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# Ali Banisadr

By Olivia Sand

Numerous young artists have embarked on a career in painting, a demanding and challenging medium. Ali Banisadr (b 1976, Iran and based in New York) is one of them, working continuously to develop his practice. Although his work remains recognisable, it has nevertheless taken a new direction over the past years, a major step when dealing with overall abstract work.

On a constant quest to find answers to questions from different angles, his paintings innovate, disclose and reveal. In the interview below, he discusses his approach with the Asian Art Newspaper.



Ali Banisadr. Photo: Olivia Sand

## ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

While living in California, besides painting, you were also involved in the graffiti scene. In regard to your work on canvas, what was missing in your practice that prompted you to go to art school?

ALI BANISADR: The reason was that on canvas I was trying to make the work that I do now, however, the work stopped at a certain point where I would feel this frustration. I wanted the work to do something, but I did not have the faculty to realise it. I then recognised it was time for me to get to the bottom of this problem and try to learn how to do things from inside out.

I always knew that I was going to work out of what was inside my head. In order to do that, I wanted to internalise, to understand structure, colour and all those elements in order to have the painting do what I wanted. Before art school, the painting would come out and look nice, but it was not what I wanted. Even today, I still want more out of the painting: I still want to learn how to do certain things, how to get closer to what I am seeing in my imagination. I believe this quest will continue until my last day ...

At school you want to get the fundamentals and to be able to build on that. Now, I have the foundation, but back then, that was precisely what I was missing before I decided to go to school.

AAN: At that time was your graffiti work drastically different from what

you were doing on canvas?

AB: I think it was. However, the work I was making then with graffiti might have some similarities to what I am doing now – in the sense that it did want to create a world where you were looking at it from a bird's eye perspective. By the bird's eye perspective I mean the 'all-overness' of it, worlds within worlds, figures everywhere, things like that. In that sense the graffiti is clearly similar to my paintings, although it was more 'primitive' and looked a little like Basquiat. It was very flat, it had the graffiti elements, but then it also had other elements I wanted to bring into it.

AAN: Graffiti is spontaneous, immediate, and does not leave room for any mistakes.

AB: Indeed, it is spontaneous, but I also think that good graffiti art – the only sort I was attracted to – always had this inner structure, this inner rhythm within it even if it was dealing with letters. The people that were doing that kind of work were very much aware of structure. Building those letters to bear this musical harmony is very hard to do.

AAN: We are witnessing a strange situation when it comes to graffiti art: there are some fantastic artists in this genre, but for some reason, graffiti art remains marginal and has not been properly integrated into the gallery circuit.

AB: Yes. For example, I have always liked Os Gemeos who created these

## NEWS IN BRIEF

## SOTHEBY'S

In August, Chen Dongsheng, the Chinese businessman, whose wife is a granddaughter of Mao Zedong, has become the largest shareholder of Sotheby's auction house with a controlling share of 13.5 percent. Mr Chen has great experience of auction house management as he is the founder of China Guardian, one of China's biggest auction houses that began life in the 1990s. In 2011, China Guardian set up a Hong Kong office and regularly holds auctions in the special administered region.

## CHRISTIE'S, PARIS

Over the summer, Christie's sold the Portier Collection of Japanese Art at the Drouot. It was a white-glove sale with 100 percent of lots sold and also attracted a world auction record for a Japanese print when *Deeply Hidden Love (fukaku shinobu koi)* by Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) sold for Euro 745,800. This was also a world auction record for the artist.

## 20TH ARAB FILM FESTIVAL, SAN FRANCISCO

It has been 20 years since the Arab Film Festival first opened its doors, and as a generation has grown with it, the festival has also grown in importance and scope. This year, the festival will celebrate its 20th anniversary by screening acclaimed Egyptian film *Clash (Esthebak)* on 7 October at the Castro Theatre. Mohamed Diab's film is set entirely within a padded wagon, travelling

through the streets of Cairo in 2013, as supporters of Morsi's toppled government and Muslim Brotherhood members fight each other inside and out.

The Los Angeles edition of the Arab Film Festival opens on 21 October with Lebanese comedy *Very Big Shot* from first-time writer-director Mir-Jean Bou Chaaya. The plot centres around a drug dealer who makes a movie to smuggle drugs, effectively making this a movie about making a movie, meta-jokes included.

