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Ali Banisadr's studio in Long Island City.

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# ALI BANISADR IN CONVERSATION WITH POROCHISTA KHAKPOUR

BY KATY DONOGHUE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY



It's rare that a writer connects so strongly with the person doing the cover art for their new book. But the painter Ali Banisadr and the writer Porochista Khakpour have quite a bit in common. They were both born in Tehran (within two years of each other) and moved to the United States at an early age, landing in New York by way of California. They both describe their work as maximalism. Banisadr's sweeping paintings are full of energy, color, brushstrokes, and visual noise; Khakpour's punchy, vivid, wildly imaginative, and frenetic sentences beg to be read aloud.

Not all this was known to Khakpour when she first saw Banisadr's paintings, its chaotic, kinetic composition resonating with her. She reached out to him and over a series of e-mails, a friendship was formed. Banisadr eventually made the cover art for Khakpour's second novel *The Last Illusion* (to be published this summer by Bloomsbury; her first was *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*). *Whitewall* had the chance earlier this year to speak with both in Banisadr's studio a few weeks before the opening of his solo show at Sperone Westwater, "Motherboard" (March 1–April 19, 2014).

**WHITEWALL:** *I wanted to start with the idea of maximalism, which I think we see in both your work.*

**POROCHISTA KHAKPOUR:** Maximalism, right. I think we have that in common, a maximalist.

**ALI BANISADR:** I like that word. It's a reaction against minimalism. Minimalism scares me—I don't like it. I want to have things I've collected.

**PK:** I also get anxiety with minimalistic writing a lot of the times, too. The idea of a perfect polish; it's overly handled. One of the things I thought I would do was create a rough texture to the ending [of *The Last Illusion*], make it sort of raw. I had to fight against the impulse to overly prune it. Everyone wants endings to be final.

**AB:** It's like the endings of Iranian films, when people watch it they're normally like "What?!" at the ends. They're always so pissed off.

**PK:** People want happy endings, but why? Everybody's ending is sad at the end of the day.

**WW:** *When you're writing, what kind of environment do you prefer for that maximalist method?*

**PK:** It's funny because when I write it has to be completely silent, even sometimes I'll have white noise machines or earplugs. I operate on multiple brains, I'm an extreme case of that—I'm always multitasking. For me sound can be tricky because my language is within sound and I'm really sensitive to the sounds of words. Sometimes there's a lot of alliteration or consonants in the language that only poets think about, but for me it is incredibly important. I have to say things out loud, and I'll do a draft and say it out loud. I don't mind the visuals of the space, but for me I have to control the sounds a bit.

**WW:** *And sound plays a role in your work, doesn't it, Ali?*

**AB:** It's inner sound; it's not a sound I respond to like music or anything. It's more like composing the work requires a certain kind of sound for it to come together. I never think about names of things like "tree" or "figure." It's always that I hear this sound and then I follow it to have the work have this flow.

**PK:** I'm just so fascinated by that. Can you describe that?

**AB:** There are many different sounds within the painting that even when I look at it now, I know what those sounds are because I followed it to make that gesture. This [*gestures at a part of the painting*] had a certain sound for the whole thing to come here and make this turn so you never leave the painting. There are ways and tricks to make the eyes not want to leave the work. All these parts are based on sounds. It's sounds you hear in opera.

**WW:** *Is that something that painting brings about, or are these sounds you've always heard?*

**AB:** Painting brings it out.

**WW:** *When did you first connect sound and painting?*

**AB:** I think this goes back to my childhood when I was in Iran. My mom says that when the bombing and stuff was happening I would make drawings based on the sounds and vibrations, to make sense out of what was happening.

Then when I was in graduate school, I thought about it and decided to make charcoal drawings based on the sounds of explosions and, when I did that, it was like, wow, and it all started to make sense. It wasn't so rigid; it was like the composition wasn't planned—it just came out by itself. Then the narrative developed out of that. So when I started painting it was the same. The composition comes together and little by little they break down to their own narratives and stories. At the end you have to surrender to some of the things that it wants and then you kind of direct toward the direction you want it to go as well. But never forcing it to go somewhere it doesn't want to go. That's when it falls apart so you just have to dance with it.

