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Ali Banisadr, New York, autumn 2013 'When I take elements from other art that I love, I try to understand what they are and use them in the work, rather than have them there just as references'

IN THE GARDEN OF EARTHILY DELIGHTS

Frantic, kinetic, tightly-constructed explosions of dynamic energy - Ali Banisadr's effervescent passion for painting, stories and densely complex composition will be causing a commotion at Sperone Westwater in New York this March. Exclusively for Harper's Bazaar Art, Lucian Harris meets Banisadr in his Manhattan studio.

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Portrait photography by Sueraya Shaheen

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Ali Banisadr makes paintings that are big and emotional, exploding with colour and joyfully brimming with a rich assortment of art historical motifs. Their abstracted surfaces pulsate with expressive brushstroke and colour, swirling gestures, which challenge the eye to explore their layered recesses.

Reticent to release too much too quickly, they unfold to reveal fantastical vistas populated by legions of grotesques. Blurred, ethereal visions in which strange creatures from Bosch and Breugel rub shoulders with legions of warriors and divs from the miniatures of Firdausi's Shahnamah in the stylised realms of a Baroque ceiling or a Flemish landscape.

The 37-year old artist was born in the Iranian capital Tehran but has lived in the United States since the age of 12, first in San Francisco and more recently in New York. His career since he left the New York Academy of Fine Arts in 2007 has been little short of stellar. His large and intense canvases with their ambitiously eclectic visions have ➤

(Below) 'Reflektor' (2014)
(Courtesy of the Artist /
Sperone Westwater Gallery)



earned him considerable plaudits and a fast growing number of admirers.

A series of solo shows with Leslie Tonkonow in New York and Galerie Thaddeus Ropac in Paris and Vienna and inclusion in numerous high profile group shows internationally have seen his works acquired by museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, as well as by power collectors like Charles Saatchi and Francois Pinault. He starts this year with a New York solo show for his new gallery Sperone Westwater (1 March - 19 April) which will undoubtedly further ramp up his reputation and exposure.

I meet Banisadr in his small studio in New York's Long Island City, close to the MOMA extension PS1. His work space is meticulously clean and tidy, far from the bohemian paint splattered environment that one might predict from the chaotic vortices of brushstrokes that cover his canvases, the most recent of which stand propped against each wall. It is an early indication that Banisadr is



(Right) 'The Scream' (2014)
(Courtesy the Artist /
Sperone Westwater Gallery)



an artist not to be easily pigeonholed.

Having previously only seen his work online or in catalogues, standing in front of Banisadr's paintings one is immediately aware of the extent to which they demand both physical proximity and sufficient time to explore the dense tableau of dream-like action that constantly flickers beneath the choppy ebb and flow of the waves of paint that explode across his canvases.

'It's very difficult to get the full impact of my work in reproduction' he says to me as we survey a painting. 'It takes so long for certain things to unfold. You see something and then it goes away again. Figures emerge and then disappear. They demand a certain engagement on the part of the viewer.'

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(Above) 'Aleph' (2014)
(Left) 'All The Hemispheres' (2014)
(All artworks courtesy the artist / Sperone Westwater Gallery)

(Below) 'Burn it Down' (2014) (Courtesy the Artist / Sperone Westwater Gallery)

The immersive effect they create together is very much intentional, recalling the grand-scale atmospheric of Monet's water lilies or the emotive drama of Abstract Expressionism at its most monumental. Banisadr is no action painter, however. The gestural exuberance and slashing brush strokes with which he builds his compositions belie a long and painstaking painterly dialogue that goes into the making of each work.

'One painting will take me about a month and a half', he says. 'It takes a long time just to get started. To get in there and get a feel for where it is going. I don't start off with any kind of plans or references. Sometimes I have an idea of the colour sense, but often that does not even stay once I get started and red will change into green. I let the work speak to me. It becomes a dialogue. It's a very organic process. As I'm working, parts of the painting will open up to me and draw me in.'