More information on the festival on [www.arabfilmfestival.org](http://www.arabfilmfestival.org)

## ANCIENT TOMB PAINTINGS, MONGOLIA

Three ancient tombs, with interior wall paintings dating back to the early and middle period of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), have been found by archaeologists in Mongolia. These well-preserved colourful paintings were found in tombs in Jungar Banner in Ordos, and featured mythical beasts, flowers and plants. Yang Zemeng, Head of the Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute in Ordos, noted that, 'the paintings show mysterious images in a plain style'. These findings will serve as research material on the local culture and funeral customs of the Song dynasty.

## DANCE UMBRELLA, LONDON

The celebrated Indian dance maker Aditi Mangaldas infuses the ancient art form of *kathak* with 21st-century

sound, rhythm and light. She returns to the UK with her latest dance-work *Inter-rupted*, which premieres at the Barbican Theatre on 22 October as part of Dance Umbrella before a short UK tour. Information on [www.barbican.org/theatre](http://www.barbican.org/theatre)

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

More works of art from the museum's Asian collection were returned to India in a handover ceremony in Canberra last month. The Indian high commissioner to Australia, Navdeep Suri, welcomed the return of the sculptures, and said he 'commended the National Gallery of Australia for its approach to dealing with this complex and difficult issue'.

## OKAYAMA ART SUMMIT, JAPAN

The Okayama Art Summit 2016, 9 October to 27 November, is the first edition of a new contemporary triennial with the first edition entitled *Development*. All 31 artists involved in the exhibition, working under the concept of artistic director, Liam Gillick. More information, on [www.okayamaartsummit.jp](http://www.okayamaartsummit.jp)

## CHINA'S GREAT FLOOD

The Evidence has been found for China's Great Flood; a 4,000-year-old disaster on the Yellow River that led to modern Chinese civilization and to the birth of the Xia dynasty. These findings provide evidence not only for the extent of the flood, but fundamentally that it occurred in

1920 BC, several centuries later than traditionally thought; this would mean consequently that the Xia dynasty, led by Emperor Yu, may also have started later than historians have thought. Emperor Yu became noted for being the man who was able to gain control over the flood by orchestrating the dredging work needed to guide the waters back into their channels. Darryl Granger, Professor in the Department of Earth Atmospheric Planetary Sciences at Purdue University, Indiana, told reporters on a conference call to discuss the findings, that the floodwaters would have been 'roughly equivalent to the largest Amazon flood ever measured'.

## VENICE FILM FESTIVAL

The Philippines film *The Woman Who Left*, a black and white drama by director Lav Diaz, has won the Golden Lion for best film at the Venice Film Festival. It tells the story of a schoolteacher's thirst for revenge and her feelings of forgiveness after 30 years in jail for a crime she did not commit. Diaz said the film was a testimony to the struggles of the Philippines after centuries of colonial rule. Twenty movies competed in the 73rd edition of the film festival. 'This is for my country, for the Filipino people, for our struggle, for the struggle of humanity. Thank you, thank you so much,' the 57-year-old director said as he accepted the award. The film, *Ang Babaeng Humayo* in Tagalog, has a running time of almost four hours.



*Fravashi (2013) oil on linen, 96 x 180 inches*

worlds and used their own environment to suggest political issues. Barry McGee was another artist I enjoyed. Back then, those were the graffiti artists I looked up to because it was not just about pretty letters, or writing your name. They were also creating a context and making political suggestions, which was very interesting.

AAN: And exactly these two made it into the gallery circuit...

AB: Exactly for these reasons!

AAN: The initial starting point of your paintings was set during the war in Iran. Over the years, has your outlook changed and become more global?

AB: I think it has always been global. I used my experience to point out conflicts in general in the world, historical or current, or imagining the future. I have never made work that was directly about the Iran-Iraq war. Because I experienced it, it pushed me to make works that were on a more general global stage. Recently, as I was in Madrid, where I was looking at Goya's *Disaster of War* series. It was based on his experience in Spain, but looking at it, it could be anywhere – as it is more about the essential idea of human suffering than anything else. It mainly reflects human cruelty, human suffering and what we do to each other in general than being about a specific place.

