WHERE THE PAINTING WANTS TO GO

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Ali Banisadr is an exception.

An exception because his work defies all the usual explanations or logic one normally brings to the description and understanding of an artist. An exception, too, because the way he conceives of painting and the way he practises it have little to do with the practices of his contemporaries. An exception also because his statements about his art, as well as his paintings themselves, take us well away from the beaten track of present-day creation.

I first came across Ali Banisadr's paintings in London in 2009, at the Saatchi Gallery exhibition *Unveiled: Art from the Middle East*. There were a number of artists involved, none of whom had much in common and some of whom seemed to have nothing to do with the Middle East either, having been born in the suburbs of Paris and now living in Berlin, like Kader Attia, or having been born in Teheran and now living in New York, like Ali Banisadr. The heterogeneous nature of the artists was an encumbrance because it suggested that belonging to the Muslim world might be the only thing the artists had in common, which was not the case and, in many respects, was a Western, postcolonial vision—betrayed by all the implications and connotations of the word *Unveiled*. On the top floor of that exhibition, in a windowless room, there were a few paintings by Ali Banisadr. It was their first appearance in Europe before the group exhibition *Raad O Bargh* in Paris a few weeks later. I had never heard of the artist. Three of his works were up there on the wall. I remember going back to them several times. There was something very disconcerting about them: disconcerting in the context of the exhibition but something inherently disconcerting too, in what they showed. An exception already.

The first thing that marked them out, and the most striking at the time, was the fact that they stood outside the political current, whereas almost all the other works reflected it in some way. In 2009, the religious question was already an important one and the regions lying between the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and Central Asia were all threatened by wars—or were already involved in civil war. The Arab-Israeli conflict, chaos in Iraq, Islamist terrorism, and the devastating consequences of 9/11 were all facts of life. In *Unveiled*, they were widely evoked, commented on and criticised. Fanaticism, integration, nationalism, and imperialism were all far more than mere objects of reference. They were the subject that all the participants had in common, in installations, sculpture, photography, and performances. This was what made that exhibition a lasting landmark for anyone wanting to understand developments in world art at the beginning of the 21st century.

It was quite clear however that if there was one artist to whom that analysis did not apply, it was Ali Banisadr, whose paintings were incapable of that mode of interpretation. They did not represent the tragedy of history, unlike so many works whose reference to modern life was through images and symbols. His works were characterised by the coexistence of fairly regularly organised geometrical constructions with proliferations of pictorial elements, which were neither totally figurative nor properly abstract. They were also characterised by the intensity and multiplicity of the colours. A number of comparisons were suggested in commentaries: Hieronymus Bosch on the Western side, and Persian miniatures to the East. It is also probable that the chromatic sampling along the upper edge of the canvas in *Prisoners of the Sun (TV)* was an allusion to Marcel Duchamp or Gerhardt Richter, or both. Although it is a fact that Banisadr was born in Teheran three years before the beginning of the revolution and four years before the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted eight years and left hundreds of thousands of victims, and it is also a fact that his family emigrated to Turkey and then to the United States in 1988, the year of the end of that conflict, it was very difficult to maintain that those or any other autobiographical or historical facts were perceptible in his works. While *Unveiled*, the exhibition, was essentially a chronicle of political and religious violence, one artist, whose childhood and teenage years were marked by the worst acts of carnage since the Second World War, did not seem to fit in with that conception of art. There was something disconcerting about this. One could only wonder who this artist was, who stood out so markedly, who seemed so different.

He was a painter—of oils on canvas. And this immediately calls forth an observation and a hypothesis. Ali Banisadr was born in Iran and, although he left that country at the age of twelve, it was for California, where there is one of the largest Iranian communities outside Iran. When one considers most of the artists from the Middle East who have appeared on the international scene over the last twenty years, the most striking thing about them is that they work in media other than painting. Photography, performance, installation, and video provide the staple of their exhibitions. The probable reason is doubtless that those were the disciplines that dominated contemporary art from the 1970s until the end of the century and were therefore the ones most taught in art schools, at the expense of drawing and painting, which were often considered obsolete; but also perhaps because there was scarcely any native historical or cultural tradition in the Middle East to nourish the practice of painting—principally for religious reasons. In cultures where the representation of images is forbidden—not to mention the destructive iconoclasm of certain Islamic factions in recent years—wanting to be a painter is not an easy ambition to share, nor one that easily suggests itself. The opposite case obtains in sub-Saharan Africa, China or Europe where sculptural, graphic and pictorial representations abound, whether of beings, things or divinities. The one exception in the Muslim world is Iran, the land of the Persian miniaturists. Although there is no reason to seek out quotations in Ali Banisadr's work from this complex art of representations and ornaments, which developed over the centuries and cast its influence over neighbouring countries, nor to seek pastiches of it, one can nonetheless only suppose that the artist never had cause, as a child or as a teenager, to think that there was anything sinful about his urge to draw and to paint. Indeed, he has himself related how as a child during the bombing of Teheran, he used to draw pictures while his mother looked on—proof, if any were needed, that nothing was done to thwart this personal and precocious need. It is surely no accident that, amongst contemporary artists of Iranian origin, there are a great number of painters—however different their styles and subjects may be.