All of Banisadr's paintings bubble with a melange of historical devices. They reveal unique combinations of diverse elements, all of which he attributes to an intense period of study during his education.

'Up until my second year in graduate school I had decided that I wasn't going to do any of my own work. I was just going to study other artists and how they worked. Eventually I brought everything from the past and combined it with what I had learned and fused it all together to start making this sort of work.'

His dialogue with the Old Masters and other art of the past is an indulgence, which could easily topple into the sterile territory of postmodern pastiche. Yet, thankfully it is never burdened with over-elaborated constructs. In fact, Banisadr is infatigably enthusiastic about the art that moves him. He talks excitedly about his love for artists as diverse as Durer, Tintoretto, Bacon, and De Kooning, but also of the need to preserve the integrity of his own aesthetic. ▶





Banisadr in action in his studio, 2013

'I've always loved de Kooning. When MOMA showed a retrospective of his work (in 2012) I can't tell you how many times I went to see it,' he says. 'When I take elements from other art that I love, I try to understand what they are and use them in the work, rather than have them there just as references.'

The surreal battle scenes and tangled crowds of grotesques that populate the interior recesses of Banisadr's paintings play out like some kind of blurred hallucinatory reportage of a kind that might suggest a warped refraction of the images of war and conflict that flicker continually from the portals of the world's news media. However, Banisadr insists that rather than containing a legible political commentary, his paintings explore an interior world of indistinct and half-lit metaphysical dreamscapes and are meant to defy any specific associations.

'What narrative elements exist are still to a large degree unspecific. It's never a narrative that is tied to a time, place or historical event. It's more a combination of many things that I am feeling at the time. Whether it's my emotional life, what I am reading, dreams I have had,

**'I WILL KNOW
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art I have been looking at, or music I have been listening to. Often, the resolution of a work is when it satisfies this fusion of elements. Eventually I will know that a work is finished when it stops talking to me. It sometimes takes a few months to really know that my dialogue with a painting has fully concluded.'

Most recently he has expanded onto giant triptychs. Big, decorative and at once cerebral and emotionally expressive, they seem almost tailor-made for the walls of the museums and the mega-rich collectors who have already started to snap them up.

'I enjoy working on large canvases, but often I find it necessary to alternate between large and small works, simply for the change of focus. In a smaller work I like the way that just one or two figures will bring a more iconic quality to the piece.'

For all his meticulous attention to the working of the picture surface, and the copious activity that fills his compositions with a sense of horror



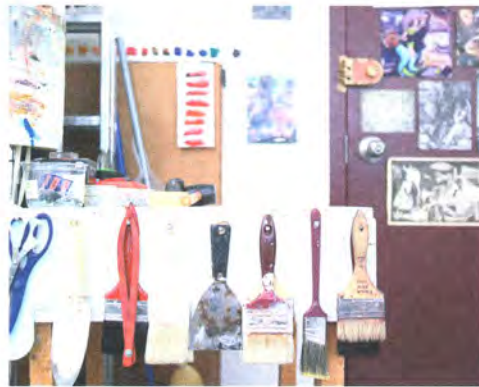


vacui, Banisadr is nevertheless reserved in his rendering of representational detail, preferring to suggest figurative action in blurred, half-seen, peripheral glimpses that dissolve into the movement, colour and texture of the painted surface.

'Figures have to be at a distance for me. I like that perspective. It's very important for me that there is no central focus. I want every single corner of the work to be as interesting as the rest. To have something to attract the eye. I don't want any hierarchy. I want to express that sense of movement, the wind that blows through the whole thing.'

Banisadr's interest in the science of perception in art is abundantly evident. His paintings explore a path between representation and abstraction that betrays a fascination for art history's more experimental exponents of light, colour and movement, whether it be Tintoretto, Turner or Kandinsky.

'I have just been reading Kandinsky's book 'On the Spiritual in Art' he says. 'The whole idea of synesthesia is so interesting. The capacity to see sound and hear colour. I can really identify because my own work has been based on sound for as long as I can remember. When I was a kid growing up in Iran and there were air raids and I would try to make sense of what I was hearing through drawings. I still find that the process of composing a painting becomes almost musical and as I progress it is very much like creating harmony out of the sounds that I hear.'



