



ALI BANISADR

GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC

VOICES OF EVIL: A COMMON WORLD ORDER

Fereshteh Daftari

A grand vision marks the painterly creations of Ali Banisadr. His is a sweeping glance unconcerned with detailed descriptions or ethnic specificity. His focus, rather, is on the larger picture, on capital moments with fundamental implications for humankind. In the imagined scenes, the chosen vantage point is high. The panoramic vistas encompass heaven and earth. The fury of the battlegrounds may almost be heard, the tenor of events felt through the temperature of the colors, dubious transactions noted, and perhaps a time for judgment evoked. In these plunging views of crowded activities, epic narratives seem to unfold. The question remains as to what these indeterminate scenarios might be about.

Unquestionably, Banisadr's project remains deeply if not exclusively informed by a childhood spent in a country in turmoil. He was three years old when revolution broke out in Iran and four when the country was invaded by Iraqi forces. The war lasted eight years, until 1988, the year when Banisadr, age twelve, left his native country for good. After a brief period of transition in Turkey, he moved with his family first to California and then to New York, where he completed his art degrees and where he currently lives. Recalling his early memories of war, he says, "At least twice a week the alarm sounded, warning us of the bombing. I remember hearing the vibrations of the explosions."¹ As an adult and an artist, Banisadr has embarked on a quest, a persistent, serially conceived inquisition even, to make sense of events and sounds that shattered the integrity of objects and lives. His scenarios are edited by memory and filtered through the edifying prism of art history. Extricated through the fog of memory, the work "exists in a space between

recognition and abstraction," a space he identifies with the subconscious. Banisadr does not simply accuse one culture, one war, one revolution, one belief system. Corruption and thirst for power being universal traits, he summons his cast of characters from all epochs and cultures. In this encyclopedic forum time is not linear, location is not specific, visible references point neither to the Islamic Republic of Iran nor the United States of America. Conflating past and present, the Orient and the Occident, personal experience, myth, history and current events, Banisadr concocts situations where human behavior, its dark side, can be observed, as he says, "at a macro level."

In 2008 Banisadr painted *The Hashashins*. The title refers to the followers of a branch of Shi'i Islam, the Isma'ilis, about whom Europeans – starting with the Crusaders in the twelfth century and culminating with the Venetian Marco Polo in the late thirteenth century, a merchant traveler not a historian – propagated myths fueled by ignorance and hostility towards Islam. According to these legends, thoroughly refuted by current scholarship, the devoted followers of the leader (the "Old Man of the Mountain"), were administered drugs such as hashish and sent out on missions to kill their enemies. These sectarians were made famous in Europe as the "Assassins" (derived from the term *hashashin* or *hashishin*).² *The Hashashins*, not in the current exhibition, strategically and conceptually paves the way for subsequent works. The artist is fully aware of the unfounded nature of the myth but retains the title to underline that history is written by victors and truth is mastered by those who hold power. Moreover, the criminalization of the "other," intrinsic to the legend, is a phenomenon that finds resonance in contemporary politics, where



ALI BANISADR
THE HASHASHINS 2008
OIL ON LINEN
122x91.5 CM 48x36 INCHES

PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY LESLIE TONKONOW ARTWORKS + PROJECTS, NEW YORK

demonization of foes continues on all sides. Banisadr is a product of an era marked by caricatural vilifications: the Great Satan on one side, the Axis of Evil on the other. The battle he pictures might therefore refer not only to the “Assassin” legend but also to other hostilities pursued in the name of god or democracy. The artist creates the stage and provides the actors, but it is left to the viewers to identify the protagonists. The creator of this image remains aloof. He removes himself from any Manichean partisanship. He observes his creatures from a higher position, from a perspective where idiosyncrasies dissolve to expose what afflicts both sides of any divide.

