facing page
Riders on the Storm (detail)
2018
Oil on linen
208.3 × 304.8 cm (82 × 120 in.)

THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

David Anfam

History and art make tricky bedfellows. Some artists respond outright to historical events – more often than not terrible – and their politics. Among the most obvious are Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1815) and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Others seem to sidestep these confrontations. Think of Johannes Vermeer's serene interiors realised against the background of an onerous domesticity with fifteen children. Likewise Henri Matisse, whose joyous late cut-outs evolved in the shadow of cancer and his daughter's torture by the Gestapo. Another creative type is harder to categorise. Cognisant of the world's woes, they avoid both overt polemic and Olympian detachment. Instead, the universal, symbolism, allegory and ambiguity come into play. A few random instances might number J.M.W. Turner (hardly untouched by the Napoleonic wars), Max Beckmann (subtly incorporating Weimar Germany's gloom and glitter into his moody set-pieces) and the Abstract Expressionists (heirs to the twentieth century's myriad tragedies). Ali Banisadr leans towards this third trend, his art engaged yet distant enough to grasp the wholeness enfolding the world's sound and fury.

Banisadr's familiarity with nationalist violence since his birth in Tehran in 1976 has been oft-told. Suffice it to say the Iranian Revolution erupted three years later followed by the Iraqi war – Banisadr knew at first-hand as a child what being bombed meant – forcing his family to emigrate to Turkey, then California and his ensuing art studies in New York. Banisadr is, therefore, an émigré and exile, replete with the complex perspectives, ties and emotions associated with such a condition. If absence proverbially makes the heart grow fonder, it might also make the mind grow sharper.

In American art, one thinks of Arshile Gorky's intense psychological relationship to his native Armenia and the Turkish genocide, as well as the transatlantic stowaway Willem de Kooning's dialogue with the Netherlandish old masters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder.[1] In literature, notable instances include the dyed-in-the-wool Irishman James Joyce writing *Ulysses* (1922) in Zürich, Trieste and Paris or Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), perforce composed in Istanbul without his Berlin library.[2] Banisadr shares this mix of acuity and remove. Taking the G Line subway train to Classon Avenue to visit the artist in his immaculate studio, I pondered on the divide, geographical and conceptual, separating Tehran from Brooklyn's Clinton Hill. In turn, it brought a timely reminder that we still suffer, now with a vengeance, a quintessential social ill from the last century: the mass migration of peoples. As T.S. Eliot summoned in 'The Waste Land' the plight of the wretched of the earth between the two wars:

> What is that sound high in the air
> Murmur of maternal lamentation
> Who are those hooded hordes swarming
> Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
> Ringed by the flat horizon only[3]

The two Gulf conflicts, the Syrian civil war, the ongoing strife in Yemen and kindred catastrophes have turned the Middle East into the fate that the Balkans once suffered – a deadly arena for the Great Powers and umpteen sectarian groups, except on a far huger scale. No wonder Banisadr has devised titles like *Exxon* (2007), *Time for Outrage* (2011), *Hypocrisy of Democracy* (2012) and *Broken Land* (2015). Also, more than once he has alluded to W.B. Yeats:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity[4]

With Yeats's 'The Second Coming' the register shifts from politics to apocalypse since the verse concludes with a reference to the 'beast' of Revelation.[5] Here, Banisadr meshes with the zeitgeist.

Ever the perfect gauge of popular sentiment, Hollywood, starting in the 1970s (a dystopian decade, from the bombing of Cambodia at its start to the fall of the Shah at its finish, not to mention the 1973–74 OPEC oil crisis), has developed the fantasy, science fiction and horror film into a mass-market genre, further abetted by the millennium's advent. At one

William Blake
The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun
c.1803–05
Feather, watercolour, graphite and incised lines
43.7 × 34.8 cm (17.2 × 13.7 in.)
Brooklyn Museum, New York
Photo: AKG Images

1 David Anfam, 'De Kooning, Bosch and Bruegel: Some Fundamental Themes', *The Burlington Magazine* 145 (October 2003), pp. 705–715.

2 On a personal note, I recall completing an essay about the German artist Jonas Burgert while far from London in São Paulo during a record heat wave early last year. To rephrase Samuel Johnson's quip about hanging, the strain focused my mind wonderfully.

3 T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' [1922], in T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909–1962 (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 77. Banisadr's *What the Thunder Said* (2007) quotes the title to this fifth section of Eliot's poem.

