By Olivia Sanabria

It did not take Ali Banisadr (b. 1976 in Tehran, Iran) much time to make a smooth transition from being an art student to becoming a successful full time artist. Graduating in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art, he had his first solo gallery show the same year. Since then, he has continued to explore the medium of painting, perfecting it in order to create these fascinating pieces that could depict the end of the world, a new beginning or simply the trials and tribulations that affect our communities.

Based in the US since leaving Iran as a child, Ali Banisadr has developed an unusual, and challenging language to bring to life recollections from various backgrounds combined with his imagination. In this interview with the Asian Art Newspaper, he discusses how he creates his work and explains the milestones in his career so far.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER: Your most recent exhibition was exclusively devoted to drawings. Do they relate to your previous paintings?

ALI BANISADR: It is a completely different medium and I view it as a completely different world. For the drawings, I was inspired by film stills, and the final result actually resembles film stills, or film strips, featuring a repeated image that moves from left to right, from bottom to bottom. I used a monoprint technique, rolling the piece with watercolors, ink, and mixed media (colour pencils, etc.).

AAN: How does the medium of drawing fit within your work? These days, it is quite unusual to have a whole show based on drawings.

AB: I like painting in collage and monoprints a lot, and I am going to continue on page 6.

 ARTSCIENCE MUSEUM, SINGAPORE

The world’s first ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands, Singapore, opens its doors on 17 February. The museum aims to feature exhibitions that explore the influences and meetings of art and science, media and technology design and architecture. Within the museum are 21 gallery spaces installing 50,000 sq ft, which visitors will be able to explore through three main galleries: Creativity, Inspiration and Expressions. The museum will also host major travelling exhibitions curated by leading museums from around the world. A permanent exhibition, “ArtScience: A Journey Through Creativity,” showcases the latest ideas in technology, design and culture.

CHRYSTIE’S, NEW YORK

Christie’s has announced the appointment of Xiao Li as Asian Business Development Director. In this capacity, she will be responsible for developing new business in Asia and managing relations with Christie’s most important private collectors from Mainland China and Asia. Li will be based in New York and will travel regularly and extensively throughout Asia. She will also participate in all of Christie’s major sales in London, New York, Geneva, Paris and Hong Kong.

JAPANESE APPS: To make life a little easier when visiting Japan for non-Japanese speakers, there has recently been a flurry of publishing of apps (applications) for iPhone users. Tokyo Art Beat (TAB), which searches out galleries in your vicinity, lists reviews of the exhibitions and gives directions using Google maps. Tokyo Art Beat have also developed a museum coupon application, cleverly named Magnum, which, as you might expect, offers discount coupons to most of the best museums all over the city. Whilst Japan Galleries and Lost in Japan are seemingly innocuous applications that allow users to take photos of Japanese words which is then used to produce an English translation. This app even works for vertical text: just turn the phone to the right and the whole interface changes to a vertical one. There is also a China Gall gaps, for help reading Chinese characters.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

In January, the Metropolitan Museum of Art launched Connections, a new online interactive feature that highlights the perspectives and contributions of museum staff on works of art in the Metropolitan’s collection.

Connections is presented as weekly four-minute episodes through live interviews on the museum’s website. Episodes are comprised of audio narration and slide shows of the artworks discussed, as well as links to contextual background. Each Connections episode explores a broad theme through the subjective and personal viewpoint of a Museum staff member. Participants will include curators, conservators, scientists, librarians, educators, photographers, designers, editors, digital media producers, technologists, administrators, executive staff, and many other staff. From each online episode, visitors can link to additional information about the works of art: the time period in which they were made, the geographic origins of the works, and where works on view can be found in the museum’s galleries. Connections can be found at www.metmuseum.org/connections.

DETOIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

At the end of last year, the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) opened a new gallery devoted to the arts of the Ancient Middle East that showcases the ancient cultural heritage of present day Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Yemen and Armenia. The display of art from the collection includes some of the DIA’s oldest objects. More information on www.dia.org.
explore this medium more. However, whenever I think about venturing into something new it always turns out to be done in a very unconventional way. I tend to find my own way of doing things, a way that works for me.

AAN: When you left Iran on your way to the USA, you lived in Turkey for a few months. Did this have any impact on your work?

AB: My favourite author is the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk. Whenever I read his novels, I know the places he is talking about. Perhaps because I lived there for eight months, there is some connection, but I cannot define it.

AAN: Once you reached California, you became part of a graffiti artists' group. At the time, what made graffiti art so interesting to you?

AB: When I moved to San Francisco, it was the golden age of graffiti art and San Francisco just happened to be at the centre of it. I remember meeting many artists from around the world who came to San Francisco for three or four months. When I moved there, all my friends had become graffiti artists. We had our own little group of artists and spent time discussing ideas. This movement was fantastic, and the mayor of San Francisco even gave us a whole warehouse on whose walls we could paint. Every time we went there, we would meet friends visiting from Italy, Spain, from many places, and do collaborations with them. I really liked that concept. At the time, we were creating something completely different from traditional art.