AAN: When you say 'also imagining the future', how do you go about this?

AB: It is something that the painting shows me because when I paint, it is like this dialogue with the work. Sometimes, certain things happen in the painting telling me that this could be what we will become or not. Within the painting, there is that past, the present, and the future. There are historic elements in there, there are current events, and then there are things that could possibly hint at the future. The work is not about specific things I am thinking about.

AAN: Do you have any recollections of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988)?

AB: The war is something I remember most because it lasted eight years and I was twelve when I left Iran. I also remember the change that happened, as everybody was talking about it. This is something I clearly have visual memories of. I do not have that many recollections, per se, about the revolution, but you felt it, everybody was talking about this change and everybody was trying to understand it.

AAN: Are living through the war and looking back on it two different things?

AB: When I was in Iran, living through the war, I did not even think about it. I did not dissect it and I did not analyse it. To me, I was born in it, I lived in it, I left and I did not think about it until graduate school. It was always there, but graduate school was when I actually started to think about my experience, about the war, about the conflict and what it meant to me.

AAN: Have you been back to Iran since leaving? Could you go back?

AB: I think I could and I would like to go and spend a month there. I just do not know when.

AAN: Has your work been shown at all in Iran? Recently, YZ Kami (born in Iran, but based in New York) was part of a group show at Ab-Anbar Gallery in Tehran.

AB: I was once part of a small group show of drawings and that was about it. As I have not been in Iran, in order to understand the art world there I would need to go back, but I have not really pursued it. I am definitely open to the idea, but it has to be in the right context, a context that sounds interesting to me other than just Iranian artists packed in together.

AAN: Do you follow Iranian traditional miniature painting?

AB: I am interested in it. I have taken classes and copy some paintings. They are some of my favourite art works because they are so playful and unique in the way they use colour and composition among other things. And again, they go back to the bird's eye perspective, being Cubist flat, but also looking from above.

AAN: The bird's-eye view you adopt in your work is very important, it puts things in a different perspective, making some of the specific issues quite basic.

AB: For example, you could look at it like a traffic jam from above ground: it is just this line of cars moving slowly, but then if going into detail, everyone is sitting in their car and annoyed because of the traffic. Looking at the big picture, what is the point, where are they going, what are they doing? When you look at things from a macro-level, it just makes our little every day frustrations, etc, ridiculous. A bird's-eye view gives you clarity, and allows you to breathe a little bit.

AAN: You often mentioned regretting that when you were at art school, certain chapters were simply left out to focus on European painting. What were the areas you would have loved to see included in your curriculum?

*Continued on page 4*

## Jihei Murase 村瀬治兵衛

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## 4 Profile

AB: The chapters we skipped included Japanese and near-Eastern art, both subjects in which I am very interested. We skipped those in order to get to Giotto. I could not understand why Japanese and near-Eastern art were set apart from European painting as two parallel worlds that had nothing to do with each other. As we know now, that is not true as they were very much influenced by each other.

AAN: Your work is often described as being at the crossroads of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997). Do you agree with that comparison?

AB: Yes and no. There are other artists that are compared to Bosch, but the reason is because they directly try to mimic him, taking characters from his paintings, or doing *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and changing the characters to emojis, for example. I was never trying to create the world he creates and he never influenced me. As I started to do my work, I realised it looked similar to Bosch, as far as the way I saw the world. Whenever I look at his work, it communicates with me, probably because it came directly from his imagination, showing something that still exists in our present time. Everything he pointed out exists in our time: you could simply change the outfits of these characters and apply it to us today. In that way, he inspires me because I feel I am also a social critic in a way.

As for de Kooning, I appreciate his technique, as I also like to create fragments. His work is abstract, but at the same time, these fragments are a part of something, part of some kind of biomorphic thing. They are never just a random abstraction: they always try to achieve a certain effect or they are part of something that is living. Therefore in that way, I relate to him. However, I do not think I am trying to make 'de Kooning-esque' paintings, or 'Boschesque' paintings for that reason. I guess some people get that part wrong: if I made a painting that had green in it, in their eyes I am trying to make *The Garden of Earthly Delights* ...

