graffiti in San Francisco, and attended SVA (School of Visual Arts) for his BFA, before earning an MFA from New York Academy of Art while also performing as a DJ in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Above all else, Banisadr is a devoted student of art history and the culture of painting specifically. On the occasion of the artist’s first solo exhibition in Germany, Banisadr paid a visit to the Rail HQ for a long conversation with Phong Bui, *Rail* Publisher, about his life and work.



Ali Banisadr, *Language of the Birds*, 2018. Oil on linen, 66 x 88 inches. Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern, London and Berlin.

Phong Bui (Rail): In '86 I was on a traveling grant to Italy, and had the privilege of being introduced to and spent the weekend with [Roberto] Matta with my late teacher Nicolas Carone, in his lavish studio/living quarters in Tarquinia, which previously had been a convent. I remember asking him why the entire studio floor was covered with beautiful canvases as though they were house painting drop cloths. His response was "That's because all of the paint drips, all sort of stains, the dirt from my own and other people's footprints would create a patina. All of which breed images. And each of those drop cloths would end up being the next painting on the wall." He then went on to paraphrase Leonardo [da Vinci], "When you look at a stain on the wall, you will see at once the emergence of horses, soldiers in combat, or you will see intimation of landscape with trees, mountains, rivers, ruins and so on. As an artist, your task is to bring out these ghost-like images in fuller visibility, well, depending on the degrees that each may call out for." This is, of course, usually referred to part of the Surrealist pure psychic automatism, being dictated by thought, not reason, and activated outside of the aesthetic concerns. There are endless ways of channeling different kinds of images. There exists first the Freudian sequences of dreams that can be rendered, embraced with traditional technique and with illusionistic space, as we see in the works of (Giorgio) de Chirico, even in aspects of [Max] Ernst, [Yves] Tanguy, [Salvador] Dalí for sure. Then there are ways in which automatic writing can be populated with greater abstraction along with over-all treatment of space, like in the paintings of [André] Masson, [Joan] Miró, and, for example, where certain levels of flatness and actual writings are permissible. Your work seems to be in between these two tendencies, utilizing traditional modeling, assimilating the all-over energy of Abstract Expressionism, yet at the same time, there seems to be a part of fluid references to endless images of past art as well as art of the present, not to mention digital technology, among other things. Which came first, or did both come simultaneously?

Ali Banisadr: It was neither, actually. It began with looking at the Old Masters paintings that I gradually saw traces of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism in them. Say you look at a close up of [Diego] Velázquez's paintings, for

instance, you would see traces of details of [Willem] de Kooning's painterly and abstract gestures. You look at [Martin] Schongauer or [Hieronymus] Bosch and you would see aspects of Surrealist visions of the world. For me, looking at Old Master paintings have been an endless source of inspiration in that it allows me to see them in the lineage, be it from early Christian art, art of the Renaissance, Baroque, to Impressionism, Modern, and Contemporary art. I tend to not really be attracted to things that are only one or the other. So if it is an Old Master painting, it should address certain issues that are still relevant in our time. Say looking at Titian, [Francisco] Goya, [Édouard] Manet, and [Pablo] Picasso, just to name a few, you could activate the sentiment in each of their works, be it love, the destruction of war, or jealousy, etc., through the paint and see the similar relationship to contemporary life somehow. It still speaks to our time. Likewise, something that is made today evokes something ancient.

Rail: What you say is generally true. There is a lineage of art historical continuity, though it may be applied to most artists, but not all since some are driven to be liberated by irony and paradox in order to fulfill their ambition. Anyway, it's quite evident in your work, the open-endedness to open sources. One can see representational forms infused with abstract shapes, all sorts of painterly gestures in the subtle and not-so-subtle references to the paintings of your favorite painters such as Tintoretto, Bosch, [Pieter] Bruegel, Velázquez, Goya, to Impressionist brushstrokes, [Jackson] Pollock and de Kooning, and whatnot. It also refers to Persian miniature painting, specifically in a treatment of flat space and the narrative that speaks of the worldview of Persian culture, specifically from period of the 14th to 17th centuries.

Banisadr: Which was influenced by Chinese painting traditions, right after the Mongol invasion (1219 – 1221) of the Islamic States. I'd say the space opened up more, and images seem to be less constricted to the flat backgrounds. They are more free in the distribution of images. There is no emphasis of one image being more important than another.

Rail: Which makes sense since the similar treatment is inherently viewed in Chinese landscape painting, particularly scroll painting of late Imperial China, say the Ming Dynasty.

Banisadr: Exactly!

Rail: Yet, coming back to your painting, despite the all-over energy carried across the canvas, there seems to be only the foreground with a certain event happening below, and then the less defined, less compressed, suggesting a sky above as a background. There is no middle ground, so it's structured like a stage proscenium. How did such a space come into being?

Banisadr: A small painting I made in 2006 called *The Waste Land* opened up the floodgate for me. It came strictly from my memory. I was thinking, "How do I paint something from memory, from a vibration or a sound that I heard when I was a kid growing up in Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988)"? And the way it came out it was so real to me, partly because the way in which a crater in the foreground appeared so suddenly that immediately connected to my early memory of hearing bombs blasting and seeing craters in the ground. I remember it came out so fast that I just used whatever was around, rags, palette knives, twigs, or whatever just to convey the sensation I was experiencing a past memory, which I thought was so thrilling. It was like an out-of-body experience.

Rail: Or in the least it's an epiphany.

Banisadr: Yes. It was from that epiphany that I discovered my own voice. It was exciting because several questions were racing in my head, yet the body was connected to what was going on: how do you store things in your memory, how do you remember or see things from this memory, and because the image in your memory is always changing, it's like you're trying to capture something that's ungraspable. It became a challenge: how do you capture the intangible in paint without making it like an illustration? My feeling was it was urgent and real because my hands were working with the paint materials very fast. I just trusted the whole process.

Rail: And your use of the palette knife seems to be a perfect tool to physically manipulate the space, dividing it into different segments.

Banisadr: And subtracting, setting up the rhythm of the painting as well.

Rail: True. One other thing I found when looking at your paintings is that from afar the endless gestures and textures provide a sense of painterly quality, but when I come close up it is in fact economically painted. There are unpainted white areas of the linens showing through, which allows the air to circulate throughout the painting in an otherwise action-packed and condensed space. I was surprised how relatively thin the paint was applied, and of the mixtures between wet-on-wet and more built-up segments in the painting. Do you think the sound of the palette knife troweling the paint onto the linen's surface may propel the mood or sentiment of the painting from the beginning?



Ali Banisadr, *The Waste Land*, 2006. Oil on Panel, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Banisadr: Not really. It's more like the sound of the image I'm looking at, which only occurs when the composition is being created, especially with movements of larger shapes that correspond to the smaller fragments, figures, objects, etc. that move forward or recede. It's as though your eyes are connecting the dots between these fragmentations and hearing different sounds of these living things that could come into existence or not—often times they get painted over or scraped away. It's a challenge when I hear too many sounds, I have to figure out which one makes sense for them to come alive and which one needs to disappear, and which one should stay in between the two stages. As far as you mentioned automatism, which doesn't require too much editing, I may unconsciously adopt a similar method, but I do so much analyzing, editing, and constant reworking that in the end it feels like a well-rehearsed orchestra.

Rail: Ready to perform! [*Laughter*] How do you know when a certain painting needs to stay monochromatic, as opposed to others that are immersed in a sea of colors?

Banisadr: I don't always know in advance. It all depends on how strong the mood at the beginning conveys to me whether the painting is a definitive monochrome of brown, which there's no need to add any color to it. And there are times where the mood is really not as strong, so I bring in colors to enliven the painting. For example, in the cases of *The Building of Icarus*, *Homo Deus*, or *The Game of Taming* (all 2018), they're paintings that demand revisions, additions, fine-tunings, which happens every day, over time. Whereas, *Language of the Birds* (2018) doesn't need to bring in anything else, except for occasional accents that heighten the images in the key spectrum of blue.

Rail: The monochromes in general seem to have more open gestures and broader space than the color paintings, which brings me to my next question: How does the issue of scale relate to one as opposed to another?



Ali Banisadr, *World Upside Down 5*, 2018. Ink on paper, 30 x 24 1/8 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern, London and Berlin.

Banisadr: I think color makes separations, so when you look at a figure that has a dominant red uniform, your eyes automatically start to follow similar colors, which soon turns into a random search for patterns.

Rail: Or some kind of a rhythm!

Banisadr: Rhythm—which I think is my own sense of scale—is so important. If you have too many, as some call them “traps,” the eyes never leave the painting. The idea is to lead the eyes with a certain rhythm that allows slow discoveries in the painting, and yet, at the same time, encourages second or multiple viewings.

Rail: Those “trapping” devices can also be very subtle.