4 W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in A. Norman Jeffares, ed., *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry* (London: Pan Books, 1974), pp. 99–100.

5 Of which there are actually two: the first marine (Revelation 13:10), the second terrestrial (13:11-18).

end of this scale stands the whimsical wizardry fueling the *Harry Potter* films; somewhere in the middle is the dramatic cyber-morphology that *The Matrix* (1999) and its numerous offshoots/imitators typify; and at the other limit are the apocalyptic horror fictions initiated by *Alien* (1979) in outer space and a book such as Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* (1981) and its cinematic variants landed gruesomely on earth. Banisadr's ubiquitous changeful personages, at best half-decipherable and the more hypnotic for it, parallel this fascination with gods, monsters, myth and metempsychosis. Thus in his studio a reproduction from William Blake's *The Great Red Dragon* watercolour series rubs shoulders with a copy of 'Speech of the Birds', a twelfth-century Persian poem by Farid ud-Din Attar (c.1145–1221). As the former addresses terrifying revelations, so the latter offers an exquisite parable of mystery and spiritual enlightenment. It further elucidates the riddles signaled by, say, *Language of the Birds* (2018) and *We Work in Shadows* (2017):

> What shadow is ever separated from its maker?
> Do you see?
> The shadow and its maker are one and the same,
> so get over surfaces and delve into mysteries.[6]

As for *Trust in the Future* (2017), its titular tidings might suggest the two-way time travel in *Back to the Future* (1985). Nevertheless, the film was saccharine enough to yield a stage prop for the Reaganite ideology, 'It's morning in America' (a highly successful 1984 TV Republican campaign ad). A big fan of the movie, President Reagan hymned its promise in his 1986 State of the Union Address: 'Never has there been a more exciting time to be alive, a time of rousing wonder and heroic achievement. As they said in the film *Back to the Future*, 'Where we're going, we don't need roads'.'[7] Maybe voters would have done well to bookmark the year when the utopian hogwash originated: 1984.

Hieronymus Bosch
The Garden of Earthly Delights
1490–1500
Oil on wood
205.6 × 386 cm (80.9 × 151.9 in.)
Museo del Prado, Madrid
Photo: AKG Images

Moreover, 'trust me (and I'll build you a better future)' has been the con sold by countless dictatorial monsters, from Adolf Hitler to Richard Nixon, Margaret Thatcher and George W. Bush's promise for a democratic Iraq. Hence 'Trust in the Future' sounds at the least ironic, at the worst, a warning.[8] If Banisadr and Hollywood trade in comparable mysteries, hopes and fears, he differs sharply from the dream merchants in the intellectual breadth and depth fortifying his ongoing project to explore the world's folly. This begs the question of how to survey such a macrocosm while still upholding its vital, intriguing minutiae? In short, to look simultaneously from afar and close-up – a recurrent dualism in Banisadr's visuality. The answer lies in a venerable tradition that he holds dear.

With humankind's increasing globalisation in the early modern period – starting with Christopher Columbus's voyages from 1492 onwards and Vasco de Gama's discovery of the sea route to the East in 1498 – new spatial perspectives dawned. On the one hand, cartography gathered pace, shaping our eventual grasp of the globe. On the other hand, when this vantage point coincided with theological credos from the late Middle Ages, the prospect grew dark. That is, the more lofty and panoramic the gaze, the greater its propensity for encompassing everyday foolishness and malice. Thus, the bird's eye viewpoints adopted by Bosch and Bruegel, which remain crucial for Banisadr. In the words of a specialist: 'Seen from this perspective, the world appeared like a vast stage or amphitheater in which human life was an absurd spectacle.'[9] In fact, no text on Banisadr can omit to mention/illustrate Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Notwithstanding, it is food for thought that the triptych's outer wings depict the earth's creation in a nocturnal greenish grisaille not unlike the benighted recent painting that the artist regards as his version of an etching. Similarly, this somber exterior contrasts with the brilliant colours within. The polarity echoes Banisadr's alternation between monochrome – mostly an indefinable, cool indigo shade specially mixed – and the dazzling chromatic motley prevalent elsewhere.

