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Ali Banisadr



Ali Banisadr

By Olivia Sand

It did not take Ali Banisadr (b. 1976 in Tehran, Iran) much time to make a smooth transition from being an art student to becoming a successful full time artist. Graduating in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art, he had his first main solo gallery show the same year. Since then, he has continued to explore the medium of painting, perfecting it in order to create these fascinating pieces that could depict the end of the world, a new beginning or simply the trials and tribulations that affect our communities.

Based in the US since leaving Iran as a child, Ali Banisadr has developed an unusual, and challenging language to bring to life recollections from various backgrounds combined with his imagination. In this interview with the Asian Art Newspaper, he discusses how he creates his work and explains the milestones in his career so far.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:
Your most recent exhibition was exclusively devoted to drawings. Do they relate to your previous paintings?

ALI BANISADR: It is a completely different medium and I view it as a completely different world. For the drawings, I was inspired by film rolls, and the final result actually resembles film rolls, or film strips, featuring a repeated image to be looked at from top to bottom. I used a monoprint technique, reworking the piece with watercolour, ink, and mixed media (colour pencils, etc.).

AAN: How does the medium of drawing fit within your work? These days, it is quite unusual to have a whole show based on drawings.
AB: I never prepare anything for my paintings, and I do not do any

preparatory drawings. As far as drawing goes *per se*, I have been drawing since I was a small child. It is something that I have always done, and have been through different styles of drawing during my student years. This drawings exhibition was based on an idea that I had – and drawing suited this idea. Since I am very fond of etchings, and especially those by Dürer, I paint with one colour and subsequently rework the piece with an etching needle. This 'technique' allows me to complete the etchings the way I want to, instead of using the traditional method. I scratch into it, make lines, and to me, this is drawing.

AAN: Although it may seem premature, would you also consider moving into prints or woodcuts?
AB: I like printmaking, etching, and monoprints a lot, and I am going to

Continued on page 4

news in brief

constructed a modern pavilion while creating landmark exhibitions, innovative public programmes and groundbreaking curricula in the 25 years of its existence. Its mission is to create greater understanding and appreciation of America's ethnic and cultural diversity through the lens of the Japanese American experience. Besides the National Medal, the Museum will be the recipient of \$10,000 plus a visit from StoryCorps, a national non-profit organisation dedicated to recording, preserving, and sharing the stories of Americans from all backgrounds and beliefs.

MONGOLIAN ART, BERKELEY

Silk Road House has organised an exhibition of four Mongolian artists for its first exhibition of 2011. Tumurkhuyag Batjav (b. 1969 in the Province of Khovd), is an illustrator of 16 books in the paper-cut technique and has had solo exhibits in Mongolia and Scotland and joint exhibits in Japan and the US. Chimeddorj Moonon (b. 1965 in the Province of the Sukhbaatar), is a master of fine arts, an illustrator, a wax portrait sculptor and has participated in two state projects (interior design of Mongolian Parliament Palace and Museum of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of Mongolia). He has also worked as a fashion designer for Mongol Costume Museum. Baatarsog Norovsambuu (b. 1967 in the Province of the Khovd), is a master of fine arts and holds a PhD in Art History. He is a paper-cut artist and

has had solo exhibitions in Korea and in the US, as well as participating in numerous shows in Mongolia, Germany, and the UK. Nyamdorj Buyan (b. 1966 in Ulaanbaatar), attended art school in Mongolia and Russia (V. Surikov Moscow State Academy Art Institute) and is a well-known graphic artist and painter. Silk Road House, 1944 University Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94705, tel 510 981 0700, silkroadhouse@yahoo.com, www.silkroadhouse.org.

ARTSCIENCE MUSEUM, SINGAPORE

The world's first ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands, Singapore, opens its doors on 17 February. The museum aims to feature exhibitions that explore the influences and crossings of art and science, media and technology, design and architecture. Within the museum are 21 gallery spaces totalling 50,000 sq ft, which visitors will be able to explore through three main galleries: Curiosity, Inspiration and Expression. The museum will also host major travelling exhibitions curated by leading museums from around the world. A permanent exhibition, *ArtScience: A Journey Through Creativity* showcases the latest ideas in technology, design and culture.

