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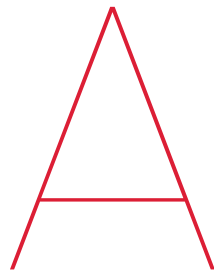






Ali Banisadr

BY GREG HERBOWY



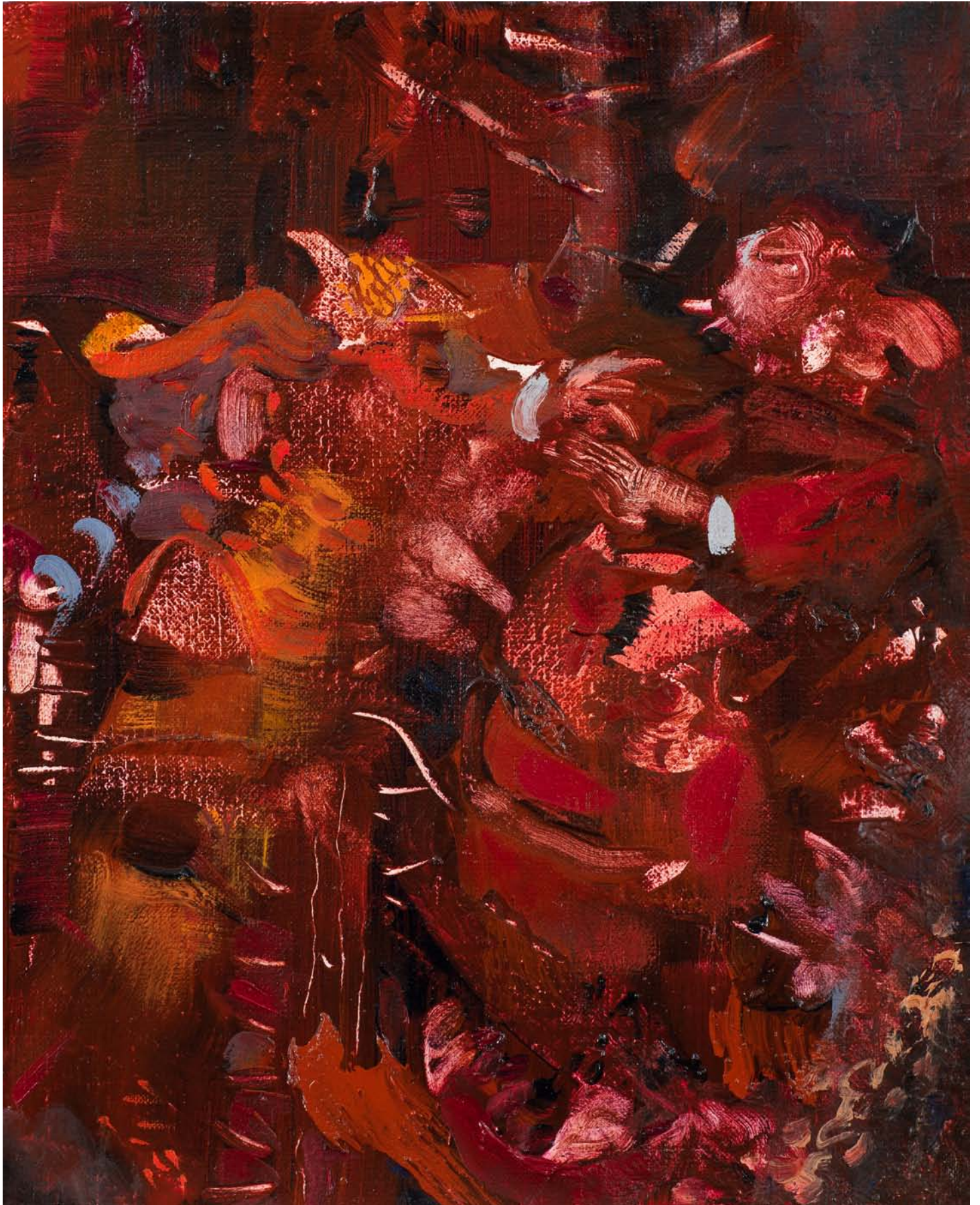
Artist Ali Banisadr keeps an organized studio in a two-level Brooklyn condominium, where the area dedicated to painting has a front-burner/back-burner setup. The front-burner end, outfitted with a supply-laden cart and a custom pegboard wall, is for the work in progress. During a visit to the studio late last year, a sizable blank canvas hung there. Banisadr—who concentrates on only one painting at a time, discovering each piece along the way—indicated that it could stay that way for a week or longer, while he waited for the right mood, color or idea to occur.