Less discussed, Albrecht Altdorfer's *Battle of Alexander at Issus* ranks among the most spectacular painted panoramas – spectacle's lure for good and bad must engross Banisadr. The Altdorfer is apposite on several counts. Firstly, it depicts the defeat of the East (the Persian Darius III) by the ancient pre-crusading West (Issus is near the border of modern Turkey and Syria). Second, the vast sky's inky blueness approaches that of the monoprints in ink on paper (now numbering around ten) as well as

Albrecht Altdorfer
The Battle of Alexander at Issus
1529
Tempera on wood
158.4 × 120.3 cm (62 × 47 in.)
Alte Pinakothek, Munich
Photo: AKG Images

their roiling, albeit diminutive, drama.[10] Third, as one art historian writes, Altdorfer reduced the protagonists so that 'even Alexander and Darius are but transitory dots on this landscape.'[11] Should these dots and dashes, which populate Banisadr's style down to his enigmatic charcoal drawings, also reference the digital image and pixilation,[12] it would be a typical move to wed past and present. Fourth, the Altdorfer confirms that the aspect from on high seems a natural for capturing struggle and chaos rather than harmony – were a pun appropriate, a thousand and one fights appear to be happening – which leads to the last issue. Namely, 'the ebb and flow of battle makes it difficult to distinguish initially between the two sides.'[13] Like the effect hovering over many compositions by Banisadr, the mood is troubled and poetic, as articulated memorably in Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach':

> For the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy nor love nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.[14]

That is, the erstwhile stable, diurnal dominion turns upside-down into nighttime melancholy.

The limen where opposites mingle or swap places offers a key to Banisadr's closely fought, so to speak, pictorial battles. No clear winner emerges because gestural flux reigns, a sensorial flood such that sounds are liable to precipitate hues, attesting to Banisadr's well-known penchant for synaesthesia. 'There are chaotic sounds', he remarks, 'and they're all somehow merging at best, or more often bumping into each other. It's often about holding opposite views in my head at the same time.'[15] Of course, real-life politicians' polar gush reinforced, though malignantly, this sleep of reason. To the Islamic fundamentalists America became 'The Great Satan', while Trump and his hawkish crew have since re-demonised Iran in contrast to President Obama's bridge-building diplomacy. *Plus ça change*. With the international moral compass askew perhaps the most an artist can attain is a truthful retort to shambolic hypocrisy. The mixing is all. Bosch and Bruegel, notwithstanding their Christian morality, knew it. A comparable awareness underlies Banisadr's thoughts:

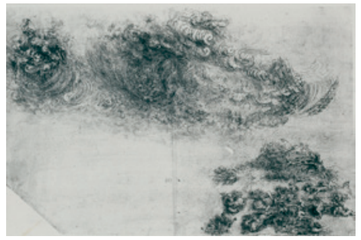
> I'm fascinated by how systems function, be it religious, corporate or political. When I deal with it visually, breaking down systems makes me at easc. That's why the work is always from a bird's-eye point of view. You're looking at worlds within worlds, but as a whole, it's a system function. To me, not getting caught up in a political situation – Republican, Democrat, whatever – is having that bird's-eye view. I like to zoom out of the situation so I can see it all and don't get caught up in the little things down there.[16]

Having elevated himself to an omniscient spectator, what does Banisadr behold? Again, Bosch and Bruegel are at hand. Simply stated, the *theatrum mundi* and its philosophy – all the world's a stage (to translate the Latin phrase's gist) upon which humans enact their vices. For the two Netherlandish painters this scenario spelt a topsy-turviness. To quote 'Folly' personified by the Renaissance humanist Erasmus: 'There is no show like it. Good God, what a theatre! How various the actions of fools!'[17] And the *theatrum mundi* was not an exclusively Western paradigm. The Persian philosopher Omar Khayyam envisaged its stage as a chess game. The ludic element continues in Banisadr's painterly harlequinade, ranging from dire (especially the monochromes) to carnivalesque (especially the compositions that flutter like rainbow-hued confetti).

The carnivalesque pivots upon ambiguity, reversals, excess, revelation and concealment[18] – thereby striking to the heart of Banisadr's pictorial universe. Rather than labour formal comparisons with Bosch and Bruegel, it may be fresher to consider their ideological intricacy. Bosch's iconography has proven so hermetic that art history has still not pinpointed its precise significance beyond the manifest parade entwining sinners and saintliness, horror and ribaldry, the plebian and the fantastic. These traits blend in a veritable visual *Wunderkammer*, the cornucopia that has by now made *The Garden of Earthly Delights* a perennial object of wonder. To state its core modality – in-betweeness – the literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov offers a useful insight: 'The fantastic… may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvellous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre.'[19] *A fortiori*, Banisadr foregrounds both of Todorov's sightlines.