Banisadr: Yes, like a hidden or invisible geometry, the opposite of Cubist geometry, which is very visible. I feel the structures in my paintings need to be invisible. It’s internalized, and I always know where to situate different figures and things in different places throughout the painting.

Rail: As we’ve just spoken of the issue of rhythm, you’re a conductor of an orchestra so to speak, where the various textures of sound are dependent on specific compositions.

Banisadr: I like that analogy.

Rail: Let’s visit your early upbringing in California where you lived for twelve years. You and your family moved from Iran to San Diego when you were twelve, then moved to Modesto, and San Francisco eventually. And it was in San Francisco that you were exposed to graffiti culture, what was called Mission School of San Francisco, or sometimes called “New Folk” or “Urban Rustic.”

Banisadr: What made it so interesting was that it was folk art, such as sign painting and homemade objects, mixed in with comics, cartoons, and of course mural and graffiti! A real collective grew out of a real community.

What happened was William Brown, the mayor of San Francisco, who was an opponent of graffiti culture, made a compromise by giving us warehouses, and it sure was a lively scene. I met Barry McGee and many artists from the community, including many from Europe. I quickly realized two things about myself: one, I wasn’t so enthusiastic about painting on walls; and, two, I tended to lean more towards doing work in my studio alone. I realized couldn’t make what I make around noise and people. It takes me a while to get to a place where I even know what I need to make. So even though I was always around the graffiti artists and a part of it, I wasn't really out there doing my graffiti in public. I’d rather make my own graffiti in a sketchbook or the studio. And there were other artists in the Mission who also leaned towards making art in the studio.

Rail: Like Chris Johnson, Ruby Neri, Alicia McCarthy?

Banisadr: Yeah.





Ali Banisadr, *Page from Sketchbook*, c. 1996. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Have you kept your sketchbooks from that time?

Banisadr: I've kept some of them.

Rail: I know you came to New York to attend SVA to study painting specifically, but then you took classes in illustration. Why?

Banisadr: It's funny. I came to SVA as an older student—twenty-five years old—so I was really hungry for knowledge. As much as I was enjoying other classes such as film, printmaking, and so on, it was in my third year that I realized there were classes in illustration that I was interested in. I was like, "Alright, I now want to learn from others what I don't know." The first year was a boot camp. You were basically just internalizing everything, from anatomy to painting techniques to art history to theory, just everything. And then the second years was more "what are you going to do with what you have learned?" You were encouraged to bring in your own subject and you went with whatever! I took as much as I could from different teachers. There wasn't one that was more influential than another. They all had something to offer.

Rail: You then extended this thirst of knowledge to graduate school at New York Academy of Art in Tribeca.

Banisadr: Yeah, I was committed to furthering that knowledge, knowing it was good for my growth somehow.

Rail: And when exactly did you make your first abstraction with this knowledge of traditional techniques and materials, given your formative years being a graffiti artist?

Banisadr: Well, it was in my third year of fellowship, which you basically get a studio in school and you can make whatever, and you're no longer required to go to class, yet still have access to everything at the school, like lectures,

visiting artists, critiques, etc. So it was during this period that I began to make abstractions. Well, it was and always is a synthesis of both abstraction and figuration. Anyway, I thought everyone was going to hate it. [Laughter.]

Rail: Because you're rebelling against what you were taught?

Banisadr: Yeah. To my great surprise, they all embraced it! Even one of the toughest faculty teachers, Martha

Erlebacher, who was known for her steadfast advocacy of realism.

Rail: Yeah, Thomas Eakins and anything before was cool in her book. I had her as a visiting critic as an undergrad at PCA [Philadelphia College of Art, now called University of the Arts] so I know. Anyway, what was your memory of the first time you felt you'd discovered your voice? Can you recall the sensation?

Banisadr: You know going back to the whole thing of making work based on memory, sounds, sensation, and letting go, I think it started at the end of my post-graduate research fellowship in painting at New York Academy. I felt a freedom that I'd never felt before. I mean your voice always changes but that's when I had the feeling, okay, this is me, this is my voice, this is what makes sense, this is what speaks to me.

**Rail:** Was it a painting or a drawing?

Banisadr: It was actually several charcoal drawings I made based on sound explosions and vibrations, then I made a small painting, then a medium-sized painting that I worked on for maybe a month and a half or two months. It was called *What the Thunder Said*. I didn't show it to anybody, and then I showed it in my class and the reaction was pretty good, as I'd just mentioned. It was a surprise.

Rail: And this reassured a sense of confidence in what you were doing.

Banisadr: Yes, it did.

Rail: What was the next consequential step?

Banisadr: I continued working on a body of work based on this new discovery about a year, which led to my first solo show at Leslie Tonkonow gallery.

Rail: Are there particular artists whose works you feel strong affinities towards in terms of how they mediate their own walks between abstractions and figuration, energy, a sense of invention, and so on in the work?

Banisadr: I admire Neo Rauch, Dana Schutz, and my friend Amy Cutler, who I've known since New York Academy. The way each invents their own worlds is just incredible. I mean Neo Rauch with his invention of these places, or these spaces that lie between dreams and hallucinations, I feel there's always this good balance between his imagination and the material of the paint, and what the paint is capable of creating. There's a fluidity of the two, plus

his treatment of scale. They seem incredibly uneven, unreal, whether it's a bigger figure next to a smaller one, yet they somehow seem to belong to that one specific space. Something similar applies to Dana Schutz, except her work has a louder sound. Amy Cutler's magic realism is amazing. Her work is both a quiet nightmare and a magical world. I should add that my connection with these artists is that: one, they have great craftsmanship, second, they work from their imaginations—so they create things that didn't exist before— and third, they're very aware of art history. And as far as narrative goes, they create their own narratives. They all have interesting heads, and they really know how to paint. [Laughter] You know it's like if I go and visit the Prado, for example, there's Velázquez, there's Titian, there's Goya, there's Bosch, and endless other great painters, so you know you have a long long long way to go. You might not even get close, but at least you have a bar that you can work towards. Some kind of a model to strive after.



Ali Banisadr, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 2018. Etching painting, 11 x 14 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern, London and Berlin.

Rail: What about Cecily Brown? Your treatment of the figure and abstraction holding equal weight as one pictorial synthesis seems to relate to her own.

Banisadr: I see how you'd see the similarities, but yes and no. I like how she treats everything equally, all the strokes of paint, be it a figure or a tree. I tend to focus on certain things and work on them more, so there's a different percentage of development as opposed to leaving things in in-between spaces and having things be almost ghostlike. So I think there is a degree of shift between them, there is more variation, more characters. Also, the sound and temperature in our work are different: mine is abrupt, loud, and dry; hers is smooth, continuous, and wet.

Rail: That's a good observation. And you certainly embrace illusionistic space when necessary.

Banisadr: That's true, amidst lots of things that don't even have names. Our minds always want to categorize things, I like to leave things in a space where your mind is having a hard time categorizing what you're looking at—so it's constantly alert, not falling asleep.

Rail: Again, just to follow up on the difference in "mood" or "sentiment" that is being generated from either the monochrome or color paintings, we often question why we either dream in black and white or color. When Picasso painted *Guernica*, he understood the painting would have not been as effective if he'd painted in color. Black and white, or the monochrome in general, has a certain bearing in our memory that tends to associate with past events, perhaps due to black and white photographs, black and white television, black and white newspapers, and so on, as opposed to dreaming in color, which usually is referred to future events.

Banisadr: For me it's like seeing a play on stage. In one version you can see all the characters at the same time, because the light is lit evenly, which is the case of the monochrome. Whereas in another version, the light shines on different characters and in different ways so colors guide the viewer to concentrate on certain things in the painting.

Rail: In the monochrome painting there is far less mark making, gestures, or details than in the color paintings. Still, I remember we were often told in painting 101 class not to introduce too many different characters or brushstrokes or gestures because they would confuse and overwhelm the viewing experience. It was and still is considered a definite not-to-do thing whatsoever!

Banisadr: Not that I was intentionally trying to rebel, to do things I was told not to, but I feel that if I want to stay true to my own gut feeling, I just have to do whatever I need to follow that gut feeling. I should mention the painting starts very loud at the beginning, and then my job is to sort of make sense of these loud sounds, which cancel out and collide with each other, and create a composition that harmonizes them. The work is finished is when it's relatively calmed down. More importantly, I feel there's a wave of air, or energy, flowing through the painting that really ties everything together. It's hard to describe because I also feel it's capable of doing the opposite: blowing everything off.

Rail: Matta often refers to his paintings as "inscapes" like a landscape within, which relates to the mind, the imagination more than the physical body, how would you describe your relationship between the two?

Banisadr: When I start to hear the sound and see the images, I see them in my head first, as always. Once I begin to make the painting there's always movement because things are in flux. I can then hear and feel that movement within my own body. It's only then I know what I'm supposed to do with the figure. If one specific figure is leaning over, for example, and it's heavily on one leg, I feel it within in my own leg. If its head is heavy, I feel that weight in my own head. I sort of become that figure. The same goes even for something that's only like semi-representational, or a breeze of wind or a flow of energy or a sound wave or whatever, I feel it inside my body and then I'm able to project it, and create it.