To carry through his agenda Banisadr engages in a formal manipulation or strategy: he allows his compositional scheme to refer simultaneously to the antipodes of aesthetic regimes. On the one hand, he deports the *Hashashin* legend to its Western origin by speaking in the voice of a number of Old Master painters, such as Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Brueghel and possibly even Michelangelo, a poster of whose *Last Judgement* is tacked to a wall of his studio (the towering presence of Michelangelo’s God, however, yields its centrality to a violent explosion in Banisadr’s painting). On the other hand, the work allows associations with Persian miniature paintings, in which charging armies, depicted from bird’s-eye views, do not diminish in scale as they recede into space. In Banisadr’s cosmogony all parties are ruled by impulses translatable into any language. The same strategies are apparent in *Fishing for Souls*, in which Banisadr has transposed current ideological-religious conflicts onto a Biblical episode, as depicted by the seventeenth-century painter Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne. Banisadr created his own version of this Dutch

painter’s *Fishing for Souls* (1614), a painting he had seen at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus tells fishers casting their net into the sea, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Van de Venne applied the Bible story to the division that existed in his time between Catholics and Protestants, each promising salvation. Banisadr, while retaining in a highly stenographic manner the visual disposition of the Dutch painter’s composition, replaced the Catholics and Protestants with a cacophony of ethnically and sartorially diverse groups of interacting figures. Unlike the Dutch painter, Banisadr provides no clue enabling the viewer to identify origin, religion or culture. Who is vying for dominance (religious sects, political parties or civilizations) depends on the reader’s own anxieties and cultural obsessions. Once again the viewer takes charge of the script.

When concocted scenes pause at the threshold of cognition and visibility, when close scrutiny yields little information, when formal references keep morphing and slippery identities shifting, the titles, which sound like oracular judgments, fragments of a pious discourse or chapter headings of a sermon, play a significant role in decoding the message. This is especially the case with the larger paintings of 2009, in which narratives are taken to the border of abstraction. The title *Nothing That Is So Is So*, Banisadr’s first diptych, is Shakespearean in origin. The words are spoken by a clown in act 4, scene 1 of *Twelfth Night*, a comedy built on gender disguises, lies, and mistaken identities. In that same spirit, in Banisadr’s painting the loosely suggested human transactions lack transparency. Not even the luminous beams of light pouring from above elucidate the actions of those lost in the opaque realm below.



HIERONYMUS BOSCH
THE LAST JUDGEMENT & THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS
MAIN PANEL FROM THE LAST JUDGEMENT TRIPTYCH
DETAIL FROM THE LOWER AREA. CIRCA 1504–1508
OIL-TEMPERA ON WOOD
MAIN PANEL: 164 x 127 CM 64.57 x 50 INCHES
BEQUEST COUNT LAMBERG 1822

GEMALDEGALERIE DER AKADEMIE DER BILDENDEN KÜNSTE WIEN

The very ambiguity of the cryptic signs inspires mistrust and suggests deceit. The plot remains a mystery, the characters shady, the activities clandestine and the truth impenetrable.

Banisadr's second diptych, *The Gatekeepers*, is another staged tableau, another scene of deceptive beauty. Gatekeepers are custodians of a territory replete with value, be it a country, knowledge, faith, ideology, morality, history or truth. Contradicting expectations, the guardians in this land, as dainty as the inhabitants of Watteau's *fêtes champêtres*, conceal themselves behind their masks in an atmosphere of carnivalesque affectation. They have turned their mission into a travesty. At the center of the scene is a basket of gold coins and a masked master puppeteer pulling the strings of a marionette. Weight is lacking. Gravity is absent and so is accountability, by implication. But in this painting there is a disturbing sense of imminent intervention: the choreographed players appear against an agitated horizon that explodes into a flurry of fluttering creatures. Might it be an oblique critique of any system whose guardians are busy pulling strings and amassing wealth? Or are we merely witnessing the amplitude of sky-high corruption? Once again Banisadr resorts to art history. He turns to paintings with no gravity – to Tintoretto, the Venetian master he admires. In Banisadr's work the ethereal lightness of the brushstrokes applied in a celestial blue leads to dissolution, to a disintegration into abstraction that is, perhaps, the artist's ultimate revenge against duplicitous gatekeepers.