The marvellous resounds in his titles. *Growth* (2016) (nothing is more wondrous than this natural phenomenon); *The Levanter* (2017) (the Mediterranean wind's nomenclature has crafty Orientalist overtones); *Beyond the Sea* (2017) (which portends some fabulous terra incognita and may pun on the artist's blues[20]); and *The Building of Icarus* (2018) (a cautionary tale about human aspirations to miraculous flight).[21] But not by words alone does Banisadr convey these qualities. Every shape-cum-stroke appears

Pieter Bruegel the Elder
The Netherlandish Proverbs
c.1525–1569
Oil on oak panel
117 × 163 cm (46 × 64 in.)
Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin
Photo: AKG Images



Leonardo da Vinci
Hurricane over Horsemen and Trees/A Tempest, c.1517–18
Black chalk, pen and ink and wash with touches of white heightening
27.0 × 40.8 cm (10.6 × 16 in.)
Royal Collection, Windsor
Photo: AKG

on the brink of shifting into something else. No sooner do we glimpse the semblance of a figure, a bird's beak, a turban, sumptuously patterned robes and so forth, than they melt into the warp and weft formed by the bravura brushwork (other implements are employed too). This swoops, stops and accelerates as it evaporates into cacophony – half blizzard, half flack – in the compositions' upper reaches. Uncanny, too – as Sigmund Freud identified the 'unheimlich' – are these phantasmagorias permeated with repetitions, labyrinths animated to the pitch wherein lifelike presences and objects fuse.[22] Here painting configures the 'effacement of the limit between subject and object' Todorov discerned in the fantastic, adding that musical sounds heard

6 Attar, trans. Sholeh Wolpé, *The Conference of the Birds* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017), p. 18.

7 'President Ronald Reagan's Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union'; C-SPAN (February 4, 1986).

8 Cf. Banisadr's pungently named *They Build It Up Just To Burn It Back Down* (2013).

9 Walter S. Gibson, Bruegel (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), p. 77.

10 Despite, or perhaps because of, the staggering detail, Altdorfer compresses it with great aplomb into a mere 62.5 × 47.5 inches panel.

11 Jeffrey Chips Smith, *Northern Renaissance* (London & New York: Phaidon Press, 2004), p. 319.

12 Lily Wei, 'Fire and Ice', in *Ali Banisadr: Trust in the Future* (New York: Sperone Westwater, 2017), p. 8.

13 Smith, op. cit., p. 376.

14 Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach' [1851], in Christopher Ricks, ed., *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). p. 454.

15 Banisadr, below, Negar Azimi, 'In Conversation with Ali Banisadr' p. 18.

16 Emily McDermott, 'How Ali Banisadr Holds Memory', *Interview* (March 2014)

17 Desiderius Erasmus, trans. Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, *Praise of Folly* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, [1512], 1998), p. 50.

18 For an excellent concise account, see Tim Hyman and Roger Malbert, *Carnivalesque* (Brighton: Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, 2000). On the inherent obscurity associated with storytelling, see the brilliant theoretical analysis by Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press: 1979).

19 Tzvetan Todorov, trans. Richard Howard, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [1970], 1973), p. 41.

20 The etymology of 'ultramarine' derives from the Latin *ultra* (beyond) + *mare* (sea).

21 *The Fall of Icarus* (2018) followed.

22 Freud hypothesized that the hallmarks of the uncanny included repetition, doublings, effacement, animism and a confusion between the living/the lifeless; Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' [1919], in James Strachey, trans. and ed., *Freud: Art and Literature* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 335–376.

Masqud of Kashan
The Ardabil Carpet
1539–40
Hand knotted woollen pile on silk warp and weft
Victoria & Albert Museum, London
Courtesy: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Photo: Victoria & Albert Museum

without any instrument present belonged to the same structural semiotic instability.[23] Think, since the tenor is shrewdly orientalist, the snake charmer's piping.