CHRISTIE'S, NEW YORK

Christie's has announced the appointment of Xin Li as Asian Business Development Director. In this capacity, she will be responsible for developing new business in Asia

and managing relations with Christie's most important private collectors from Mainland China and Asia. Li will be based in New York and will travel regularly and extensively throughout Asia. She will also participate in all of Christie's major sales in London, New York, Geneva, Paris and Hong Kong.

JAPANESE APPS

To make life a little easier when visiting Japan for non-Japanese speakers, there has recently been a flurry of publishing of apps (applications) for iPhone users. Tokyo Art Beat (TAB), which searches out art galleries in your vicinity, lists reviews of the exhibitions and gives directions using Google maps. Tokyo Art Beat have also developed a museum coupon application, cleverly named Mupon, which, as you might expect, offers discount coupons to many of the best museums all over the city. Whilst Japan Goggles and Lost in Japan are seemingly miraculous applications that allow users to take photos of Japanese words which is then used to produce an English translation. The apps even work for vertical text: just turn the phone to the right and the whole interface changes to a vertical one. There is also a China Goggles, for help reading Chinese characters.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

In January, the Metropolitan Museum of Art launched

Connections, a new online interactive feature that highlights the perspectives and insights of museum staff on works of art in the Metropolitan's collection.

Connections is presented as weekly four-minute episodes throughout the year on the Museum's website. Episodes are comprised of audio narration and slide shows of the works of art discussed, as well as links to contextual background. Each Connections episode explores a broad theme through the subjective and personal viewpoint of a Museum staff member. Participants will include curators, conservators, scientists, librarians, educators, photographers, designers, editors, digital media producers, technicians, administrators, executive staff, and many other staff. From each online episode, visitors can link to additional information about the works of art: the time period in which they were made, the geographic origins of the works, and where works on view can be found in the Museum's galleries. Connections can be found at www.metmuseum.org/connections.

DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

At the end of last year, the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) opened a new gallery devoted to the arts of the Ancient Middle East that showcases the ancient cultural heritage of present day Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Yemen and Armenia. The display of pottery from the collection includes some of the DIA's oldest objects. More information on www.dia.org.

4 ASIAN ART PROFILE

explore this medium more. However, whenever I think about venturing into something new, it always turns out to be done in a very unconventional way. I tend to find my own way of doing things, a way that works for me.

AAN: When you left Iran on your way to the USA, you lived in Turkey for a few months. Did this have any impact on your work?

AB: My favourite author is the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk. Whenever I read his novels, I know the places he is talking about. Perhaps because I lived there for eight months, there is some connection, but I cannot define it.

AAN: Once you reached California, you became part of a graffiti artists' group. At the time, what made graffiti art so interesting to you?

AB: When I moved to San Francisco, it was the golden age of graffiti art and San Francisco just happened to be at the centre of it. I remember meeting many artists from around the world who came to San Francisco for three or four months. When I moved there, all my friends had become graffiti artists. We had our own little group of artists and spent time discussing ideas. This movement was fantastic, and the mayor of San Francisco even gave us a whole warehouse on whose walls we could paint. Every time we went there, we would meet friends visiting from Italy, Spain, from many places, and do collaborations with them. I really liked that concept. At the time, we were creating something completely different from traditional art.

AAN: Why did it end? Did you feel you had exhausted this medium and needed to move on?

AB: I was never a big fan of spray paint. It did not do what I wanted it to do, whereas oil, for example, does. While I was using spray paint on walls, I was also painting on canvas at home. The work was similar to what I am doing now, but very 'primitive'. I always wanted to do this type of work – creating my own world – but for some reason, it just was not coming out. I felt that I had reached a dead-end. That is when I decided to go to art school and moved to New York. I knew what I wanted to do, all these things I could visualise in my head, but I needed to learn how to do them. I wanted to be in the position to put onto canvas anything that I had in my mind without wondering how to go about it technically.

AAN: Did your time at art school meet its purpose?

AB: Very much so. In my class, maybe 80 percent of the students did not even want to be there. They did not want to work – they were simply lazy. I, on the other hand, was hungry for knowledge because I wanted to learn so I actually took four or five extra classes. I think it is good to try certain things on your own, and then reach a point that leads you to the conclusion: 'now, I need more', as opposed to not trying anything on your own, going to art school, and then wanting to do these things in art school and rebelling against what they are teaching you, which a lot of students, in my experience, seemed to do. They wanted to do this and not do that, and you kept wondering why they were even there?