PREVIOUS Ali Banisadr, *Thought Police*, 2019, oil on linen, 82 x 120".

OPPOSITE Ali Banisadr, *Annunciation*, 2011, oil on linen, 10 x 8".

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, London, Salzburg. Photos: Jeffrey Sturges.



“My speed is my speed,” he said, shrugging. “I can’t do anything about it.”

Hanging in the back-burner end of the room were two smaller canvases, one of which he judged to be 90 percent done, the other maybe 40 percent. Banisadr often works on a grand scale, painting bustling, usually vivid assortments of odd and amorphous beings that emerge from, congregate within and resolve back into abstracted, churning compositions that can sprawl across one, two or three large panels. His works are deliberate mysteries. Their scattered details—a bird’s beak, a patterned robe, a row of teeth—add up to no easy narrative, and their titles tend toward the gnomic: *Thought Police*, *The Myth Makers*, *World Upside Down*, *It’s in the Air*.

The paintings in his studio this day were comparatively muted and less expansive, zeroed in on a select few of his enigmatic, monstrous subjects. But even with this tighter focus the figures were inscrutable—not wholly human, not wholly animal, not even wholly there. “I want my paintings to have that feeling of metamorphosis, where you’re looking at things becoming something else,” he said. “Because that’s the truest mirror of imagination and memory and dreams—things are always changing.”

Ever since his first solo show, in 2008, Banisadr’s creative heritage has been attributed to an array of predecessors spanning eras and styles, and their diversity speaks to the singularity of his vision. In his art, observers have claimed traces of Jackson Pollock’s splatter paintings, the details of Persian miniatures, the vibrant abstractions of Wassily Kandinsky and, above all, the clamorous, zoomed-out panoramas of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel.

Banisadr acknowledges all of these influences and more. But if he aligns himself with any one tradition, it is that of artists like Bosch, Bruegel and Francisco Goya. All of them made work with allegorical power, taking what he calls a “macro view” of the human condition—

our perpetually fallen state, our helplessness in the face of the unaccountable forces that govern or wreck societies, our sense of greater truths that are beyond our reach. “Where do these things come from?” he said. “These archetypes, these stories that we’ve told ourselves forever? What’s the root cause that’s creating those sorts of images in your mind?”

Born in Tehran in 1976, Banisadr spent his first years in an Iran buffeted by the successive upheavals of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War. His artmaking began in early childhood, and he used it to process the violence and unrest that surrounded him. He drew monsters and other menacing forms to represent the explosions and other sounds of conflict

he heard outside of his home, an early example of a sort of synesthesia, or intermingling of the senses, that he says still guides his creativity today.

When Banisadr was 12, his family relocated to the San Diego area, settling in a suburban environment that felt alien to his sensibilities. After high school, he moved to San Francisco, where he studied psychology and became active in the local graffiti art community. After a few years, he decided to pursue art full-time and enrolled at SVA, where he studied a mix of fine arts and illustration. He graduated with his BFA in 2005 and went on to the New York Academy of Art, for his MFA. Artist Amy Cutler visited his studio at the latter, and introduced Banisadr to his first gallerist, Leslie Tonkonow, which started his career.

“There was so much going on in his paintings as well as in his head,” Cutler says. “It was evident that he was well-versed in the history of painting, but he wasn’t recycling old ideas.”