Rail: What kind of music do you listen to in your studio? For example, Mondrian, between 1940 when he moved to New York City and died 4 years later in 1944, loved boogie-woogie music. He'd listen to Fats Waller, as one can

imagine the pounding sound of the piano corresponds with the exciting and lively energy of NYC; Pollock loved Charlie Parker because of his improvisational nature and fast tempos because it relates to the making of his own painting.

Banisadr: It all depends. If the sound that comes out of the painting is too loud, I don't listen to any music at all. But there are definitely times when I am listening to music while painting or working on works on paper. My taste in music is very eclectic, mostly because of my past experience as a DJ. I liked to play music that was not supposed to go together but I would make it work somehow. It could go from rare groove, from soul music from the '80s, to '90s hip hop, to electronic music, to jazz to some random sound, and back and forth . . .

Rail: What was the urge to become a DJ? How long did you do it as a job?

**Banisadr:** I did it for fun when I first moved to New York. I used to DJ in Williamsburg in various cool little clubs when it wasn't what it is now. It soon became a paid gig, and I did that for a good six years. I really enjoyed the experience because there were constant surprises. You know how sometimes you hear music and you already know what's going to come next?

Rail: You mean the predictability of a familiar rhythm?

Banisadr: I wanted to play a mixture of things that surprised people, even if they may barely recognize it, like "I know that song or that music but where does it come from exactly?" For example, there's this great album by a French DJ (named Uncle O) called *Shaolin Soul*. What they did was they took all the music that RZA sampled to make Wu-Tang Clan albums, but they're so good. There's Al Green, Ann Peebles, Willie Mitchell, Booker T & The MG's, Barry White in the compilation, but you only get a hint, and you'd say to yourself "Who is that?" or "What was that?" This is why I love sampling. You can create your own music out of taking one part of a song like a rhythm break, which can be used to build the beat for another song. Every club I'd DJ, people would just come up to me, and ask, "Who are you, what is this, where'd you get this?"

Rail: So each time you DJ, you can't replicate what you did previously?

Banisadr: That's right, because it's not a planned thing. You just go with the flow and feel the energy of the crowd. Whatever you end up playing is an immediate response to those factors. It all makes sense somehow, which is the thrill of the experience.

Rail: I'm glad you mentioned your experience as a DJ. This seems plausible when recalling your memory growing up in Tehran with the air raids, bombs, and explosions during the Iran-Iraq War, which were the roots of your own synesthesia. I could only imagine it'd be impossible to isolate one episode from the others to deal with or address one at a time.

Banisadr: I feel like I'm patching all of these different things, places, and times into one large thing, and all these little variations and glimpses are productive in my case.



Ali Banisadr, *The World Upside Down*. Oil on linen, 82 x 120 inches. Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern, London and Berlin.

Rail: I wonder whether your interest in music sampling and your experience as a DJ has had an influence on how you bring together different sources in your work?

Banisadr: That's a good question. I never thought of it in this context. It's an internal thing where I just somehow know where I am supposed to go with what, and, again, thinking about the underlying core structure that connects all these different elements has always been my desire or my own way of dealing with my complex background as an immigrant. I guess I don't want to miss out on everything that has happened in my life.

**Rail:** Another way of saying it would be "You have no control over the matter." [Laughter] The fact that you don't censor yourself from what you love in art history and everything else that you love in contemporary culture ...

Banisadr: There's no separation between one memory from another. I also feel in our time there's this level of distraction, and a speed of things moving at such a fast rate, which makes it impossible to concentrate—or to meditate—on anything. We're in the digital world, and there are always multiple things coming at you at once and there's this level of feeling overwhelmed. So I feel like more than ever painting is one of a few media where you could find refuge, because it slows down time and that's one of the most important things about painting. It slows down time and therefore slows you down in your viewing experience.

Rail: Even though each time one looks at the details of your painting, one feels they're at constant threat of disappearing.

Banisadr: It's like you're trying to hold onto things that are moving.

Rail: A fleeting dream, or fleeting moment of seeing a carnival of half-men, half-animals or creatures at times, other times I see humanoids, cyborgs, which remind me of the Dada artists of Berlin. They created the Dada cyborg as a

mixture of hope, fantasies, and anxiety about what lies in between the unknown abyss of human creation and destruction. Hannah Höch, John Hartfield, Otto Dix, George Grosz, for example, created these hybrids which can be very disturbing because they're filled with jump cuts, dissonance, fragmentations, and so on. I know it's far-fetched as a reference, but I do see in your paintings a similar urge. Is that a fair observation?

Banisadr: Living in our time and thinking about what's happening to us right now, the whole digital world, with cyber space, social media, etc. which is something we can't avoid. I've been thinking for a long time how I can bring those elements together in my work, knowing and accepting that they are part animal, part human, part machine, with this idea asking what will become of us as a species in the future. I feel like the space, the stage, or whatever in the painting is a place, it's like a time machine for me, where things from the past, the present, and the future can dwell at the same time. It's not based on a linear timeline, it could exist in different times at once, and then somehow you have these things from different times coming together and the viewer has to make sense of it all, or not.

[Laughter]

Rail: A viewing pleasure I'm sure, or not. My last question: How do you feel about this new group of paintings? Is there a small or large degree of change, building on the previous body of work?

Banisadr: Of course, the current body of work is always based on the last one that I've made. It's work that comes out of work. For me, I've always moved slowly, step by step, even though the world I'm creating is a fleeting one. But to answer your question: I feel there is more space in the new paintings.

Rail: Especially in the monochromatic ones.

Banisadr: Yes. And some of the figures are more developed. There's more air in the paintings.

Rail: What about the mood of the work?

Banisadr: Since I started to become more conscious of different moods I've been mixing my own paints, so the color that I'm creating could convey the strong mood that I'm after. More and more the colors that I'm using are becoming personal because they trigger a sensation or a mood; and it's a color that I've created so I can't really call it anything. I label them by moods. So that's happened in the new works.

Rail: To go back to the issue of synesthesia, do you think you have to mix certain colors that would modify or assimilate the equivalence of the sound you hear in your head?

Banisadr: Yeah, once I mix a certain color, right away I feel it trigger a familiar place, a mood, a feeling, even a temperature, a sound—all those things at once. So it's based on memory, but it doesn't matter whether it happened twenty years ago or two years ago, or just yesterday. Deep within myself I always know that place, that feeling. And so I need to preserve this mood, this color I've just mixed, because from that color comes this whole new world.

## Trust in the Future: Ali Banisadr

MIMI WONG  
JUNE 7, 2017



Ali Banisadr, *Trust in the Future*, 2017, oil on linen, 208 × 305 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

The paintings in Iranian-American artist Ali Banisadr's second solo exhibition, "Trust in the Future," at New York's Sperone Westwater gallery resemble dreamscapes. Building upon the abstract and figurative works presented in his 2014 show "Motherboard," the artist's latest, large-scale compositions appear to welcome allegorical interpretations. Whether his paintings are of nightmares or omens is unclear, reflecting the uncertainty of our troubled times.

*Myth* (2016) highlights icons such as pharaohs with headdresses and shamans donning medallions and pointed hats—figures who have assumed powerful roles throughout human history. Yet their authority has depended on widespread belief in certain myths, or what Banisadr refers to as an "imagined order" that has lent them power, which includes laws, religion and other forms of social cooperation. No single figure comes into focus; rather, the blurred faces encourage the viewer's eyes to roam the canvas. With no clear focal point, the work deliberately resists precise definition.

For Banisadr, a synesthetic painter, the visual motion he renders on his canvas directly correlates to sound and vibration. Growing up in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the artist experienced air raids and bombings going off around him, whereupon he would run down to the basement and draw. Many years later, as a grad student in his thirties, Banisadr visited the D-Day landing beaches in Normandy, where he experienced a flashback: the artist



remembered the crater where his school once stood, as well as the half-leveled buildings of his childhood. Soon after, he began making charcoal drawings based on the sound of explosions. Banisadr eventually moved on to experimenting with color and paint, but he said he continues to use sound as a “guiding force.”



Ali Banisadr, *Myth*, 2016, oil on linen, 167.5 × 223.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

With his imagination inextricably linked to concepts such as “energy” or “harmony”—terms he mentioned as essential to his process—an intangibility permeates his work. The seven ink drawings of the “Seven” series (2017) look like rough portraits or smudged photographs. Without clearly defined features, the faces lose all trace of personal identity, and the artist’s subjects are deprived of their humanity. Instead, we are left with generic bogeymen that are easy stand-ins for criminals, terrorists or enemies of the state. “From this imagined order, we fear them,” Banisadr said, alluding to how those in power exploit our lack of empathy or understanding.