AAN: Why did it end? Did you feel you had exhausted this medium and needed to move on?

AB: I was never a big fan of spray paint. It did not do what I wanted it to do, whereas oil, for example, does. While I was using spray paint on walls, I was also painting on canvas at home. The work was similar to what I am doing now, but very 'primitive'.

I always wanted to do this type of work – creating my own world – but for some reason, it just was not coming out. I felt that I had reached a dead-end. That is when I decided to go to art school and moved to New York. I knew what I wanted to do, all these things I could visualize in my head, but I needed to learn how to do them. I wanted to be in the position to put onto canvas anything that I had in my mind without wondering how to go about it technically.

AAN: Did your time at art school meet its purpose?

AB: Very much so. In my class, maybe 80 percent of the students did not even want to be there. They did not want to work – they were simply lazy. On the other hand, was hungry for knowledge because I wanted to learn so I actually took four or five extra classes. I think it is good to try certain things on your own, and then reach a point that leads you to the conclusion: 'now I need more,' as opposed to not trying anything on your own, going to art school, and then wanting to do those things in art school and rebelling against what they are teaching you, which a lot of students, in my experience, seemed to do. They wanted to do this and not do that and you kept wondering why they were even there.

AAN: Some artists say it is best to forget everything you learned at art school in order to start with a fresh mind and a new approach. What are your thoughts?

AB: In art history, the greatest artists were the ones who had the knowledge, but broke away as opposed to artists that did not have it and started from nothing. My favourite abstract painter is De Kooning, and when he was nineteen, he could draw like Raphael. Later, he broke away from it, but you can see that he had craftsmanship, you could see that he knew how to go about it. On the other hand, you can look at some abstract painters eager to do abstract painting, but it simply does not look any good. I always believed in learning it first, then forgetting about it, picking and choosing what you want from it, and then moving on, as opposed to rebelling against wanting to learn anything.

AAN: Regarding the time you spent in Iran where you grew up, is it still very vivid in your memory? How does it translate into your paintings?

AB: Yes, it is still vivid. Actually, what made me think about my time in Iran was my second year in art school. When I was getting my Masters, we went to Normandy and to the D-Day site. While I was there, I felt it all looked so familiar to me, and I could not help thinking that I had seen it before. I had all these flashbacks from the time I was in Iran, the Iran-Iraq war, and...
the bombings. I remembered that I had seen similar things throughout my whole childhood, and I had never wanted to think about it, never written anything or talked about it. When I came back from France, I decided I was going to make some charcoal drawings based on the sound of explosions that I used to hear at night. That was very satisfying, and I had the feeling they were just coming out. This work prompted me to ask questions, like 'why the war happened?' 'who was involved?' and 'who was behind it?'. These questions opened a whole flood gate for me to think about world politics in general and world history. Thinking about the experience in Iraq has had a huge impact on the work I do now.

AAN: Why did your family leave Iran?
AB: They wanted to leave in 1978, 30 years before we actually ended up leaving, and seeing Europe or America. Everything was in place in the embassy, and then the crisis with the American hostages at the embassy happened and all our documents were lost. So we waited another 10 years. Also, by 1988, Iran was not a very welcoming place for Iranians. I was sent to Iran to get my passport, but I left because I didn’t want to go back to Iran. At school, they call you by your last name, so it was a very uncomfortable situation for me. There were also various other reasons that persuaded my parents to leave.

AAN: There are many interpretations that can be made in your work, biblical and other meanings. Do you have a deep interest in religion?
AB: I don’t have much in the way of very interesting in comparative religions. I am fascinated by religion and I like to know about all theologies. I see it as literature. The Bible to me is as interesting as the Odyssey, and I read them on the same level.

AAN: Although a lot can be read into your work, there is also a great deal of uncertainty. How do you look at the setting in your paintings?
AB: I think the paintings create its own narrative. I begin the piece and then followed by a lot of addition and subtracting in order to make it work. I think I am constantly referring to archetypes that I have created in my head, to things that I have taken in. They have created characters in my head, creating certain characters that to me can mean five different types of things that I have. It is not one thing, or one place. After a while, it becomes a dialogue between me and the painting, it goes back and forth, painting me towards something that should be there within the composition.

AAN: There is a lot of movement in your painting. Why such intense composition?
AB: Since I started using these charcoal drawings that I mentioned earlier, based on sound and explosions, everything is in motion. Everything is in a state of flux. I never tried anything to be static, because when it is static it becomes similar to a central point. I am not trying to create one central focus, ideally, I want the whole piece to be a central focus. I want to show a system as opposed to a focal point, or to having a hero. I want everything—the figures, the land, the sky—to have equal importance.