AAN: What about Surrealists. Do you relate to them in some way?

AB: I cannot say I relate to all surrealists. I like some of Dali's and some of Max Ernst's work.

AAN: Our last interview took place in 2011. How would you say your work has evolved since then?

AB: When I look at my work from that time, I think that now the figures have become larger, more confident and they are more aware of what they represent. Before, they were more fragmented and maybe they did not quite have the role that they have today in the work. My idea of painting is always about wanting to do it better, always wanting to get closer to the thing in my imagination that I am trying to bring out. That is the challenge. Hopefully, I am now a little closer.

AAN: It seems to me there are more patterns in the background, the painting has become more organised and better structured. In addition, certain things have become more abstract while others have become more realistic.

AB: In the newer work, I have learned to control how much one thing should develop and how much should stay fragmented. Maybe in the old work everything was fragmented on the same level. Over time, I guess I have learned to be able to bring



*Motherboard (2013) oil on linen, 82 x 120 inches*



*Myth (2016), oil on linen, 66 x 88 inches*

certain things out more, to give a little bit more focus to one area while certain other things have this blurriness that keeps the eye moving on to the next thing. I could either bring everything out 100 percent and then everything would be realistic, or I could have it all fragmented. It is a matter of this 'push and pull', what to bring out more. It is all working towards the overall composition of the painting, towards this musical harmony that I want to create within the work that makes the eyes move around the work. Velasquez, for example, is very good at having your eyes move from one theme to the next, keeping them moving yet never having them leave the canvas. That is the idea, keeping the eyes on the canvas. You build compositional structures to create that musical harmony within the painting to make it come alive. Once that happens, it is as if it has been finally worked out, plugged in, and turned on. Sometimes, even if a line or dots are missing, for me it is not yet activated. That is why a painting could be in my studio for three weeks and then, suddenly, this dot or this line will make a difference. Needless to say, no one else will know the difference but for me, it is just this one last thing that activates it. When I am painting, my thinking is all about that: how to make it come alive.

AAN: However, what makes it become alive for you does not necessarily make it become alive for the viewer, is that true?

AB: That is the thing about painting: everyone experiences it very differently and that is what I love about painting. You could look at the same work, talking about obvious things that you are seeing, but ultimately, each person has a very different experience with the painting. I do not think that exists with anything else.

AAN: In music perhaps? Sometimes by listening to music, one sees and imagines things.

AB: I guess music is something that people could experience collectively whereas painting cannot and should not be collective. It is bad when it is collective and when people talk in front of it. I always tend to recommend that people experience the painting first and then one can talk about it.

AAN: When discussing painting, people like categorising works although the same work, like yours for example, can have multiple readings.

AB: There has always been the problem of categorisation, and I do not think any of the artists that were categorised as 'isms' agreed with it. On the contrary, they were saying they were not part of this, doing their own thing, but somehow in art-history books they get lumped together just for us to be able to place them, understand them, and categorise them. There are works that are easily packaged to fit a certain category and I do not find anything of interest in that.

AAN: Could you elaborate on what you said earlier, 'making the painting come alive'?

AB: That takes me back to the idea of musical harmony: when I paint, there is this sound being created in the painting while I am making it. For me, that sound has to travel within the painting with these highs and lows in order for it to become complete. To begin with, I visualise the painting as sound when I am making the composition and then, everything falls into place. It is like a combination of having the rhythm and the sound work and then sit back, look at it in order to make critical decisions about what you should leave and what you should take out. There is a lot of editing, but the sound is the driving force that helps me figure it out.

AAN: What are you referring to exactly when you speak of 'sound'?

AB: It is the sound of the painting itself, as well as the sound of things.

When I create a shape or a colour, to me it has a sound. That sound has to be in harmony with what I am going to put next to it. That is how I am able to make the choice based on 'it needs this' and then 'it needs that' ... This is one part of it, but it is not just that. There is also the abstraction when I create these shapes and colours and from this also emerge these sort of biomorphic figures and things, which also have their own sound. Then, it is a matter of having this 'back and forth' between trying to control the abstraction, the sound of the abstraction, the structure, the figures, what they represent and how I bring them out more or not. It is like juggling a 100 balls.

AAN: What is your relationship to colour?