The meaning behind the painting *The Rise of the Blond* (2016) was uncloaked once I recognized the yellow mane of a figure in purple looming above an anthropomorphized horde that shuffles to the right in an orderly fashion. Banisadr revealed that he painted the work during and in the immediate aftermath of last year’s US presidential election. His internalization of current events also inspired a tumultuous canvas, *Mosaic People* (2017), in which an obscured, faceless crowd clothed in brightly colored textiles scrambles in many directions. Smears of paint, like shrapnel, explode from the background, contributing to the overall feeling of chaos and confusion. Here, Banisadr paints people who are “being pushed out of their land.” Again, the viewer’s eyes must wander, our gaze trying to keep up with the setting’s intended movement.

A character that the artist calls a “cult leader,” identified by the mysterious symbol on his chest, is one of many spectral creatures in *We Work in Shadows* (2017). The painting’s earth tones suggest fire and heat, while actual yellow flames lick the body of a demon in the lower right-hand corner of the painting. The inhabitants of Banisadr’s underworld are hybrid monsters, simultaneously of our world and from another realm. Similarly, the figures in *Trust*

*in the Future* (2017), the show's namesake, appear partially human: up close, one can just make out a profile here, a hand there, before the kinetic scene swallows that body part again. Once we step back to take in the entire image, its monochromatic blue casts a fog over the setting, clouding our vision. A darker reading of the phrase "Trust in the Future" supposes the mantra may be nothing more than an empty promise about progress—yet another myth that is forced upon us.



Ali Bandisadr, drawing from "Seven" series, 2017, ink on paper, 21.5 × 15.25 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.



Ali Bandisadr, drawing from "Seven" series, 2017, ink on paper, 21.5 × 15.25 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.



Ali Bandisadr, drawing from "Seven" series, 2017, ink on paper, 21.5 × 15.25 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.



Ali Banisadr, *The Rise of the Blond*, 2016, oil on linen, 167.5 × 223.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.



Ali Banisadr, *Treasure*, 2016, oil on linen, 167.5 × 223.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

*Treasure* (2016) places one of the artist's personal memories in the context of an art historical moment: upon welcoming the birth of his now 17-month-old daughter, the artist likened the arrival of well-wishers at his home to the theatrical tableau of Hieronymus Bosch's *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1475), now housed in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "It was such a powerful thing to witness," he remarked, observing how the infant possessed an energy or force, like gravity, that pulled in everyone around her. For Banisadr, the instinctual need to protect something so vulnerable offers a bit of optimism. The child embodies a future that her father can believe in—one that is even filled with hope.

# ArtAsiaPacific

## Ali Banisadr: Nightmares and Dreamscapes

ANNA WALLACE-THOMPSON  
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2017



## Profiles

One does not simply look at Ali Banisadr's paintings so much as one watches them, waiting for a grand finale to unfold. When faced with these canvases, we become voyeurs, drawn to the operatic splendor of some apocalyptic, perverse theater group unaware of our presence. Each of the artist's paintings is a tableau, a set piece from the end of days in which a grotesquery of carnivalesque figures dredged up from the depths of imagination, myth and hell, shuffles along deep in conversation. Arcs of paint and blurred limbs give the impression of constant motion, our eyes darting from place to place, never resting, always seeking.

This intensity has come to characterize Banisadr's oeuvre, as has a plush color palette coupled with melting, blurred brushstrokes. Each work is evidence of the artist's magpie-like accruing and parsing of current and historical events, influences and stimuli, as well as the result of his synesthesia condition, in which sounds and colors collide, slip and smash into each other. "I feel like I'm a bowerbird," admitted Banisadr. "I take from so many different places, be it art history, paintings, etchings, films, literature or everyday life, when I'm walking down the street and see a specific color that just clicks. Past, present, future—you digest everything around you, and then it becomes your own personal vocabulary."

Born in Iran in 1976, Banisadr and his family were prompted to uproot and move to Turkey, and then California, after the first Gulf War. The artist spent his teens and early twenties on the West Coast before moving to New York in 2000, where he still resides. It was here that he received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts, followed by an MFA from the New York Academy of Art. Nearly two decades after arriving in the United States, there is little of the Middle East left in his accent, except for when we discussed Iranian theater and the soft, singsong tones of Farsi come through.

As an Iranian living in New York, especially now, one could peg Banisadr's practice as one that responds to politics. Although the work is political—the artist admitted he "hadn't realized how political [his] works had become"—Banisadr veers away from specific events and statements, preferring instead to symphonize myriad threads and stories, focusing on the human condition and the wheels of history. Early traces of this approach are evident in a work created in the year he graduated, *The Waste Land* (2006). The painting was inspired

by a trip to Normandy Beach, and evokes memories of exploding bombs from the artist's childhood. Alongside TS Eliot-like evocations of desolation is an explosion in angry ochre tones, which swirls among sandy beiges and grays. A tiny crater at the center of the image speaks volumes of Banisadr's ability to capture a sensation, feeling or sound in a few deft brushstrokes.

In the ensuing years, Banisadr's aesthetic has become almost synonymous with that of Hieronymus Bosch due to his *Garden of Earthly Delights*-type panoramas characterized by earlier works such as *Fishing for Souls* (2009), an aquamarine riverside scene in which myriad small figures appear as if bathed in heavenly light. In these paintings, his figures take on the appearance of bizarre beasts, as if they had stepped out of the pages of Borges or were dreamed up by a demented puppet designer. This (somewhat gleeful) apocalyptic sensibility is important to the artist. "I always want to create something that has never existed before," said Banisadr. "I don't want my figures to be instantly recognizable; I want them to be something that I gave birth to, even if they have roots in historical mythological sources. I want them to be hybrids of our imaginations."

There have been two major shifts in Banisadr's practice recently: the first is the introduction of a monochromatic palette, which lends to his new work a sense of narrative focus. An example of this is the gigantic two-by-three-meter painting, *Trust in the Future* (2017), which was painted entirely in variations of indigo to emulate the powdery crunch of snow and the icy blasts of arctic winds in a frost-filled miasma of sharp flurries. In contrast, *We Work in Shadows* (2017) presents a nightmarish cluster of figures presided over by an ominous rust-hued cloud reminiscent of spears and violence. When viewed together, as they were in a recent Sperone Westwater show in New York, the canvases seem to mirror Robert Frost's poem *Fire and Ice*, an intentional comparison on the artist's part. "I wanted to paint an underworld, and I wanted to create something that was the opposite of snow and ice and cold, something fiery, deep within the earth," said Banisadr. "I had Dante on my mind, and these levels of hell he travels through. This is like our psyche: we dig within ourselves, and this to me was a metaphor for my paintings. I dig deep within my imagination to bring out these things that come to the world, our physical world."

Another new development is the definition of the characters in his paintings. Previously, his figures were more abstracted, and flit in front of our eyes like mirages, dissolving into brushstrokes upon closer inspection. "The figures began demanding more, they wanted to be developed more," said Banisadr. "One always wants to step into an unknown visual territory that one hasn't been to before." As such, the characters now bear more significance, evolving from being simply auxiliary details. Instead, we are faced with a cast who take on roles in the grand tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, or even Iranian *taziyeh* plays. Banisadr explained: "In theater, or opera, you are presented with figures in costume and automatically you know that this one is the authority figure, that one is the jester, and so on. I like the duality between looking at the 'real' figure and their costumed 'role.' I've always liked not knowing which is which." Additionally, he noted, artists often play the role of the jester—the one figure who, through comic refrain, is able to express uncomfortable truths. This role of artist as jokester is particularly relevant given Banisadr's inclusion in the recent major group show, "Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians," which ran at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto this year and examined themes of social and political upheaval in the various identities of Iran.

Banisadr has also begun to enlarge the size of the characters, making them harder to ignore. An example of this is in *Mosaic People* (2017), where characters congregate and move toward the viewer, as if bursting out of the painting. "Usually my figures are in dialogue with each other, in their own world. But these people are referencing the refugee crisis and here they are leaving their land," said Banisadr of the painting. This work is also significant for its use of fragmentation—despite the greater emphasis on the final silhouette, the figures possess a quality of blurry pixilation, a nod to erosion of identity as borders shift and discourse is pushed around new, and even future, states of globalization and nationalism.

For an artist whose work has for a long time drawn on the rich tapestry of art history, this new focus on the future is an intriguing one. "I am questioning the idea of progress," he says. "Are we headed toward technological paradise or ecological disaster? Have we really come as far as we think?" It's certainly a heavy question, and perhaps one that these new, bolder figures, can answer.

# Frieze

## Ali Banisadr

Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France

ROBERT BARRY  
FEBRUARY 13, 2016



Ali Banisadr, *Foreign Lands*, 2015, oil on linen, 2.4 × 3.5 m

A riot of strafing lines and clashing colours, Ali Banisadr's large painting *Foreign Lands* (all works 2015) seems to rush towards you like a backdraft through a broken window. You find your eyes widening to accommodate it; although it's the furthest painting from the door as you enter the gallery, I'd be amazed if anyone glanced at any other work before it.