The works on paper in ink and other media modulate from the inchoate to fleeting hints of more recognisable appearances, particularly the grotesque heads and curlicue or attenuated bodies drawn by the seventeenth-century French printmaker Jacques Callot (Martin Schongauer's spiky late Gothic idiom anticipated the stylisations). In spirit, their precursor is Leonardo da Vinci, who urged the artist to find inspiration in stains on walls, ashes from the fire, clouds and mud.[24] *Non finito* is the name that fits this ultra-serious game because metamorphosis by definition knows no bounds.[25] Leonardo targeted its cosmic energies in his deluges and tempests where wind and water shatter formerly integral entities so that interior and exterior merge.[26] When Banisadr declared, 'the painting starts to have a life of its own',[27] he yoked, in typical syncretic fashion, Leonardo's appeal to inventiveness and Jackson Pollock's absorption in his medium: 'When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing… I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.'[28] So does Banisadr. A brief excursus on his technique(s) is appropriate.

A formidable technician, Banisadr's tools run the gamut from conventional paintbrushes to more unconventional mark-making means. These include big brooms and using the full swing of his arm with a cloth. Certain works on paper develop in a tray of water with ink on its surface enabling him to draw with the latter as its floats (do distant memories of the craft of paper marbling lurk?). Others stem from painting directly on the print-making roller, which Banisadr then drags onto the paper as stripes. Next he elaborates the image with ink, watercolour, pencils, et cetera. The finished pieces resemble film strips – successive traces of process, a subject suspended in motion (again, the sense of things *in media res* and in-between states). In the paintings additive methods meet subtractive ones: diverse applications of the oil paint contend with equally inventive strategies to drag and scrape it away. Allied to the fine-grained Belgian linen (Banisadr finds cotton duck 'mechanical') the multiform strokes – swirling in crisscross sweeps, by any other name gestural *contrapposto* in pigment[29] – establish an impression akin to blurring. The blur has three prime attributes. It conveys movement, mediates the opposing poles of definition/formlessness (the *informe*) and hints at Banisadr's response to Leonardo's mystery-laden *sfumato*.[30] Commentators rightly ascribe much influence to medieval Persian miniatures. Certain implications follow.

Excelling the miniatures in fame and complexity are Persian carpets, such as the one in the Victoria and Albert Museum. With a staggering 25 million knots it embeds a miniaturist craft sensibility within grand dimensions,[31] rather as Banisadr combines large free-form brushwork with minuteness. Similarly, the Islamic ban on images led the carpet makers to engineer a hide-and-seek with recognisable motifs concealed within the arabesques and overall decorative 'haze' – a perceptual blur caused by the detail's sheer proliferation. Banisadr does the same for altogether different purposes. Furthermore, the multitudinous carpets resolve in the

Max Ernst
The Attirement of the Bride
1940
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice
Oil on canvas
129.6 × 96.3 cm (51 × 37.9 in.)
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice
Courtesy: © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018
Photo: Guggenheim Collection

23 Todorov, op. cit., p. 116.

24 Leonardo da Vinci, *The Codex Urbinas*, posthumously compiled sometime before 1542 by Francesco Melzi.

25 As such, it fosters what Michel Foucault termed a 'heterotopia' to denote disparate, disorientating and subversive agglomerations; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, [1966], 1970), pp. xv–xviii.

26 The two paintings *Interior* and *Exterior* date from 2015.

27 Banisadr, below, Negar Azimi, 'In Conversation with Ali Banisadr' p. 17.

28 Jackson Pollock, 'My Painting', *Possibilities* I (Winter 1947–48), p. 48.

29 Banisadr greatly admires Jacopo Tintoretto, who based his compositions on arcs and similar intertwined designs.

30 I am indebted to the artist for explicating his various technical procedures.

31 Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), pp. 364–368.

observer's eye into a tapestried effect filled with dots and dashes. If those marks in Banisadr's paintings and charcoals advert to cyberspatial digitisation, they may also inherit a touch of Islam's richest decorative feats (architectural, woven, written or painted). But Banisadr – perish the thought – is no decorator.