**WW:** *Is that something you connected to, when you first saw his work?*

**PK:** When I saw his work I related to it in a way I've never related to a work before. It's sort of specific. It relates back to a series of dreams I had when I was four years old—one main, reoccurring dream that came out of that. Ali was in Iran longer than me and my family. We left when I was three or four, but my first memories are of those airwaves and sounds and bomb shelters. I vividly remember these sirens. I have such a fear of anything in the air, but I never thought when I looked at his work closely that this could be from that. Because these dreams are called chaos dreams, they looked like these paintings and were basically all the stimuli from this earth, from organic to manmade—sounds within them, all the narratives on earth, everything happening at once. So in my dream I almost saw a canvas with Ali's aesthetic.

When I first e-mailed him a fan letter, it was actually emotional for me because, really, I couldn't believe there was somebody who made those dreams real in that way. And then we talked about it and further connected me to a writer we both loved: Borges. There's this magical story by Borges, "The Aleph"—it's about a device that this artist has in his attic that has all the points on earth at any given time. It's a gorgeous thing. I read it to my students all the time. There's an incredible paragraph that represents all the objects on earth at any time. It says *rape, steal, wool, skin, hair*; it's all representational and personal in some moments, not personal in other moments. That paragraph feels like Ali's work. It's all there and those dreams weren't apocalyptic. It was more like the world exploding.

**AB:** Yeah, it's not about war. It's never about, "Oh, this is that war." It's the feeling of it, the sensation you experience, and I think that's why people get it wrong. Going back to Borges, I think that room for me is also Cubism, because you're looking at it from every angle simultaneously, and also Persian miniatures, where Cubism came from, I think. When I title things, I like the title to satisfy me in many different ways. Like it covers all these things I'm trying to say or think about, but doesn't necessarily have to be didactic. If you see it and get it, you get it, but if you don't, it could just be a title.

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Banisadr talks with Khakpour.

**WW:** Does it take you a while to come up with a title?

**AB:** Yes.

**PK:** Do you come up with a title in the middle of the process or the beginning or end or does it vary?

**AB:** It varies. Sometime it could be like right at the beginning. I know it's going to be that and sometimes I won't know till the end. Once the work is finished and titled and done, I let it go.

**WW:** What about the titles of your novels?

**PK:** I mean, my first short novel had a title I was never comfortable with. I'm bad at titles so I really admire Ali's skills with titles because it takes me a very long time and in the end that title was not exactly what I wanted for that book. My second book, *The Last Illusion*, was also the third or fourth title we came up with, but it was really mine. I wanted a certain simpleness in a book that's sort of complicated.

**WW:** *Porochista*, you've said that when you write it's big and fast and all at once—you don't believe in writing every single day.

**PK:** I am not routine. I don't do well with nine-to-five hours, I've always failed with that. Writing every day for me is oppressive. I do something literary every day, I certainly like to read every day, and sometimes I write every day, but I don't put those sorts of constraints on myself because living is also part of my work.

I like the exuberance and mess of the first draft. It's a raw and passionate kind of thing and so it goes pretty fast for me. I try to get to the end as quickly as I can. With both of these books, the first draft took under a year, but then the editing took years and years and years. It's so hard to edit because the work is so rough. I don't drink caffeine when I do a first draft, because I like to be a little bit foggy, in a dream, but for editing I need to be highly caffeinated.

**AB:** It's two sides! The artist and the editor.

For me, I'm the opposite of you—I have to be here every day. If I don't come in and work, I'll feel, like, useless. I have to do it. Six days a week, probably. But I like to travel, so that's when I take a lot of stuff in and bring it back. The process for me is the most important and satisfying thing. After I finish, I take a week off and go wander around.

**WW:** Where do you even start?

**AB:** It's always different. But it is always abstract to begin with. I never start with one figure and go somewhere else. No references, no drawings. There's a lot of adding and subtracting, and in the end you don't know what was what. It can completely disappear or get layered or sanded out.

