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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

By MEGHAN DAILEY



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."

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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 Hieronymus Bosch landscape were caught in a sudden, violent windstorm.

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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."