On the contrary, Banisadr approaches the existential foundations to pattern and ornament, profoundly understood. In his magisterial study of decorative art, E.H. Gombrich cites Goethe: 'If to the Infinite you want to stride/Just walk in the Finite to every side.'[32] The implication is that humanity balances two urges, the physical and the spiritual: *horror vacui* versus *amor infiniti*.[33] At the zenith of its intricate virtuosity – seen in the feats of Islamic craftsmen – patterns instill a sense of order into chaos, making sense of a senseless world. *Mutatis mutandis*, Banisadr's interlaced spatiality – warps, folds, layers, blots abound – reflects the psychological knots attendant upon our remaining physical beings in a cyber-reality that increasingly dematerialises into multi-dimensionality.[34] Yet it also bespeaks the need to test constraints alongside an ultimate elision of fixity. This is why his favourite Abstract Expressionist is de Kooning. For the Dutchman, 'content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny – very tiny, content.'[35] Yet de Kooning was also the practitioner par excellence of the expansive painterly gesture. Combine the two and the equation's factors cancel each other in provocative tension. To quote de Kooning: 'That's what fascinates me – to make something I can never be sure of, and no one else can either.'[36] To quote Banisadr: 'I want the viewer to see everything from every angle.'[37] A wondrous bafflement, as of the expectancy felt at a crossroads leading in multiple directions, unites them.

Whether it be Bosch, de Kooning or Banisadr, common threads run across the ages and continents. Eternal verities assert that change is the sole constant, while earthly existence combines extremes. Evil and ugliness always stalk us, but so do goodness and beauty. To perceive one side alone divides the indivisible. Rather, the secret to comprehending life *sub specie aeternitatis* rests upon acknowledging that alpha makes no sense, as it were, without omega. Opposites attract, nay, demand each other.

This logic may explain Banisadr's attraction to Max Ernst's legerdemain in which alchemy is a prominent theme together with demonic avian creatures juxtaposed with a seraphic female.[38] Alchemical lore in essence targets change, seeking to transmute base matter into gold, thereby uniting opposites, the storied *coniunctio oppositorum*.[39] It constitutes a metaphor for the human condition. We can aspire to the heights or sink to the lowest depths.[40] A visionary mindset may be necessary to embrace both. Whatever his faith or philosophy, Bosch discerned a parity linking damnation

Hieronymus Bosch
The Garden of Earthly Delights (detail)
1490–1500
Oil on wood
205.6 × 386 cm (80.9 × 151.9 in.)
Madrid, Museo del Prado
Photo: AKG Images

and salvation. Amid the leftward panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, apparently depicting Paradise, the Saviour's strange reddish tint may signify the Antichrist.[41] Even more surely, Blake recognised that we issue from the coupling of the supernal and the infernal, our mortal destiny poised between the two. In 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' Blake prophesied, 'Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence.'[42] A later American poet, Wallace Stevens, renewed his European precursor's holism:

> His firm stanzas hang like hives in hell
> Or what hell was, since now both heaven and hell
> Are one, and here, O terra infidel[43]

Stevens's message is that art's awesome artifice replaces what was once religion, thus restoring enchantment to an all-too-secular age.[44] Ali Banisadr's creative vision – wherein worlds collide only to coexist – exerts this powerful spell.[45]

32 E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1984), p. 63.

33 Ibid., pp. 79ff.

34 See Nicholas Baume, ed., *Super Vision* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2006) and Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space. Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass & London: The MIT Press, 2000),

35 Willem de Kooning, 'Content Is A Glimpse', [1963], in *The Collected Writings of Willem de Kooning* (Madras & New York: Hanuman Books, 1988), pp. 82–83.

36 Harold Rosenberg, 'Interview with Willem de Kooning', *ARTnews* 71 (September 1972), p. 59.

37 Ali Banisadr, in Philippe Dagen, 'Where the Painting Wants to Go', in *Ali Banisadr: In Media Res* (Paris: Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, 2015), p. 12.

38 On the alchemical themes, see David Hopkins, 'Max Ernst's 'La Toilette de La mariée'', *The Burlington Magazine* 133 (April 1991), pp. 237–244.

39 Serendipitously, the word 'alchemy' derives from the Arabic noun 'al-kīmiyā'.

40 Cf. Ali Banisadr, in 'Boris Groys in Conversation with Ali Banisadr', in *Ali Banisadr: One Hundred and Twenty Five Paintings* (London: Blain|Southern, 2015), p. 22: 'In the past… Man would strive to become a god or angel, moving towards 'that' direction. But now it's animal, man and machine, going backwards – towards the animal.'

41 Margaret A. Sullivan, 'The Timely Art of Hieronymus Bosch: The Left Panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'', *Oud Holland - Quarterly for Dutch Art History* 127 (2014), pp.165–94.