What it means to be a painter needs to be more explicitly spelt out in the case of Ali Banisadr, a painter totally committed to the process of creating directly on the canvas; in other words, a painter for whom every painting is an adventure whose progress is as unpredictable as its outcome—a process that Banisadr would not seek to predict, either. This needs to be said, because there is a distinction today between two conceptions of painting, two different practices. One operates with images which are already present and public; the other absorbs them and transforms them—or ignores them. In the first, photographs, films, posters or screenshots are at least recognisable and the fact that they are there is often obvious because their presence is the raison d'être of the work. For more than fifty years now, pop art in all its forms has been involved in the vast operation of recycling images from current affairs, the entertainment industry and public relations. The list of artists who work in this way could go on forever—Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Sigmar Polke, Neo Rauch, Martial Raysse, Stéphane Pencréac'h—, because this was and still is the dominant conception of creation. In every case, it is important that the images that have been collected, processed, or hybridised in one way or another—the collages, montages, superimpositions, and silkscreen prints—it is important that those images be identifiable and their subject recognisable, so that we can interpret them. The interpretation may be sociological, political, economic or psychological; it makes no difference. It is there on display and gives rise to decoding and analysis, in other words, to discourse. The first works to incorporate fragments of our ordinary, quotidian visual life were Robert Rauschenberg's *Combine Paintings*. They took up and amplified what had already been a revolutionary idea: the Cubists' «papiers collés» and the Dada collages.

The other conception of creation does not begin with a

recycling of already existing images, which does not mean that the artist necessarily works without them, or that the artist is not living in the present. But, broadly speaking, the difference is that the artist's work actually begins on the blank canvas, whereas, in the previous case, the canvas is the surface onto which, before proceeding to the painting itself, images and outlines from contemporary reality are projected. The artist processes them or reproduces them, simplifies them or orchestrates them, but whatever he or she does, it is done according to something resembling a method. The artist executes a project, whose complexities he or she controls and whose outcome can essentially be anticipated. In the other conception, the artist creates the visual elements or causes them to appear as he or she goes along, and these elements are created without any previous reference point. The artist commits himself or herself to the process without any pre-established reference. Painting then becomes a constantly renewed empirical experiment. The artist engages upon it without knowing how long the process will last or how and when the painting will be finished. For over half a century now, this conception of painting has been a distinctly minority one; mainly because of the expansion of pop art and, more recently, its neo-pop variations. Nevertheless, it was Francis Bacon's approach right up to his death, and it is Adrian Ghenie and Marc Desgrandchamps's approach today. These are artists for whom the painting is conceived the moment that it is created, and not before.

This is Ali Banisadr's conception of painting. One only needs to look carefully at one of his works, whether it is ten years old or one painted last year, in order to see this. Why so? In the first place, because it is impossible to define what we are looking at. Ali Banisadr once said "I want the viewer to see everything from every angle." We should follow his advice, but he also warns us that there are puzzles in store. "It's cubism; it's Persian Miniature paintings. Persian Miniature paintings are cubist—everything is flipped up." Flipped up, muddled, and sometimes shortened. Any attempt at describing a canvas is actually a fairly desperate exercise. Standing a few metres away from the work, differences of density are easily observed. There are zones in which a lot of coloured brushstrokes and stains are crowded and concentrated. They stand out against areas where a colour is more widely spread, not uniformly, but streaked with shades of varying density and intensity. This general layout tends to organise the canvas either horizontally or vertically. But when one goes up closer, when the eye begins to scan the surface from a foot or so away, what one sees is what we have just called brushstrokes and stains, for want of more precise words. To state that the canvas is punctuated by marks of colour, that there are parallel strips and lines and distinctly outlined, curved shapes is perfectly admissible. Other shapes, however, seem to tend towards a resemblance to bodies, but this is no more than a vague suggestion that the viewer is free to interpret in his or her own subjective way. As to whether they are human bodies, in most cases that would be going too far; there is just not enough evidence. It would also be unwise to try and categorise the works according to the usual categories of landscape or still life.