Banisadr approached his art education like an apprenticeship, forgoing any personal expression to concentrate on mastering a variety of techniques. His paintings today are not just great feats of imagination; they are also showcases of practical ingenuity and practiced skill. In addition to store-bought oil paints, he makes his own, mixing pigments with a variety of mediums. His mark-making toggles between “spontaneous and gestural” and detail-oriented modes, “so that you get something different whether you’re 20 feet from it, or you can be rubbing your nose in it and there’s stuff there, too,” he said.

To ensure that he gives equal attention to all sections of a composition, he moves large canvases up and down his pegboard wall as he works. If a painting incorporates lots of color, he will photograph it and look at it in black and white to be sure it has a dramatic balance of

tones. He has used wire scrub brushes, to etch into his paintings, and, at the suggestion of one of his two young daughters, paintbrushes taped to crooked sticks. These clumsier tools build in an element of unpredictability, and give him something to fight against.

“Over the years his work has steadily grown in size and volume,” Cutler says. “The paintbrushes have become extensions of his arms, and the viewer is now invited into the mania of his sweeping strokes and visual sounds. Ali’s art is confrontational, and the result of a private performance.”

In addition to paintings, Banisadr makes drawings in ink and charcoal, and he has recently begun making prints with Burnet Editions, a printmaking studio in Manhattan. After six months of back and forth, he created two works that combine an array of techniques—“aquatint, etching, spit-bite and a couple other things”—and are finished in his studio with a wash of watercolor. Titled *Nocturne* and *Cannons Hidden*

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Ali Banisadr, *World Upside Down 4*, 2018, ink on paper, 24 x 30". Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, London, Salzburg. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges.







“It’s like a dream where you’re trying to grasp things and nail them down and they’re escaping.”

in Roses, in tribute to Frédéric Chopin, one of his favorite composers (Chopin wrote a series of works called nocturnes, and fellow composer Robert Schumann described his work as “cannons hidden among blossoms”), they have been acquired by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, in Buffalo, New York, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City. (Both also have his paintings in their collections.)

He is already thinking of a larger, more ambitious print, though the work of translating his intuitive process to the step-by-step work of printmaking is a challenge. “I had to deconstruct my understanding of my own paintings,” he said.

“Everything’s in a state of flux while I’m working. It’s like a dream where you’re trying to grasp things and nail them down and they’re escaping. I’ll look at a painting and I’ll see stuff and want to catch it immediately. And then you come in the next day and it just goes away, and something else happens.”

Banisadr’s work has been exhibited internationally in more than 60 group and solo exhibitions, and is in the permanent collections of such institutions as Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC;

and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. This year, he will show work in exhibitions hosted by the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, and the Museo Stefano Bardini and Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, Italy. He is represented by the Kasmin Gallery in New York City and Galerie Thaddeus Ropac in Paris, and by Cristea Roberts Gallery in London for his print works. For more information, visit alibanisadr.com. ♦

ABOVE: Ali Banisadr, *Oil*, 2016, oil on linen, 66 x 88”.

OPPOSITE, TOP: Ali Banisadr, *Blackwater*, 2010, etching painting, 11 x 14”.

OPPOSITE, BELOW: Ali Banisadr, *Cannons Hidden in Roses*, 2019, hand-colored aquatint with photogravure, spit-bite, drypoint and burnishing on paper, 19 x 25”.

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Paris, London, Salzburg. Photos: Jeffrey Sturges.



Ali Banisadr, *Fravashi*, 2013, oil on linen (triptych), 96 x 180".
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris,
London, Salzburg. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges.





ABOVE Ali Banisadr, *Fact/Fiction*, 2018, oil on linen, 24 x 24".

OPPOSITE Ali Banisadr, *Hold the Fort*, 2019, oil on linen, 24 x 24".

FOLLOWING Ali Banisadr, *Prisoners of the Sun (TV)*, 2008, oil on linen, 54 x 72".

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, London, Salzburg. Photos: Jeffrey Sturges.









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