There is an aqueous, hallucinatory quality to many of Banisadr's paintings, such as *Age* and *Carousel*. From a distance, they seem to have an almost digital sheen, a shimmering limpid smoothness. But this gives way, as you get up close, to intense thickets of impasto. Many of the forms poking through the foreground – particularly in *Age*, but also its neighbours including *Metamorphosis* or *In Medias Res* – momentarily evoke, say, the hunched monsters in a Jim Henson film, before evanescing back into smears of colour. Neither entirely abstract nor figurative, these could be Schrödinger's paintings, hovering – like something vaguely recalled from last night's dream – in a state of quantum uncertainty between pure expression and recognizable form. If the brash colours and swooping gestures

Banisadr employs sometimes flirt with the kind of gaudiness associated with bad folk art, they're redeemed by a hypnagogic quality that is peculiarly compelling.

Besides the nine large canvases, the exhibition is completed by a set of 13 small works on paper. These are interesting insofar as they clarify the artist's method, the way alternations of patterned lines and dots might be broken up by a swooping gesture to give a vertiginous sense of not-quite-stable three-dimensionality. But, rendered in the hazy greys of charcoal, these works lack the visceral thrill that comes from Banisadr's often-lurid use of colour; restraint and reduction diminish their power.

Speaking to Emily McDermott in Interview magazine last year, Banisadr – who now lives in the US – spoke of the synaesthesia he first became aware of during his childhood in Iran. 'My mom says that when the Eight Years' War was happening I would draw to create a visual understanding of the sounds I was hearing – the vibrations, explosions and air raids,' he said, going on to explain that sound continues to dictate his brushstrokes. 'It's this sound that guides me to press harder on the brush and lift off, or let go or stop there and then continue there.'

Looking at his paintings, I'm not surprised. It's become common to compare Banisadr's work to the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky or Hieronymous Bosch, and that makes sense enough. He shares the former's violent, emphatic brushstrokes and, with the latter, a certain grotesquery coupled with a sense of peeking into a whole world unfolding before you. But, far more than that, these works brought to my mind the dashing rhythms and bold symphonic timbres of Sergei Prokofiev or Igor Stravinsky.

# Interview

## How Ali Banisadr Holds Memory

EMILY MCDERMOTT  
FEBRUARY 28, 2014



Installation view, Ali Banisadr: *Motherboard*, Sperone Westwater, New York, March 1 - April 19, 2014.

Bombs blasted, houses crumbled, people in gas masks darted throughout the streets: it was one of the 20th century's most violent wars. While contemporary artist Ali Banisadr was born in Iran in 1976—four years before the outbreak of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war—his upbringing is less of an influence than one might think.

“At the beginning I was trying to think about the actual war—why did it happen and what was involved? But then the conversation expanded,” Banisadr says. His Iranian background looms in the subconscious, while consciously he draws inspiration from everyday encounters: political affairs, books, and recent works of art as well as historical events and art history. Art, for Banisadr, is more than a language. It is a visual philosophy.



“Words are limiting,” he explains. “Visual philosophy is how I deal with questions in life. I can deal with things that I can’t describe in words.”

The more time spent in front a Banisadr painting, the more a work unveils itself. What at first glance appear to be abstract lines and whimsical dots begin to morph into characters that create narratives. Hidden creatures appear in the depths of canvases, and wide brushstrokes attain new significance. Kandinsky’s cubism meets Brueghel’s landscapes; pure abstraction becomes deliberate form.

Just as the viewer becomes lost within his organized chaos, the same is true for Banisadr himself. “As I look at the older works, I start to understand things more,” he says. “I have to let it settle to understand what’s happening.”

Banisadr’s family left Iran in 1988, first moving to Turkey and then to California. In 2000, Banisadr moved to New York, where he still lives and works. On March 1, a solo show featuring his most recent paintings—the largest of which he completed this week—will open at the Sperone Westwater Gallery on the Lower East Side.

Before the official opening, Banisadr guided us through the exhibition, where we spoke about his synesthesia, love of books, and his relationship with technology, while avoiding the tired topic of his Iranian background.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: One of the most fascinating things I read was how you work with sound, how you hear sound and let that guide you through your painting.

ALI BANISADR: I’ve known about that since I was a kid. My mom says that when the Eight Years’ War was happening I would draw to create a visual understanding of the sounds I was hearing—the vibrations, explosions, and air raids. It was automatic. I never really thought about it, [but] then it was something I was fascinated by. Before I went to art school, I studied psychology for that reason.



Installation view, Ali Banisadr: Motherboard, Sperone Westwater, New York, March 1 - April 19, 2014.

I was trying to understand why, when I do something visual, do I hear a sound? Or why when I eat something there's a color? I didn't know there was a name for it—synesthesia. Reading about it and about Kandinsky talking about it was interesting. It was driving me to tap into my imagination and understand why senses are mixed.

MCDERMOTT: Do you find synesthesia in other parts of your life?

BANISADR: It's mostly sound and visual, but say someone tells me their name—that name can turn into a taste or a color and that's how I categorize it in my mind. It's an easy way of categorizing things, but it's mostly about composing the work. It's this sound that guides me to press harder on the brush and lift off, or let go or stop there and then continue there. It's a guidance.

I never think about actual things when I'm painting. I'm not thinking, "I'm going to put a person here, a tree here and a bird there." The beginning stage is always the sound. From that, slowly, stories come about based on what I'm reading or thinking at the time, but if I didn't have that sound I don't know what I would do.

MCDERMOTT: You said a lot of your inspirations are what you're reading or what's happening at the moment, but what are some things you find yourself always referring to?

BANISADR: It's always a combination of what I'm reading, current events, artwork that I've seen, films and music. As I work day after day, inspirations from different places go into the work. It's combination, but it's also comparative. I'll be reading two books at the same time that are totally different [and] then have two stories mix together.

MCDERMOTT: What's an example of that happening?

BANISADR: I was reading Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and at the same time I was reading this book that's coming out—my work is on the cover—called *The Last Illusion*, by Porochista Khakpour. It's this story like Iran's *The Odyssey*, [but] put in the modern day, pre-9/11. It's surreal. I was reading that, Kandinsky, and re-watching my Kurosawa films. The painting downstairs is titled *Ran*, which is a Kurosawa film, but this [*looking at Contact*] is called *Contact* because of the tension between two characters.

MCDERMOTT: Were you feeling a tension in your life when you painted *Contact*?

BANISADR: I was trying to protect this person who is a metaphor for myself. I felt there was a danger coming and danger did come... I moved into a new place and a light fixture fell and cut my hand. [*shows scar*] I got five stitches and couldn't paint for 10 days.

[*moves to another painting*]

This one is called *Aleph*, which, talking about books, was inspired by Borges.



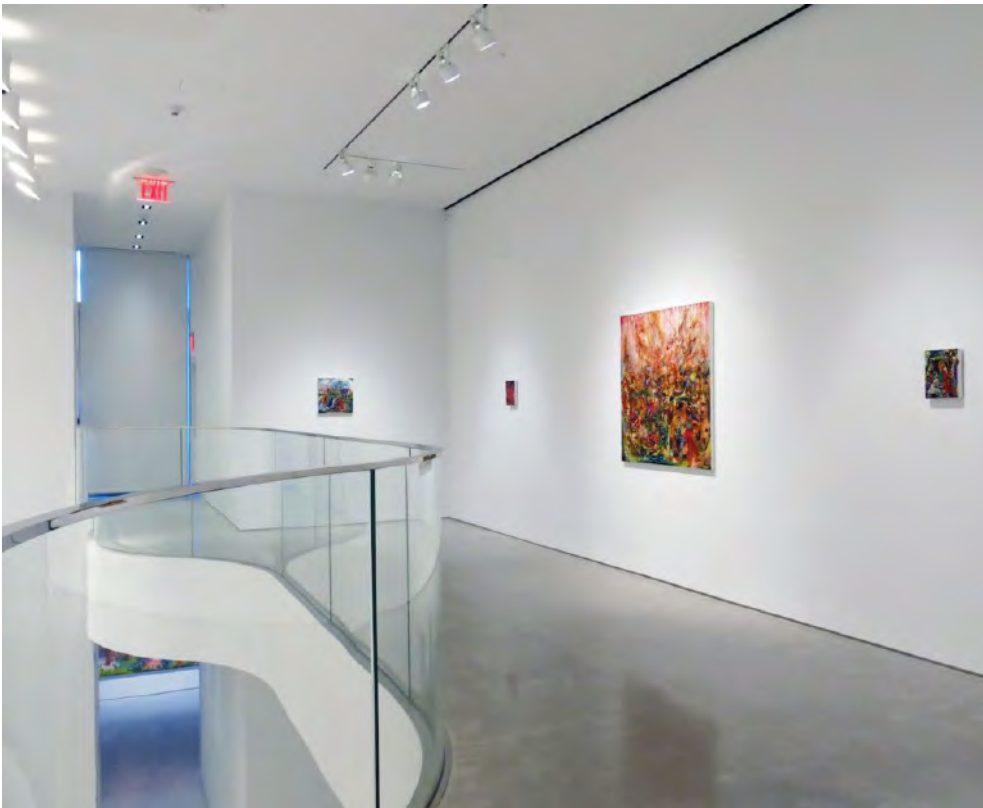
Installation view, Ali Banisadr: Motherboard, Sperone Westwater, New York, March 1 - April 19, 2014.