AAN: How do masterpieces from earlier decades or centuries fit into the composition of your present work?
AB: Going to museums and looking at paintings I admire is a huge part of my process, as I keep them in my visual memory. When I am painting, all these references that I have taken into my visual memory come together, and help me make certain decisions. More than anything else, it is really about intertwining certain aspects from those earlier masterpieces. I never directly take something from other painters. I just like to borrow it and allow to it to have its own influence, or mix it with other ideas.

AAN: Your paintings have been subject to very diverse interpretations. How do you feel about this?
AB: I always liked the fact that one thing could be many things, it could be this or that. I never liked when one thing just resembled itself. For example, considering one of my works, one person may find the subject matter serious. Another person may see it as a theatre or a set-up, even a joke. I did a work entitled ‘the man who had stained glass on his head’ which a fire in a church, and there are certain characters who could be taken for priests, or they just represent a sheer masquerade. I like that— not being able to make a clear decision which one it is, a serious religious experience or a carnival.

AAN: How do you go about titling your works?
AB: Sometimes it tells me the title when I am having the dialogue with the work. That is wonderful, and it always works. Often times, I go back to titles that I wrote earlier to see if any match. Also, it could be based on the literature I was reading at the time, and if that I was reading had any dialogue with my painting. It all depends.

AAN: Does one painting develop out of a previous one?
AB: I am always making a statement. Each painting I complete is a continuation of the last, but it does not necessarily mean that I am continuing what the last painting was about. The next painting could be something completely different. For my last show in Paris last year, there was a narrative that went through the whole exhibition.

AAN: From your perspective, how has your work evolved since you graduated from art school?
AB: When I was at undergraduate and graduate school, I was only studying. I just told myself, I’m not going to put any part of me in the work. I was not going to abed. I was just going to learn how things were done. It was not saying anything, it was just one learning technique. The second year at graduate school was when I did the charcoal drawings and that opened up a whole new horizon. It has been three years now, and I think it is becoming clearer to my head what I want to depict and where I want to go with it. Each time I create paintings, I learn a new trick and new ways of doing what I want to do. Hopefully, there has been progress.

AAN: Would you say that works by young Iranian contemporary artists are properly understood in the West, or would you say that we read too much into them?
AB: I was in the Saatchi show in London (Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East, 2009) and the show at Thaddeus Ropac in Paris, but after that, I did not want to do any shows that had anything to do with being in a show merely because I was Iranian. I was completely against that. I just wanted to part of the show because it fitted and because of my art. Like the Harem Saur Eason and Contemporary Art at the RNAI, no one would see me in Belgium (until February 2011) is perfect for me, and I see a few. I always stressed the fact that I was an artist who just happened to be Iranian. I think some of the Iranian artists are taking advantage of the recent boom. They cannot just have the opportunity. A friend of mine referred to that as self-orientation, which I find very avuncular. It is the same with Chinese artists, too. I prefer looking at an artist, liking their work and at the same time realizing that they happen to be Chinese or the other way around.

AAN: Where do you see our work going over the next few years?
AB: I am always open to trying out new media. There is a lot that I want to explore in my paintings. I want to go much further. There are many views that I have and would like to translate into my work. I would not do it if it was not meaningful for me. It would be like using a computer—I could connect to a printer and just print out any images. My paintings are on lines, which are a very specific moment. A: I was in museums, or galleries, and look at paintings, I read a lot in them close. Canvas is machine-made and it features this perfect pattern that I cannot stand. But I have done much better as texture. I have been working on linen for three years, after using canvas which I did not find very satisfactory. Wood is good for the etching technique, I like to use it as it can be so smooth.

AAN: I know that you like the work of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). Why is that so?
AB: I feel that a work that can never be unlocked. There have been so many things written about it, but you still do not know what it is and, to me, when something is not unlocked it is mysterious. I cannot take it away from the same thing. What you read stays with you for ever and you can keep thinking about it. With Bosch, I still think about every painting I have seen. There is still the question in my head. What could it be? What I guess his paintings are all about morality and they are timeless. It is a system that goes on and on and you could think what he was painting to our present time. Looking at paintings like Brueghel and Bosch, we see the big questions—unanswerable—and they will remain unanswered forever because I do not think we will ever have the intellectual level to understand them.

---

**Flying Cranes Antiques Ltd**

Antique Arts of Japan

1050 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10022

Galleries 55, 56 & 58 
Tel: 212-223-4600

Visit us at: www.flyingcranesantiques.com

Shop online at: www.trocadero.com/flyingcranes

**EHSITICS AT THE ARTS OF PACIFIC ASIA SHOW**

The Market Suites at 7W, 7 West 14th Street • March 24th – 27th.