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In his second solo exhibition at Sperone Westwater, the Brooklyn-based Ali Banisadr occupies the gallery's spacious three-floor Lower East Side space with large scale paintings that burst with tumultuous colors and ethereal forms. Combining elements from traditional European painting with global socio-political consciousness, the Iranian-American artist leaves mesmerizing marks on the canvas, building narratives on displacement, tragedy, and chaos. Artspeak editor Osman Can Yerebakan spoke with Banisadr about *Trust in the Future*.

Osman Can Yerebakan: You use the term "world landscape" to define your paintings' divergence from typical understanding of landscape painting.

Ali Banisadr: The work is never about a certain time, place or event, but instead it goes in and out of time. For example, imagine the way you read a dream and try to remember it; no matter how you try to make sense out of it, it's never accurate. You try to interpret it, but that interpretation is never precise. I think "world landscape" captures that state with multiple voices, figures, and times. While moving in and out of time, the viewer observes everything from bird's-eye view. When I begin the paintings, they are abstract. The figures come later out of this abstraction and build a dialogue with the work. Abstraction is the main way I construct the work, because for me the whole process has to do with sound. Initially there is always sound that I hear from the painting which is unlike music, but similar to a note that comes directly from the painting. Through the phenomenon called synesthesia, sound guides me about where the colors will go over the painting. Little fragments about the work start to emerge and at that point it's the matter of rejecting or accepting these fragments. When I compare the current body of work to previous ones, I realize that the figures want to be more visible at the moment. I see those fragments of figures more clearly compared to the viewer, but in the end it depends on how much of them I want to reveal. These tiny familiar fragments come from hours of looking but not doing anything except pondering how one small element will be enough to give character to a figure. The challenge for me is to keep the figures' characteristics at spontaneous levels where small elements convey meaning.

OCY: In a previous interview you compared your paintings to Picasso's *Guernica* in terms of rendition of political tone. How do you see that tone in *Trust in the Future*?

AB: When I look at *Guernica*, I can relate to the political climate in which Picasso made that painting better than I could with literature written about that time, because I can see how war felt like from his sole perspective. *Guernica* is one of the most powerful paintings ever made, because I experienced Iran-Iraq war for eight years and I am aware that he captures the suffering and chaos of war in the most human way. He soaked in how tragedy feels like from many different voices and channeled them in his work.



Ali Banisadr, *Trust in the Future*, 2017 Oil on linen Courtesy the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

“I always say my work falls into three categories: my personal history, art history, and history of our times. Within each painting, these things always exist, but sometimes one aspect weighs heavier than the others depending on concurrent personal or public events. Of course, as a citizen of this world, I feel the need to react to politics. I don’t always mean that to happen, but because these issues are on my mind, they influence me.” — Ali Banisadr

OCY: Being an Iranian-American artist imposes a responsibility that your work should have political aspect. How do you respond to such responsibility?

AB: I always say my work falls into three categories: my personal history, art history, and history of our times. Within each painting, these things always exist, but sometimes one aspect weighs heavier than the others depending on concurrent personal or public events. Of course, as a citizen of this world, I feel the need to react to politics. I don’t always mean that to happen, but because these issues are on my mind, they influence me. If you look at *The Rise of the Blond*, you will see human and animal hybrids all marching toward right. They are wearing costumes that represent authority, but these costumes are also clownish. Everything in my mind finds way into the work; 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. There are small drawings on the second floor about natural orders and imagined orders. Natural orders, such as gravity, exist even if we believe them or not, but authority or religion, for example, are imagined by humans to put matters in order. In these small works, I thought about orders that the public has collective ideas about although they are never publicly visible, such as corporations or terrorists. We have blurry ideas about them, yet we lack tangible perceptions about their forms. I created these heads that are supposedly fearful due to their blurry compositions and

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unimaginable states. We cannot identify with these figures, because they have no features or characteristics, but they transform pure fear.



Ali Banisadr, *We work in shadows*, 2017 Oil on linen Courtesy the Artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

OCY: Your paintings usually amass sharp forms at bottom parts of the canvas while upper sections are monochromatic and left for contemplation. How do you define this balance between chaos and serenity?

AB: The bottom part is where the material world resides, therefore, chaos lives there. There is tension between the figures. On higher fragmented part of the painting, there is always transformation, freedom, and even hope. This fragmentation starts with the entire canvas, but the heaviness starts to conquer the bottom part. At the beginning, I try to capture the entire energy of the painting and then slowly the details and figures begin to reveal themselves. Some of the characters show up in multiple paintings, because they represent certain notions; each has a different role.

OCY: How does synesthesia influence your work as a visual artist?

AB: It's about hearing what I see and seeing what I hear which helps me compose the work and balance my process. The first few days of painting a canvas; I hear so much noise. The type of noise depends where my eyes move on the canvas, but they are similar to notes rather than musical compositions. Wherever my eyes move, I encounter a different sound. When I look at a Rembrandt, for example, I hear sound from that as well. I was living in Iran and the war with Iraq started when I was four years old. Any time we heard sirens or bombings, we would run down to the basement. The neighbors' kids and I would constantly draw.

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I was drawing because I was trying to make sense out of horrific sounds. At the time, I didn't think anything about this, but over time, this started to help me figure out other visual elements. Later, in the second year of graduate school, I went to Normandy where I saw war ruins that brought back my childhood in Iran as I started to hear these sounds again. I began to realize that sound has been what guides me through the visual work since when I was a kid. I later read that Kandinsky had the same ability which made me think more about making paintings that are somewhat based on sound.