MCDERMOTT: I just read that last week.

BANISADR: It's fascinating to me, that room where every point in the universe meets and you see everything from every angle. That's a metaphor for the way my paintings are made. I want the viewer to see everything from every angle. It's cubism; it's Persian Miniature paintings. Persian Miniature paintings are cubist—everything is flipped up. I love the [Borges] story, but at the same time I use the title to describe my paintings, they way they're painted, and what they're trying to show. I don't have a focal point in the work. Every part of the painting is important. There's no hierarchy.

MCDERMOTT: An interesting part of the story I thought about was whether or not everyone has the same vision when they see everything in the universe converge. What do you think?

BANISADR: I think everybody brings in his or her own fears, anxieties, and background. As a painter, that's interesting to hear what other people see in the work, what it means and where it takes them. I think [my art] is a visual, universal language. Of course, when Iranians or Middle Easterners see it, they automatically see their history, but then there's everything else. When I was taking art history I was always angry that we would skip certain chapters because "it wasn't important." Like, "Let's skip over the Japanese. Let's just get to Giotto, because that's where everything begins." It's like, no. Everything is relevant to me.



Installation view, Ali Banisadr: *Motherboard*, Sperone Westwater, New York, March 1 - April 19, 2014.

MCDERMOTT: How long does it take you to usually make a painting?

BANISADR: For something like *Contact*, it could take about a month and a half, but it all depends. The smaller ones could take just as long, because sometimes they're actually harder. I work until they are finished, one at a time. I could never go from this to that at the same time. They're different worlds, different conversations. It takes so long to connect to the work. It might take three or four hours of sitting and looking, then slowly things start to come about.

MCDERMOTT: That makes sense. There are so many layers.

BANISADR: There are a lot of layers, and adding and subtracting as well. At the end, some parts could be just white canvas and some parts could be super thick. It's like creating holes or worlds within worlds.

MCDERMOTT: Some of it even looks three-dimensional. How would describe your work to someone who had never seen it?

BANISADR: It's good to give people a reference. I always say kind of like a Brueghel-Bosch world because it has that bird's-eye view, but the paint handling is more abstract, like De Kooning. It's landscape, but not really. I like when there's a fight between deep space and flat space.

MCDERMOTT: How would you describe your philosophy toward art?

BANISADR: For me, my work makes people understand things in a visual way that I could never understand in a literal way—like the way you deal with and break down problems, and don't come up with answers, but [find] a pathway that becomes clearer. If I have certain philosophical questions, dealing with them in a visual way is how it gets solved. A chemist could handle it in their lab; I handle it on the surface of the canvas.

MCDERMOTT: What's one of those questions you've dealt with in your works?

BANISADR: I'm fascinated by how systems function, be it religious, corporate, or political. When I deal with it visually, breaking down systems makes me at ease. That's why the work is always from a bird's-eye point of view. You're looking at worlds within worlds, but as a whole it's a system functioning. To me, not getting caught up in a political situation—Republican, Democrat, whatever—is having that bird's-eye view. I like to zoom out of the situation so I can see it all and don't get caught up in the little things down there.

MCDERMOTT: That's so hard to do, to remove yourself from situations.

BANISADR: It is, and so many people are down there in this maze talking about things that in the big picture don't matter. You could argue about something for forever, but all that argument comes down to is what channel news you watch and what channel news I watch.



Installation view, Ali Banisadr: Motherboard, Sperone Westwater, New York, March 1 - April 19, 2014.

I constantly think about these issues. I sometimes say the conflict in the work is the conflict of my own thoughts and anxieties. It's a civil war in my head. The top part [of my artwork] is you letting go and floating. You become part of the air and you've tapped into the heartbeat of the universe. All of these problems go away. I guess that's what people do when they meditate.

MCDERMOTT: Do you do something that allows you to...

BANISADR: This is it. This is the meditation part. I go to my studio, and time disappears. Sometimes I forget where I went and how decisions were made. I could never say how I made something because I make a thousand decisions in eight or nine hours. You can't remember how it happened. It just does. It's a gut instinct.

MCDERMOTT: Have you ever had a moment where you've stepped away from your painting and come back and are like, "Wow. I didn't even realize I did that"?

BANISADR: All the time. It's an interesting painting process. *[laughs]* Sometimes I forget what I put in. If you try to remember someone or an experience, it always changes in your mind. They're never static. I want to capture things in that way, where you're looking into your memory, a dream or hallucination. The characters become a mixture of archetypes, [and] that's what I like. You're trying to figure it out and your brain wants to categorize things, but it can't because of this motion. You want to solve the problem, but it never gets solved. It's like when you read a really good book and the story never leaves you.

MCDERMOTT: Do you have one of those books?

BANISADR: I have plenty. I would say Orhan Pamuk is one of my favorite authors. He's really famous for his work *Snow*, but I like *My Name is Red*. There are many things that happen in the story, but the way it's written is like every character is speaking to the reader. You're the judge of what's happening in the story... it's a puzzle. Everything is fragmented and you're supposed to put it together.

MCDERMOTT: You can see that reflected in your work.

BANISADR: Exactly. When I was reading it I was like, "That's it!" He's Turkish, and he used to be a painter himself. But of course I love Borges and Umberto Eco. There's a lot. *[laughs]*  
*[moves to other paintings]*

MCDERMOTT: Should we talk about "Motherboard"?

BANISADR: A motherboard is this chip with different compartments that work together in order for the whole thing to function. In my work it's the same thing—every little dot and line has to function for the whole work to activate. Another reason [for "Motherboard"] was the fact that it holds memory. I don't use references in my work. It's very visceral and organic, coming from memory.

“Motherboard,” for me, has four different levels: the bottom part is the water, vegetation, and growth. The second part is the world with figures and animals; there’s chaos and civilization. The third part is the digital zone—these red things [*points to painting*] are turning into really loud digital sounds. [*makes sound*] Remember AOL, back in the day, when you would log in? Then the fourth level is like ether and things turning into air. This idea of how we’re becoming partly digitalized is really interesting to me.

MCDERMOTT: What do you think of technology and the way it’s progressed?

BANISADR: I think it’s scary. *1984* is another favorite—all of those things are happening. Your phone has become part of your hand and if you don’t have it, you don’t know what to do. What’s going to happen later? A new generation of kids, if they didn’t have their electronics, what would they do? This is not something that’s happening everywhere in the world. I was observing in Paris. Nobody’s on their phone. Everybody’s sitting the café with their actual newspaper, little espresso and cigarette. But here, and in China and Japan, it’s insane.

MCDERMOTT: Have you seen technology change your work?

BANISADR: I think in a way it has influenced my work. Think about the way you go surfing on the Internet—you go from one thing to another. You can’t really concentrate. I can’t sit and read 10 pages on my computer. You’ll read and then all of a sudden part of your brain is like, “What about that? And oh, Facebook.” Things keep going from one to another. Borges talked about the Library of Babel, which is the Internet, really, except you’re not reading the whole book. You’re reading fragments. Even though I think it’s bad, I think it’s interesting too, because that’s the way my brain works.



Installation view, Ali Banisadr: *Motherboard*, Sperone Westwater, New York, March 1 - April 19, 2014.

MCDERMOTT: And how do you feel about the Internet and images representing your work?

BANISADR: It doesn't do it justice. People quickly look through things and don't sit and experience. That's a problem with artwork, [because] it's more of an experience than something to quickly look at. It takes a while for everything to unveil itself. It's a very slow process, and the way I work is a very slow process. The way a person views it should also be a very slow process. So, it's about making you look more—not just [at] the paintings, but at life in general.



# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Painter Ali Banisadr's Sound Inspiration

Inspired by sounds — from Miles Davis to modem dial-ups — the artist takes his dynamic large-scale canvases to Manhattan's Sperone Westwater this month for his first solo show with the gallery

MEGHAN DAILEY  
MARCH 6, 2014



STROKES OF GENIUS | Banisadr in his Long Island City, Queens, studio in front of *Fravashi* (2013). FERNANDO SANCHO

When the Iran-Iraq war broke out in 1980, 4-year-old Ali Banisadr and his family were living in Tehran. As his mother tells it, the artistically inclined Banisadr began drawing nonstop as a way to make sense of the air-raid sirens and crashes of explosions. "The drawings were similar to my paintings," he says, "full of monsters and characters."