AB: Colour is a combination of mood, sound, and the surroundings. It can be based on what is happening when I walk around every day, things I see and then it arrives in the painting. Last summer, for example, there were all these pinks that kept coming in my paintings, because every day I would go up to the roof of my studio building and watch the sunset. These colours just went into my imagination and wanted to come out.

AAN: Do you sketch when you are travelling?

AB: I do not sketch. However, when I recently went to Spain, I felt the urge to take a sketchbook with me. I always have a notebook to write a lot of things down, my thoughts, things I read, or various ideas. It used to be a book with a combination of drawings and ideas, but now the drawings have gone out and there are just ideas. Taking more visual notes is something I should but do not do. Instead, when I go and see things, I try to take a visual picture in my head – in my memory. I want this visual picture to come out in the way it wants to come out into the painting and not be forced in any way.

AAN: In terms of literature whose work do you follow in particular?

AB: I have always liked Orhan Pamuk. I feel that within his books – just like in my work – there are worlds within worlds and there are many voices as opposed to one voice. A favourite book is *My Name is Red* and I also like his latest book, there are different characters in the story that are talking directly to you as the reader and you as the reader could make a decision about who is right. There is a story, but it is told from many different points of view. In general, especially with everything that is happening in our world today, I am always interested in hearing different voices. I think it is dangerous to listen to one voice, one radio station, and one TV station. I like multiple perspectives.

AAN: Do you follow a similar approach for movies?

AB: I have my favourites that are still my favourites, but I have not come across anything lately that has been inspiring. Of course, there are some films I could watch over and over again, like Rublev, for example, a film that is similar to Breugel paintings. I like the producer Wong Kar-Wai's work. What is interesting is that these were all artists and not just filmmakers. Looking at their films, one knows that for every scene, they are thinking about composition, colour and every little thing they place are like a moving still life. I can especially see this in Wong Kar-Wai's films.

AAN: There used to be a certain camaraderie amongst artists. Is that still the case or has it turned into a very solitary experience?

AB: There are artists' works to which I feel a connection, but it is not that they live in my neighbourhood and that we hang out together. It is more from the distance without knowing each other. You see their response, you continuously relate to them, you understand and appreciate what they are doing.

AAN: As you mentioned the idea of 'musical harmony', would you be tempted at some point to complete the stage sets for an opera?

AB: Definitely! This idea – collaboration with a musician I like, with opera, or something that has to do with music – would be ideal for me.

AAN: What role do the drawings play in the genesis of your paintings?

AB: In my last show during the winter in Paris, I titled the drawings *PS*, post-script, because the drawings were actually made from the figures of the painting. I wanted to concentrate on some of these figures then make a drawing from it. The drawing would go somewhere else, and possibly it would then come back and influence the painting. The drawing was born out of the painting, but then it was helping the painting in some way, too. By making these drawings as well, something new has happened in my work in the past year or two: the element of line started to come into the painting. Previously it did not exist because everything was fragmented.

AAN: Looking at your exhibitions over the past years, your work keeps changing.

AB: Painting is a challenge. A lot of people think it gets easier while I think it is getting harder, because you have to eliminate solving problems the same way. You have to give yourself new problems and solve them in a new way – that makes you excited and interests you. In my opinion, it gets harder because you want more out of the painting. There have been many times where there would be approximately five paintings underneath that one painting that could have been all right. It would have been fine because it looked like something I did three to four years ago and I know how to solve that problem as I already tried so many times. Then, you reach a certain point where you want more, more, and more. You do not want that same answer, you want something else. It gets harder, but it has to keep you excited. If I am not excited about it, I cannot expect anyone else to be excited about it.

AAN: Otherwise, the work becomes very predictable... As a viewer, you want to be surprised and experience something new.

AB: In certain places, you could walk through a whole museum and see everything in two or three hours. The Bosch exhibition, although it did not even have 15 paintings, kept me there from the morning until the time it ended. There is so much to take in and you only get part of it. There is so much time to spend on these paintings, so much thought and so much went into it. I think time is so important: the time you give the work, not just the time you are physically painting it, but the time you are eventually spending with making decisions. In my opinion, the viewer will see the time that has gone into the work and that is very gratifying.