**WW:** And for your writing, *Porochista*, do you have to have an outline?

**PK:** Not usually. I usually just dive into that first draft suicidally. I almost have to mentally tell myself life isn't worth living, who the fuck cares? It's really the same way I board airplanes. Life isn't worth it. So I usually have no idea initially, then chapters come in and I start to see what I'm doing or what I'm going to do. I need to be surprised by my work. I need to discover. The process is important. I need things to find their own way. The characters have to decide for me, then in the end I have to accept the fortune I didn't decide.

**AB:** But I think in your case it is interesting because you do have to see things like a director for a film would and collect certain characters and bring it back. Like something someone said.

**PK:** There are all sorts of little things, especially in the second novel; there are secret cameos by people. For me, the second novel is all animated. It's like *Spirited Away*. I saw it like a graphic novel but more like a Japanese graphic novel. I never saw the characters in flesh and blood. I've always been inspired by the violence and the beautiful parts of violence.

**AB:** Violence and beauty [laughs].

**PK:** Yeah, it almost sounds like a platitude. I think a lot of artists are drawn to it for whatever reason.

**AB:** They're total opposites.

**PK:** Yeah, the idea of portraying things that are supposed to be too ugly or too impossible to capture is interesting, too. One of the inspirations for this was Robert Penn Warren's *Audubon*. It's an amazing poetic sequence published in 1969 that went fairly unnoticed. It's been a cult hit for lovers of poetry. But in that work the whole thing is centered around that you have to kill the thing that you love; you have to freeze this animated thing. That's the central dilemma of all art maybe, to me. It's really interesting for your work because it's the first time I really, genuinely feel like I can look at a work of art and it doesn't feel like a still. I told him the first time I went to MoCA in L.A. was the first time I saw his work in person and it was breathtaking, and I felt like I was crawling through. I almost wanted to push people aside! I was just working my way through it. I feel that the motion is very real to me.

**WW:** How do you know when your work is done?

**PK:** I want to continue to edit for the rest of my life and I'm never done, really.

**AB:** I think after it's composed and composed and composed, then it quiets down.

**WW:** You stop hearing things?

**AB:** Yeah. You know it's the end; you feel it. And also another thing I do is turn it around for three weeks and don't look at it, then one day come back and turn it around and if everything is in place, then it is finished, for sure. It just quiets down. Everything falls into place and you know nothing more needs to be added.

**PK:** You don't have any regret about where you should've stopped?

**AB:** No, I mean there's work I think I would've done differently, but at the same time I would've needed to make that painting to know that.

**PK:** I like that. That's good for me to learn. I want always to rewrite. I did a reading once where it sounded like the craziest performance art because I started editing every sentence as I was reading it. I was sweating—people had no idea what I was talking about because it was totally changed. I was deep in my book tour exhausted and couldn't stand the book anymore. I never ever feel done, and I think that's a personality problem.

**WW:** Talking with you both, I've realized just how personal your work is to you. How do you feel about people's reactions to it once it's out in the world? Do you pay attention to that?

**AB:** When people tell me they like my work, I'm like, "Really? Are you being serious?" I find that so exciting, so miraculous each time. You create these things in your head and how amazing for someone to like it.

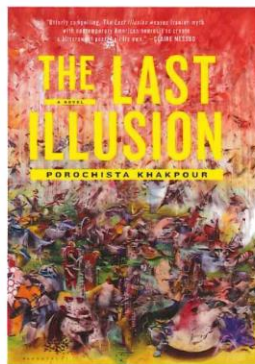
**PK:** It's a collaborative thing; you have an audience. You want your work to be seen. And I think we all want to connect—that's the thing.

**WW:** Because ultimately you are making something that someone will interact with, but that's not why you're doing it, right?

**PK:** It's a collaborative thing; you have an audience. You want your work to be seen. And I think we all want to connect—that's the thing.

**AB:** And you make it so other people can see your imagination and relate to it and give you feedback.

**PK:** Exactly, exactly.



Left: Porochista Khakpour's *The Last Illusion* (2014) with cover art by Ali Banisadr, published by Bloomsbury.

Opposite page: Installation view  
Ali Banisadr  
Motherboard  
Sperone Westwater, New York  
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