One need only look at his roiling, sensuous abstractions—on view through April 19 at New York's Sperone Westwater gallery—to believe that he feels auditory sensations no less intensely today. "There's always a sound I hear with the movements of the colors," says Banisadr, now 37 and living in New York. "Kandinsky had synesthesia. I think I may have a little, too." Whatever he may be thinking about—or listening to—might end up in a painting: Miles Davis or Daft Punk shuffling on the iPod; AOL dial-up static; the Velázquez portraits he saw at the Prado Museum in Madrid as a kid; or memories of bomb blasts in Tehran.

It's an approach that has served him well. In 2008, he had his first of two solo shows at Leslie Tonkonow gallery in Manhattan and, later, shows at Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris. In 2012, a painting of his landed the cover of *Flash Art*, and that same year he was included in a small exhibition of Persian painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which acquired a piece for its collection. (The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles also features his work in its permanent collection.) He then made the jump to Sperone Westwater, becoming one of the youngest artists on a roster that includes Bruce Nauman, Julian Schnabel and Tom Sachs.

One noise that Banisadr is able to tune out is that of the 7 subway train as it passes on elevated tracks outside his studio building in Long Island City, Queens. One afternoon in late winter, he talks about three large-scale paintings and several smaller compositions arrayed in his orderly workspace. Dressed casually in a plaid button-down shirt, dark trousers and white Burberry sneakers, he is also sporting a bandage on his right hand—his painting hand. "I just moved into a new house in Brooklyn, and I was unpacking and exhausted and cut myself on a light fixture," he says. The injury seems especially unfortunate for an artist, but Banisadr is calm. He can still paint, he says, pointing to an 8-by-15-foot triptych—one of his biggest works to date—that's included in the Sperone Westwater show. "I'll know it's done when it's not asking me for anything else," he says.

According to gallerist Angela Westwater, what the show's paintings might ask of the viewer is to spend some time looking at them: "Especially in the larger canvases, the details that from a distance seem very distinct and often figurative begin to dissolve into abstraction the closer you get," she says. Depth and flatness shift perpetually. Advancing figures are suddenly absorbed into the background, while what appear to be fluttering birds' wings might suddenly look like snapping jaws. It's as if a Hieronymous Bosch landscape were caught in a sudden, violent windstorm.

After the war in Iran ended, in 1988, the artist's family made their way to San Diego, where 12-year-old Banisadr experienced culture shock. "In Iran the most popular kid was the smartest, but in Southern California, the smart ones were nerds," he says. He adapted by becoming one of the cool kids, an attitude he maintained when the family relocated north to the Bay Area a few years later. Banisadr eventually got involved in San Francisco's flourishing graffiti-art scene. "It was the golden age of graffiti," he says. "I didn't have a tag. I was doing characters and faces," he says, adding that he was a big fan of Barry McGee, whose work appears both on the street and in galleries. At the same time, he was taking psychology courses at a community college and drawing and painting at home. "I decided to go to art school when I reached a point where I wanted more on the canvas but I didn't have the skills to take it further," he says. "It wasn't matching up with what I was seeing in my head." In 2000, Banisadr moved to New York and attended the School of Visual Arts, earning a BFA there and an MFA at the New York Academy of Art. "And that's when I decided to make work based on sounds again, like when I was a kid."

"Listen to the work, accept the fact that it wants to go a certain direction, and you can sort of dance together," he says. "Once I learned the way to paint, it helped me learn how to deal with life, too."

# Flash Art

## Ali Banisadr

NICOLA TREZZI

JULY/ AUGUST/ SEPTEMBER 2012



*The Myth Makers* (2012) Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac Paris/Salzburg.  
Photography by Jeffrey Sturges.

Ali Banisadr wakes up pretty early, goes for a run in Central Park, comes home, answers e-mails, reads the newspaper, catches up on research, writes down his ideas then goes to the studio. When he is in the studio he enters a new dimension that is based on the dialogue between him and the painting. He tries to really listen to what the painting is asking for. Once the relationship begins, time disappears. And if this occurs, it means he had a successful day in the studio.

Ali Banisadr likes poetry. This is not a coincidence. Beside the obvious connection between his work's musical and lyrical tone, there is a deeper subtext regarding the artist's attempt to question language. Among all written forms, poetry probably has the strongest potential to surpass its intended function. The artist does the same with the language of painting, of which he has great mastery. Once the initial observation of the painting is surpassed, a new kind of comprehension comes in, clarifying — paradoxically — how what we are looking at is an example of something that tried to convey a meaning and at the same time tried to refuse it. "It happened and it never did" — exactly like the title of one of his shows.

Ali Banisadr paints a combination of his own memories and Persian mythology. For example: Marco Polo's discredited story of the Hashshashin, a militaristic sect whose members were drugged and made to believe that the gardens behind their mountaintop fortress were actually heaven, where obedience might be rewarded by short visits, replete with feasting and vestal virgins. Influenced by Persian miniatures — small, intricately rendered illustrations similar to illuminated manuscripts — Banisadr's canvas unfurls like an ancient map, a spatially skewed terrain of detailed activity. Throughout, angular shapes suggesting topsy-turvy architecture provoke a disorienting sense of wonder. Out-of-scale figures are formed from indulgent dabs, and exotic fauna and pools evolve from luscious smears and layered washes. Rendered in the gold and blue associated with European religious painting, Banisadr bathes his scene of earthly pleasures in a divine glow, ignited by bombardments in the distance.

Ali Banisadr has always had this urge to combine everything together, to be able to concentrate everything in one place and have it somehow make sense. This is something that has been present since he was a little kid. He often feels overwhelmed by all the things that are going on in his head, and the work becomes his way of putting them on a surface and trying to understand them. That being said, the way he works has now reached a stage where it begins to communicate more comprehensively. In 2006 he began to make charcoal drawings based on the sounds of explosions, thus bringing auditory elements into the work and letting his subconscious take over. After this, he started to compose his paintings in an auditory way, which felt very organic and visceral.



*The Visitors* (2011). Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac Paris/Salzburg. Photography by Jeffrey Sturges.

Ali Banisadr often goes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where, coincidentally, his work is on view among his favorite artists. He calls the Museum his second home. There, he is able to dig into art history and find different things based on what he needs at the time, from Persian to Mughal miniature paintings, from Egyptian sculptures to Japanese prints, from European Renaissance paintings to cinema, from the visual experience of Claude Monet to the

obsessive brushstroke of Vincent van Gogh. However, the artists who have influenced him the most are Willem de Kooning, Diego Velázquez, Gerhard Richter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Hieronymus Bosch and Tintoretto.

Ali Banisadr conceives most of his works with the lack of a center. Scattered, diffuse, dispersed, the characters animating his large-scale paintings are continuously undermining the necessity of a focus. For him, seeing and non-seeing are connected both to motion and to the imaginings of the mind. In his imagination, things are always in a state of flux, and so the resulting images are based on fragments from different places, which are combined until they become encyclopedic hybrids. Unlike many of his contemporaries who conform to traditional Western painting conventions, Banisadr refutes the idea that a painting needs a central focus. He wants the entire painting to be the focus; every part should matter. He also wants to capture non-static elements like sound, to turn what he hears emanating from his landscapes into something visual. Often these elements emerge as ghost-like figures. Banisadr draws inspiration from the meticulous paintings of northern European artists. Although these western sources are important, equally significant for him are Persian miniatures of the 15th and 16th centuries — especially in terms of how he builds up the ground of his painting and deals with space. He has an acute awareness of the role of the invisible.

Ali Banisadr agrees that photographing his work is very challenging. When you look at it in reproduction you may think that it is an abstract painting, but once it is viewed in person you realize that there is a whole world in there that needs time to unveil itself. He has had many studio visits where people who did not know his work had a completely different idea of what the work was like until they saw it in person.

Ali Banisadr can be compared to Hieronymus Bosch. His portentous scenes are spellbinding in their finite description. From a distance, the intensely busy surfaces appear to be rendered in microcosmic detail, yet when viewed close up, recognition dissolves into a frenzy of sensitive and compacted brushwork. Banisadr handles paint with a sentient physicality; his extravagant textures and vibrant tones visually translate the experience of taste, smell and especially sonic fields of cacophonous rhythm. He thinks the comparison with Bosch is more about what Bosch was dealing with in his time. In other words, you can see the universal value in Bosch's work, and you can still find the work's message relevant today. Banisadr wants his work to function in a similar way.