AAN: Some artists say it is best to forget everything you learned at art school in order to start with a fresh mind and a new approach. What are your thoughts?

AB: In art history, the greatest artists were the ones who had the knowledge, but broke away as opposed to artists that did not have it and started from nothing. My favourite abstract painter is De Kooning, and when he was nineteen, he could draw like Raphael. Later, he broke away from it, but you can see that he had craftsmanship, you could see that he knew how to go about it. On the other hand, you can look



**Detail of
The Gatekeepers**
(2009), oil on linen,
in two pieces,
182.9 x 274.3 cm



The Gatekeepers
(2009), oil on linen,
in two pieces,
182.9 x 274.3 cm

at some abstract painters eager to do abstract painting, but it simply does not look any good. I always believed in learning it first, then forgetting about it, picking and choosing what you want from it, and then moving on, as opposed to rebelling against wanting to learn anything.

AAN: Regarding the time you spent in Iran where you grew up, is it still very vivid in your memory? How does it translate into your paintings?

AB: Yes, it is still vivid. Actually, what made me think about my time in Iran was my second year in art school. When I was getting my Masters, we went to Normandy and to the D-Day site. While I was there, I felt it all looked so familiar to me, and I could not help thinking that I had seen it before. I had all these flashbacks from the time I was in Iran, the Iran-Iraq war, and



The Merchants (2009), oil on linen, 152.4 x 203.2 cm. All images courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg

the bombings. I remembered that I had seen similar things throughout my whole childhood, and I had never made any art about it, never written anything or talked about it. When I came back from France, I decided I was going to make these charcoal drawings based on the sound of explosions that I used to hear at night. That was very satisfying, and I had the feeling they were just coming out. This work prompted me to ask questions, like 'why the war happened?', 'who was involved?', 'who was behind it?', etc. These questions opened a whole flood gate for me to think about world politics in general and world history. Thinking about the experiences in Iran has had a huge impact on the work I do now.

AAN: Why did your family leave Iran?

AB: They wanted to leave in 1978, 10 years before we actually ended up leaving, to move to Europe or America. Everything was in place with the embassy, and then the crisis with the American hostages at the embassy happened and all our documents were lost. So we waited another 10 years. Also, my last name is Banisadr – I am related to the Banisadr who was president for one year and now lives in France. At school, it was strange as sometimes we had to march and say 'death to Banisadr'. At school, they call you by your last name, so it was a very uncomfortable situation for me. There were also various other reasons that persuaded my parents to leave.

AAN: There are many interpretations that can be read into your work, biblical and other meanings. Do you have a deep interest in religion?

AB: I have always been very interested in comparative religion. I am fascinated by religion and I like to know about all faiths. I see it as literature. The *Bible* to me is as interesting as the *Odyssey*, and I read them on the same level.

AAN: Although a lot can be read into your work, there is also a great deal of uncertainty. How do you go about the setting in your paintings?

AB: I think the painting creates its own narrative. I begin the piece which is then followed by a lot of adding and subtracting in order to make it work. I think I am constantly referring to archetypes that I have created in my head, to things that I have taken in. They have created alchemy in my head, creating certain characters that to me can mean five different types of things that I know. It is never one thing, or one place. After a while, it becomes a dialogue between me and the painting, it goes back and forth, pointing me towards something that should be there within the composition.

AAN: There is a lot of movement in your painting. Why such 'intense' composition?

AB: Since I started doing these charcoal drawings that I mentioned earlier, based



on sound and explosions, everything is in motion. Everything is in a state of flux. I never liked anything to be static, because when it is static it becomes similar to a central point. I am not trying to create one central focus, ideally, I want the whole piece to be a central focus. I want to show a system as opposed to a focal point, or to having a 'hero'. I want everything – the figures, the land, the sky – to have equal importance.

AAN: How do masterpieces from earlier decades or centuries fit into the composition of your present work?