Banisadr believes that this fascination for the visualisation of sound and rhythm was also part of what drew him to the graffiti scene, which would become one of his formative influences as a teenager living in the United States.

'In the late 1990s there was a real golden age of graffiti in San Francisco. A lot of great artists came there. With graffiti you are always trying to give the work a certain dynamic movement and harmony.'

As much as Banisadr's gestural exuberance recalls his early love for graffiti art it seems also to evoke the calligraphic spirit that runs so deep through the visual culture of Iran.

His ability to weave together elements from diverse traditions, making paintings that can communicate to a diverse international audience without sacrificing the distinguishing stamp of his



(Left) *Alea lacta Est* (2013)
(Below) *'Motherboard'* (2013) (All artworks courtesy the artist/Sperone Westwater Gallery)



(Right) 'The Scream' (2014)
(Far right) 'Stairway' (2014)
(Courtesy the artist / Sperone
Westwater Gallery)



personal identity is one of Banisadr's strengths. As much as he may cite his love for Velasquez or Goya, it is evident that he has also looked very closely at Persian miniature paintings.

'My interest in Persian miniature painting is nothing like the painters who make modern versions of miniature painters. I am more interested in the way they organise a composition and the birds eye viewpoint.'

One senses Banisadr's concern that his ethnicity should not marginalise his work, a pitfall that has proved almost inescapable for so many non-western artists whose cultural and historical references challenge the comprehension of the core international contemporary art audience.

'I never had much connection to Iranian art at all' he says. 'Only recently I've been in a few group shows that has brought me into contact with other Iranian artists, but I get asked to be in so many shows just because the other artists are Iranian or Middle Eastern when really there is no other connection'

Whatever caution he may profess, however, Banisadr clearly relishes the challenge in transcending such cultural boundaries without

(Below) 'Contact' (2014) (Courtesy the artist/Sperone Westwater Gallery)



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(Right) 'Say My Name' (2014)
 (Far right) 'The Cycle' (2014) (Courtesy the
 artist / Sperone Westwater Gallery)



diluting the unique identity of his art. Indeed, such is his insatiable appetite for understanding the great innovations and sublime achievements of artistic expression that the rich and ancient heritage of Iran offers far too much to be ignored.

His triptych 'Fravashi', which was exhibited in the exhibition 'Love Me, Love Me Not' at last year's 55th Venice Biennale was steeped in the influence of Zoroastrian mysticism and mythology, sitting just as comfortably among contemporary artists from Caucasus countries as his works did among the hot stars of contemporary painting included in Victoria Miro's 2013 London group show Cinematic Visions.

Banisadr's inclusion in the Victoria Miro show is the kind of endorsement that is fast carrying him to the pinnacle of the contemporary art world. It is company that he is happy to keep even if he says that he has never really felt part of any group or artistic movement

'I've definitely felt more empathy with the other artists in some of the more recent group shows I've been included in' he says. 'At Victoria Miro it was great to be included with artists I love like Peter Doig and Jules de Ballincourt'

Banisadr says that as much as possible he tries to stay out of the machinations of the art business, yet he clearly possesses the kind of

savvy ambition and focused work ethic necessary to navigate its inevitable demands.

'I find the art market a totally different world, one which I try to leave to my gallery to deal with. I prefer to do my work in the studio. I am aware of it but I really don't find it that interesting.'

Banisadr's paintings exude an almost audacious confidence in his mastery of the medium. His apocalyptic visions bursting forth from giant canvas to grand-scale triptych with a sense of monumental drama that would seem to most befit the great palatial and ecclesiastical commissions that spawned the most awe-inspiring works of the Italian Renaissance. Such lofty challenges would undoubtedly appeal to Banisadr. **HBA**

'Motherboard by Ali Banisadr runs until April 19th at Sperone Westwater, New York www.speronewestwater.com