

All the World's



Riders on the Storm, 2018. on linen. 208.8x305.3cm

A STAGE

New York-based Iranian artist **Ali Banisadr**'s first exhibition in Germany, *The World Upside Down*, at Blain Southern Berlin, marks a maturing and complexity of technique, as well as a sharpened focus on the interplay between macro and micro, body and space, and the links between past and present, discovers Anna Wallace-Thompson

It's been an interesting couple of years for Ali Banisadr. It marks a period that has witnessed a remarkable evolution in his work and one that has seen the New York-based Iranian artist—so widely known for his Hieronymus Bosch-like scenes of sweeping, chaotic movement—shift to something almost (almost) calmer.

Banisadr's sharp, densely-packed canvases are nothing short of encyclopaedic—and this has not changed. They bring to life the melange of ideas and thoughts the artist gathers, magpie-like, to become processed and allowed to burst forth under his brush in an array of mysterious and often carnivalesque figures. However, the *Garden*

of *Earthly Delight*-type panoramas of the past decade, characterised by numerous small, blurry characters caught up in frenzied movement have now given way to something looser. Where before one had the sense of a bird's eye view of great energy or conflict—violent yet removed—he has now moved towards a more intimate style, as evidenced in *The World Upside Down*, at Blain Southern Berlin.

The overall result is of a lens being adjusted and brought into focus. Banisadr's cast of colourful characters has been zoomed in on, pulled to the forefront of his canvases. Not only is this cast of sorts larger, but the players have also become more defined. They are not, however, any less elusive. After all, the magic of Banisadr's painting is that the more one tries to focus on any one feature, the less one is able to define it. Come too close, try too hard to pin something down and define it, and the lines blur and dissolve before your very eyes, disintegrating into myriad other shapes and forms. "When you're a child, you have an infinite level of freedom because you don't know what things are," explains Banisadr. "You just see shapes, colours, sounds and textures. Everything is a wonder to you because you haven't already categorised it, archived it and put it away. As we get older, I feel we have no more room for surprise, so I like to create figures that you can't quite categorise. I love this in-between space where your mind tries to label something but it can't. I like to paint and leave my mind in that place."

The World Upside Down was also remarkable for its presentation of 12 works on paper—at 61x76 centimetres, though not expansive, they are Banisadr's largest to date. Their black and blue palette also echoes the monochromatic direction some of his works have taken recently, and appear as inky swirls that veer somewhere between Rorschach tests, sweeping calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism. "I wanted to create something that contrasted with the paintings, yet still uses the same language," he explains. "I wanted to concentrate the focus on the centres, to make them portraits, as opposed to the horizontal landscapes of the paintings." As such, where some appear like cyclones of energy, others are more compact, as if they were on the edge of exploding, bursting out into the chaotic scenes of the canvases that surround them.

They are also remarkable for their use of white space—for in his paintings, Banisadr gives the impression of allowing the viewer to peer into a tableau mid-action, the potential for an infinite horizon of movement to exist beyond the confines of the canvas itself. In his drawings, inky forms float in a white void, while that monochromatic palette, when it finds itself on canvas, has resulted in works of stark beauty, whether harking to Iznik pottery, as in *Riders*, or the large, expansive *Language of the Birds*, a blur of claws, beaks, speckles and spines. In fact, the use of monochrome has evolved out of Banisadr's much-publicised synaesthesia—in which sounds, colours and shapes all meld into each other. "When I paint, I hear a

sound from the actual painting," he explains. "So that sound helps me channel the work and compose it, and know what I'm going to do. Then, I will also listen to music, and that creates a parallel visual world that I can store in my memory and use, as in the work here, *Riders on the Storm*."

In the case of his recent works, Banisadr has also started mixing his own paints—and each colour triggers a mood. Ergo, each painting is germinated in a feeling. It's an intriguing mix of colour, shape, line, texture and that intangible something that it evokes inside the viewer, the indescribable feeling of a mood set on canvas or paper. That ability to evoke allows us to inhabit the skin of the painting, as much as we observe it from the outside, to be both within and without.

Mood brings us back to self—back to those Rorschach tests, and to psychology: Banisadr studied the subject before becoming a painter. "To become a psychologist, one has to deal with language—and I didn't feel like I could use language as my main tool," he says. "Instead, I'm finding a certain understanding through visual tools that I could never achieve through words." Not that words are needed when it comes to reading the political undertones here. Banisadr may not be a 'political artist' per se, but his work is of course rooted in the everyday events that surround him. This is where the influence of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin is felt in Banisadr's characters. Inverting social norms, they are freewheeling agents of chaos and dissent, puppets and jokers, theatre players in costume and paint talking to us about the chaos around us today.

In these new works, what is most striking is a subtle sense of impermanence—in *The Game of Taming*, a tableau seems to dissolve into eddies of wind, characters softly dispersing particle by particle to be carried away in torrents of dust. In *Homo Deus*, meanwhile, it seems as if everything before our eyes is on the verge of being washed

away by great crashing swells, some terrible flooding that will cleanse and erase. So the world is upside down, social norms are becoming increasingly inverted, and we are being swept away. Maybe that's what Banisadr is saying we're headed for: a reckoning. Ah, but remember—try to grab at any one meaning, stare too closely, and it will dissolve before your very eyes. Time will tell. ■

The World Upside Down ran at Blain Southern Berlin from 29 September–17 November 2018



Above: *The Game of Taming*, 2018. Oil on Linen. 167.64x 223.52cm. Below: *Homo Deus*, 2018, Oil on linen. 208.28x 304.8cm.



Installation view of *The World Upside Down*, 2018. Photography by Trevor Good

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