AB: Going to museums and looking at paintings I admire is a huge part of my process, as I keep them in my visual memory. When I am painting, all these references that I have taken into my visual memory come together, and help me make certain decisions. More than anything else, it is mainly about internalising certain aspects from these earlier masterpieces. I never directly take something from other paintings. I just like to memorise it and allow it to have its own influence, or mix it with other ideas.

AAN: Your paintings have been subject to very diverse interpretations. How do you feel about this?

AB: I always liked the fact that one thing could be many things, it could be this or that. I never liked it when one thing just resembled itself. For example, considering one of my works, one person may find the subject matter serious whereas another person could see it as theatre, or a set-up, even a joke. I did a painting entitled *In the name of which* had stained glass as one might find in a church, and there are certain characters who could be taken for priests, or they just represent a sheer masquerade. I like that – not being able to make a clear decision which one it is, a serious religious experience or a carnival.

The Charlatans
(2009), oil on linen,
137.1 x 182.8 cm

AAN: How do you go about titling your works?

AB: Sometimes it tells me the title when I am having the dialogue with the work. That is wonderful, and it always works. Other times, I go back to titles that I wrote earlier to see if any match. Also, it could be based on the literature I was reading at the time, and if what I was reading had any dialogue with my painting. It all depends.

AAN: Does one painting develop out of a previous one?

AB: I am always making a statement. Each painting I complete is a continuation of the last, but it does not necessarily mean that I am continuing what the last painting was about. The next painting could be something completely different. For my last show in Paris last year, there was a narrative that went through the whole exhibition.

AAN: From your perspective, how has your work evolved since you graduated from art school?

AB: When I was at undergraduate and graduate school, I was only studying. I just told myself, I was not going to put any part of me in the work, I was not going to rebel, I was just going to learn how things were done. It was not saying anything, it was just me learning technique. The second year at graduate school was when I did the charcoal drawings and that opened up a whole new horizon. It has been three years now, and I think it is becoming clearer in my head what I want to depict and where I want to go with it. Each time I create paintings, I learn new tricks and new ways of doing what I want to do. Hopefully, there has been progress!

AAN: Would you say that works by young Iranian contemporary artists are properly understood in the West, or would you tend to say that we read too much into them?

AB: I was in the Saatchi show in London (*Unwield: New Art from the Middle East*, 2009) and in *Raad O Bargh* (2009) show at Thaddeus Ropac in Paris, but after that, I did not want to do any shows that had anything to do with being in a show merely because I was Iranian. I was completely against that. I just wanted to be part of the show because it fitted and because of my art. Like the Hareng Saur: Ensor and Contemporary Art at the SMAK in Belgium (until February 2011) is perfect for me, and I see a fit. I always stressed the fact that first I was an artist who just happen to be Iranian. I think some of the Iranian artists are taking advantage of the recent boom. They are from Iran and they see the opportunity. A friend of mine referred to that as 'self-orientalisation', which I find very accurate. It is the same with Chinese artists, too. I prefer looking at an artist, liking their work and at the same time realising that they happen to be Chinese than the other way around.

AAN: Where do you see our work going over the next few years?

AB: I am always open to trying out new media. There is a lot that I want to explore in my paintings. I want to reach out. There are many visions that I have and would like to translate into my work. The perfect thing would be if it was like using a computer – I could connect to a printer and just print out.

AAN: Most of your paintings are on linen. Why?

AB: When I go to museums, or galleries, and look at paintings, I tend to study them up close. Canvas is machine-made and it features this perfect pattern that I cannot stand. For me, linen has a much better texture. I have been working on linen for three years, after using canvas which I did not find very satisfactory. Wood is good for the etching technique, I like to use it as it can be so smooth.

AAN: I know that you like the work of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). Why his work specifically?

AB: I feel it is a work that can never be unlocked. There have been so many things written about it, but you still do not know what it is and, to me, when something is not unlocked it is moving. I cannot categorise it. With literature, it is the same thing. What you read stays with you for years and you keep thinking about it. With Bosch, I still think about every painting I have seen. There is still the question in my head, 'could it be this, could it be that?' I guess his paintings are all about morality and they are timeless. It is a system that goes on and on, you could easily relate what he was painting to our present time. Looking at paintings like Brueghel and Bosch, we see the big questions – unanswered – and they will remain unanswered forever because I do not think we will ever reach the intellectual level to understand them.



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