If the probing eye is unable to pick out natural forms, perhaps we should call them abstractions. But this reassuring solution is no more satisfying either for, although the eye does not identify figures that could clearly be described as, for example, a woman, a fish, or whatever, it nonetheless experiences the vivid presence of shifting volumes and, more often than not, they are biomorphic. Sensations of proliferation, swarming, swirling, expanding and contracting appear and disappear in turn. The most "populated" areas are animated by a kind of organic life. At times, you think you can see a bird, a monster or a ghost. Anatomical fragments appear on the surface from time to time—hands and limbs. But then, an impression forces itself upon you of being immersed in liquid, plunged into who knows what underwater abyss, and you seem to sink into the depths lit by some strange, murky light—or to be flying through infinite, interstellar space, as if in some highly suggestive science-fiction movie; or to be watching shifting crowds from an extreme height—moving perhaps in panic, or drunkenness, or maybe dancing. And yet, this kind of decoding is only valid for certain works: *We haven't landed on earth yet* (2012) or *Ran* (2013), for example. For other works, one's probings lead to no satisfactory answers. It is particularly remarkable that, on the one point which ought to present no difficulty in elucidating—i.e. whether these paintings are two-dimensional or whether, on the contrary, they suggest three-dimensional space—no definite answer can be given, since to decide one way or the other amounts to offering as an objectively verified conclusion what is really no more than a purely individual perception; which is basically like elbowing one's way in, between the work and the spectator, who is never the same person, anyway. As the artist has himself remarked, "I think everybody brings in his or her own fears, anxieties, and background." This opens the way to a multiplicity of feelings, reactions and interpretations.

His painting, then, is neither totally abstract nor indisputably figurative. There is no general rule, even within the compass of one painting—and even less so with regard to the complete oeuvre. It is therefore difficult to write about Ali Banisadr, because his work is a challenge both to the eye and to language. To come back for a moment to the distinction between the two conceptions of painting that I suggested above, a pop art painting can and must be defined by what it shows, while a painting by Ali Banisadr defies definition. This finds its echo in the artist's own observations when quizzed about it. "After many hours of being alone in the studio and wrestling with the painting is when actually the magic starts to happen and then I can truly get in touch with the painting and begin a dialogue. I know I am in the zone of paining when time disappears and I am not aware of time or space any longer." These words describe a relationship with creation that involves waiting for the moment when "the painting opens up to me". There is no preconceived idea of what is coming; there are no sketches. The experiment is achieved directly, without preparation and, of course, with no predetermined subject. "My work always begins very abstract and it is all about composing the work at the beginning stage, I never know where the painting wants to go but follow through with it as I work, it is a very visceral process. As I work I start to see hints and fragments of figures and what the painting wants to become. There are larger strokes at the beginning and more body movement is used, its about the action and the larger effects but then there are days where I am working like a Miniaturist on a section of a painting, I like the Micro and the Macro, where you can view the paintings in a different way based on where you are standing. So when I work there is a lot of walking back and forth in front of the painting to be able to see it from every distance. There is also a lot of adding and taking away of the paint, some parts will end up becoming very thick and layered and some parts are thin and you can even see the fabric of the Linen."

His description of the process confirms what one experiences looking at his painting. The diversity of the sensations that take possession of the spectator is a reflection of the diversity of effects that the artist experiments with in the process of painting and that he either keeps or rejects as he goes. The disconcerting puzzle of identifying what one sees and finding meaning in it reflects the painter's own account of how the genesis of the painting evolves beyond his control: he has to somehow understand "where the painting wants to go", as if it were an autonomous being endowed with free will, rather than him creating it. "Automatism", with its suggestion of a largely unconscious process, would seem to be an apt description here, except that the word is perhaps too overloaded with surrealist connotations. But it sounds very much like the process that Ali Banisadr himself is describing when he says, "I also take images of the painting so before I go to bed I can look at it and think about how I can solve it when I get up in the morning." One could be forgiven for thinking that he leaves the business of creating to a subconscious, non-rational process that takes place while he is asleep. Other things he has said seem to confirm this analysis: his need to be alone in the studio—"I like to work alone and have never had assistants since I only can work when alone"; the attention he pays to ideas that come to him before he wakes up—"the best", and the most fertile: "I like it when an idea in the morning can lead up to the rest of the day in the studio". And this strange statement adds more weight to the analysis: "The paintings for me are very encyclopedic, they are not about a certain time, culture or place but always in and out of time and a mix. Worlds within worlds, a Hallucinogenic space."

One last point: how is it that Ali Banisadr's painting has left such a mark in so short a time and in such a generalised way? The answer surely lies in its inherent qualities: its energy, the pulse that drives it, and the teeming variety of the apparitions that populate it. But also in its inherent strangeness, the barriers that it throws up to our gaze and understanding, its density, and what we might call its opacity. We live in a world that is overloaded with obvious and spectacular images, a world where one is permanently assailed by an ultra-rapid flow of pictures and information. They fly into view, they dazzle and they disappear. They are collective, universal—the same for everyone. Ali Banisadr's painting is just the opposite. It requires time and does not give itself up immediately. It appeals to the imagination, which is a strictly individual faculty, as is our visual perception, which it excites to the highest degree. It gives rise to dreams, being itself a product—at least in part—of subconscious, night-time activity. A "hallucinogenic space" indeed. To enter into that space, to wander about in it and to lose oneself there, is to stand for a while at a distance from the world—alive and alone, in a state comparable to the solitude of the artist in his studio. Alive—that's the important word.

Note: Quotations from the artist are taken from his interview with Emily McDermott "How Ali Banisadr holds memory", *Interview*, March 2014, and from correspondence with the artist in September 2015.