A different temperature reigns in *The Merchants*. Infernal heat pervades this scene of febrile activity. One need not expect a new subject, a new

cast of characters. The merchants may be none other than the gatekeepers, and the gatekeepers none other than the figures that populate *The Charlatans*. The color red provides a new clue or a fresh angle from which to decode and enter the same narrative. This formal choice presents a parallel to the structure Orhan Pamuk used in *My Name Is Red*, a novel Banisadr has read with great attention. In a pace now increased in velocity, in blurred, vibrating actions and in brushstrokes as furtive as underhanded transactions, the frenzy has reached its paroxysm. At this climactic moment of wheeling and dealing, humanity is caught in full action.

Working on *The Merchants*, Banisadr kept visualizing the color of his following picture: *Black 3*. In this painting a sinister abstraction takes over, and remnants of figures are barely detectable in the metallic glow of a nocturnal space. Drilling deeper into human frailties, Banisadr peeks into a single abyss: the graveyard of decency, the endgame of meaning, the craters he saw in Normandy that brought back the trauma and the memory of all those he had stared into as a child in wartime Tehran.

Financial scandals and rampant corruption, derailed ideologies and disputed elections and terrorism and wars waged in the name of high ideals or false pretensions alternate in the headlines of today's news. The urgency of such events calls for testimony. Banisadr, however, adopts a biblical tone and removes his hybrid men and women from contemporary politics. He plants his narrator, who easily switches roles with the viewer, in the towering position of authority – a position that could be occupied by a range of characters, from an all-seeing transcen-

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PIETER BRUEGEL
FALL OF THE REBEL ANGELS 1562
OAK
117 x 162 CM 46.06 x 63.78 INCHES

© KMSKB – MRB&B, BRUSSELS
MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE
PHOTO: GRAFISCH BUREAU LEFEVRE, HEULE

dental being to a surveilling power to a recorder of histories to a quotidian visitor in the gallery. Presenting the facts on the ground as rapidly mumbled hints, he reinforces the elusive nature of truth. Judgment withheld or deferred, the indictments remain muffled through distance and time. Banisadr has read Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, and the description he gives of the book – "an encyclopaedia of conspiracies" – finds echoes in his own work. Banisadr's semiotically produced references and human dramas remain at the threshold of meaning. The stories unravel through clues such as titles, colors and associations with other texts and other paintings and painters. Notwithstanding all explanations, the paintings remain enigmatic because Banisadr's production is nothing less than the very quest for meaning.

Although discussed in this essay in relation to Old Masters, Banisadr very much belongs to a generation of contemporary painters who are rethinking the connection between abstraction and figuration. Like Cecily Brown and Julie Mehretu, Banisadr creates his own narratives with fragments of abstraction. In the end he rejuvenates the genre of history painting by resorting to abstraction and updates abstraction by infusing it with current events.

¹ Remarks by Banisadr quoted in this essay were made in an "artist statement" (2009) or in conversations and e-mail exchanges with the author in October and November 2009. I seize this opportunity to thank him profusely for his generosity.

² For a scholarly study of the myths of the Isma'iliis, see Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'iliis* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1994). For the etymological connection between "hashashin," or "hashishin," and "assassin" see the Appendix of the same source.



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THE GATEKEEPERS 2009
HUILE SUR TOILE OIL ON LINEN DIPTYCH
182.9x274.3 CM 72x108 INCHES



BLACK3 2009
HUILE SUR TOILE OIL ON LINEN
167.6x223.5 CM 66x88 INCHES



THE MERCHANTS 2009
HUILE SUR TOILE OIL ON LINEN DIPTYCH
152.4 x 203.2 CM 60 x 80 INCHES