Ali Banisadr keeps in his studio a Persian copy of *The Adventures of Tin Tin*, of which he has been a voracious reader since his childhood. He read the stories in Persian over and over again, and he could not get enough of the adventures that took Tin Tin to different parts of the world. He realized at a young age that, like Tin Tin, he too wanted to travel and see the world. He wanted to be always be searching for something, trying to solve a conspiracy. Tin Tin is still his hero, and traveling — whether it is physical travel or mental travel in the studio — is a very important part of his practice.

Ali Banisadr sees the narrative in his work as something developed out of painting. When he starts a dialogue with the painting, the figures begin to create a story of their own — they begin to speak to each other. His figures are archetypes; each represents many different things: a combination of personal history, art history and the history of our century. Banisadr likes when one thing can represent many things at once. Also, the narrative requires that the viewer participate in completing the story. The painting establishes a fifty/fifty relationship, asking viewers to use

their own imagination to make sense of it, not unlike a Rorschach test. The artist is interested in seeing what the viewer sees in his paintings, regardless of whether the personal interpretation is close to the artist's real intention.



*Selection* (2011). Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac Paris/Salzburg. Photography by Jeffrey Sturges.

Ali Banisadr comes originally from Tehran, but moved to America when he was a child; his works are influenced by his experiences as a refugee from the Iran-Iraq war, and his approach to abstraction evokes displacement, memory, nostalgia and violence. His fantastical landscapes, rich in aromatic colors, convey a fairytale orientalism that is both majestic and medieval. The use of color comes in a very intuitive way, driven by the mood of the day and the organic preponderance of one color over another. While working on a painting where blue is predominant, he might imagine the next one to be black, and so on. Amid his lush surfaces, splendor gives way to embellished anarchy and carnage as onslaughts of painterly gestures replicate the chaos of an attack. The fractured background, reminiscent of stained glass, is inspired by his recollection of the sound of shattering windows during bombings. This synesthetic connection between auditory memory and visualization is consistent throughout his work.

Ali Banisadr compares his work to a carnival parade. A lot of his work deals with costumes, masks, hiding behind your identity. In fact, many people told him to go and see the carnival in Venice. Growing up in Iran — during the Islamic revolution and the eight-year war — and then moving to the US, to the opposite side, gave him the ability to think about East and West and to maintain a kind of civil war in his head. To see both sides, which is reflected in his work by the oscillations between abstraction and figuration, detail and background, has become instrumental for his practice. Banisadr has nurtured an exceptional state of mind that can be described as the possibility of seeing both sides of a coin at the same time. The figures in his paintings can be seen as gatekeepers of systems: cultures, eras and religions.

Ali Banisadr pushes the boundaries of what we understand as painting. His work is not merely poetic; it is, indeed, pure poetry. Banisadr invites viewers into a universe that is as quiet as it is chaotic. His paintings, often rendered with oil paint applied to linen canvas, are lyrical to a degree that sometimes you forget the hints of figuration he injects into the composition; you want to simply follow the rhythm and free your spirit from any kind of constraint set by the rules of representation. In his explosive, exuberant canvases it is hard to pinpoint the exact nature of the action, but there is a lot of it, all compellingly allusive. His titles always suggest political machinations that merge fact and fiction. With their amassing of so many small marks and strokes in a palette variously fiery or verdant, his paintings are riotous and chaotic, creating scenes of what could be either paradise or a battlefield.

# ARTNEWS

## Ali Banisadr

CHRISTOPHER FRENCH  
SEPTEMBER 2011

### Ali Banisadr

#### Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Ali Banisadr's paintings sometimes coalesce into dense figurative groupings; other times they explode in whirligig patterns. What is most compelling about them is not the intricacy of their detailing so much as the way they generate a palpable sense of atmosphere.

This exhibition, "It Happened and It Never Did," takes its name from Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, and literary references abound in the titles of works. The names may provide intellectual points of entry, but the works themselves excite through their evocations of grandly symbolic vistas and epic melodramas, at once calling to mind Hieronymus Bosch and filmmaker Akira Kurosawa.

Green was this show's prevailing hue, skewing toward unnatural tones and away from the pastoral. *Telluric Current* (2010), which was perhaps the most all-over composition in this exhibition, is a misty gray-green jungle punctuated by what appear to be sentinels carved out of slashes of ochre, blue, or red. When Banisadr opts for dramatic color contrasts, as in the acrid red sky of *The Marvels of the East* (2011), it is to mark a counterpoint to the black-gray splotches that dominate an indeterminate horizon. The diptych *It Happened and It Never Did* (2011) is animated not by the cast of apparitions in the foreground, but by slashing whitish vertical strokes intimating an approaching deluge.



Ali Banisadr, *It Happened and It Never Did* (detail), 2011, oil on linen, 72" x 108" overall. Leslie Tonkonow.

Banisadr is as skilled at removing paint as he is at applying it—combining scraping, stippling, calligraphy, and sfumato to create hyperactive surfaces. Many of his painterly gestures seem derived from cartooning, which enables him to telegraph movement. This tension between depiction, implied motion, and atmospheric abstraction transforms traditional landscape, with its receding foreground, distant horizon line, and upper-level atmosphere, into an ambiguous terrain equally suggestive of a battle royal or the controlled chaos of a beehive.

—Christopher French



# Art in America

## Ali Banisadr

AMANDA CHURCH

JUNE 28, 2011



Ali Banisadr, *The Marvels of the East*, 2011, oil on linen, 72 by 96 inches. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow.

In Iranian artist Ali Banisadr's show of explosive, exuberant canvases it's hard to pinpoint the exact nature of the action, but there's a lot of it, and it's compellingly allusive. The exhibition's title, "It Happened and It Never Did," suggests a sort of political machination that merges fact and fiction. With their amassing of so many small marks and strokes in a palette variously fiery or verdant, his paintings are riotous and chaotic, creating scenes of what could be either paradise or a battlefield.

Banisadr's canvases embody a multicultural ethos: he was born in Tehran and lived there for 12 years during the Iran-Iraq War, against a backdrop of bombs and sounds of combat. Now based in New York, he also lived in Turkey and California as a child. Persian miniatures, graffiti, Bosch and Brueghel all come to mind as influences, as well as the painterly brushwork of de Kooning and Cecily Brown, both of whom similarly extract imagery from a mess of paint. Banisadr seems to have processed all this information to produce paintings that embody a mysterious sense of order within their tumult.

In this, the artist's second New York show, the five biggest canvases were more effective than the smaller ones, which lined the gallery's entrance hallway and seemed to give us only parts of a vast picture. The flurry of small brushstrokes that coalesce into imagery is much more dramatic on a larger scale. The larger size also enables areas of grotto-like deep space-replete with shimmering pools of water and minute depictions of figures and objects—to weave a tale that has the evocative power of poetry.

Movement is key. Using writhing calligraphic marks and squiggles, blobs and veils of paint, Banisadr is devising landscapes that are also mindscapes—trippy, visceral and cerebral—with intimations of war and turmoil but also of pure pleasure. Predominantly bluish-green, the paintings are each separated into “land” and “sky,” often with flecks and spatters of orange, green and yellow blurring the boundary between the two. Some have a gorgeous misty veil of silvery vertical strokes raining down from the top of the canvas, reinforcing the ambience of a verdant Shangri-La. *The Marvels of the East* (2011) stands out simply for its hot-pink sky across which flecks of black suggest either confetti or barbed wire. The cobalt blue sky of *Nowhere* (2010) is punctuated by what look like lingering spirals of battle smoke, and its ground appears strewn with debris. *Interrogation* (2010) has a similar ashy gray atmosphere of pessimism and despair. These paintings demonstrate the dichotomy in Banisadr's work: that of a joyful celebration juxtaposed against a war-torn world.

# The New York Times

## Art in Review: Ali Banisadr

KAREN ROSENBERG  
NOVEMBER 7, 2008

The 32-year-old painter Ali Banisadr, who was born in Tehran and lived there until he was 12, has distinct memories of the bombings from the Iran-Iraq war. (In a catalog interview he describes "the vibrations and the shattering glass.") These shock waves course through Mr. Banisadr's quasi-abstract paintings, which combine Abstract Expressionist gestures and figures from Persian miniatures.

The legend of Alamut, a verdant fortress in medieval Persia, inspires lush landscapes like "The Hashashins." (The Hashashin warrior sect was said to have wooed drugged recruits into Alamut's beautiful gardens, convincing them that they had entered Paradise.)

The link between violence and pleasure is made more explicit in several carnivalesque paintings that nod to Bosch and Brueghel. In "Fool's Errand" a clown stands between men in pointed hoods and turbaned warriors. Above, green-and-white-striped tents dot a fiery desert landscape.

In some of his larger paintings Mr. Banisadr experiments with less gestural forms of abstraction. A spectrum runs along the top edge of "Prisoners of the Sun (TV)," and a blue-on-blue checkerboard forms the background of "Land of Black Gold." These Jasper Johns-like devices don't really suit Mr. Banisadr's style or subject, but otherwise this is a riotous and inspired debut.