42 William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', [c.1790–93], in Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Blake: Complete Writings* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 149.

43 Wallace Stevens, 'Esthétique du Mal', in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 315. The poem meditates upon good and evil and art's capacity to overcome, or at least suspend, the dichotomy.

44 It is precisely secularism of a certain Western ilk that has spurred fundamentalism's recrudescence.

45 One reason why, despite his allegiance to abstraction (more or less), Banisadr remains a story teller too, as his art display characteristics – metamorphosis, grotesquerie, repetition, enigma, the frightful and the antic – found in fairy tales and folk lore. At root, the latter have also been interpreted as devices to make sense of the world. See Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). His pictorial involutions and *horror vacui* also equate to the framing and telescoped narratives exemplified by *One Thousand and One Nights* and similar stories-within-stories.

ALI BANISADR: PAINTER OF THE VOID, ARCHITECT OF INFINITY, BUILDER OF LABYRINTHS, ETC.

Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi

Since the summer of 2000, I have, with a steadily increasing sense of despair and doomed fate, tried and failed to witness the works of the Early Italian Renaissance painter Fra Angelico at the San Marco Convent Museum in Florence, Italy. My last attempt occurred two summers ago, at which point, having been barred from entering yet again—I no longer remember if I was thwarted due to construction or a shifting schedule of limited visiting hours designed to lay siege to the most devoted museum goer's determination—I became convinced that I had been sent on a fool's errand by the painter's muse. Standing on the cooked Tuscan stones in the summer heat, I caught a glimpse of my face in the windows of the cars and buses circling the roundabout adjacent to the church. I looked ravished, heat struck, exhausted. I thought to myself, I will never lay eyes on Fra Angelico's paintings. Or worse, Fra Angelico's paintings are being exhibited in a parallel dimension to which I shall never have access. Instead, I am relegated to the lesser realm of hearsay and rumours, destined to suffer whisperings of Fra Angelico's paintings; the Byzantine inspired golden-leaf backgrounds of his triptychs, the anti-perspectival density of his divine gardens, the quiet solemnity of his delicate three-dimensional figures. I saw the warbled edges of my face in the tinted windows of a speeding Fiat. That image, of my distorted countenance, my profile sliced and slant, combined with the driver's lust for velocity, his desire to shred his tires on the burning asphalt, mirrored back to me an undeniable fact—my relative stagnation—and further perverted the image of my face: I saw myself old and shriveled, with a wet drooping mouth, yolky eyes, my head crowned with a few silver plumes of hair, affixed to that same street corner, barred from crossing the threshold into the drafty candlelit nave. That fleeting glimpse of my future self, stripped of youth, revealed to me an uncomfortable fact: the future, or to be more precise, my future, was not something that existed outside of me. Like the narrative technique of embedding a story within a story, or a painting within a painting, my future self, I thought, as I climbed the steps of the next bus and headed home, is a reclusive informer or a spy hiding in the interior trenches of my being, waiting to ambush me. As the bus whined along the street and I saw through its tinted windows people seated in the shade of café awnings, sipping their coffee, drinking their beers, taking a break from the viscous air, I had the strange sensation that it was not the bus moving, but rather the city itself; its ribbons of asphalt and the baked stones of its sidewalks were floating past me as though the whole labyrinth of the city with its show of light and shadows had been set on a conveyor belt. In keeping with the deranged laws of space that seemed to commandeer my sense of reality, the flow of time reversed. I saw my present-self inserted like a Russian nesting doll within what had a moment ago revealed itself as a grotesque future version of me. I felt incredibly old, ancient, and yet, simultaneously without age, divorced from linear temporality. I immediately recognized this sensation, the atmospheric disturbance that had taken hold of me as *writing*; it was the mental attitude that engulfs me when I am at work on a book or an essay, the trance-like state in which I suspend all conscious thought in order to allow the unconscious to guide me.

By the time I arrived at my apartment, which was located near Campo di Marte on the opposite side of Florence, in an area historically considered so far-flung from the city centre it used to be known as the 'world's end', I began to suspect that my failure to see Fra Angelico's frescoes was deliberate, an unconscious desire to which I had yielded all executive functioning, a perverse impulse directly connected to my belief that the negative capability generated by our failures is, much like a black hole, capable of bending time and space to its will, opening our lives up to new and strange possibilities. I sat in my armchair in front of the cheap fan I had bought at the corner store and breathed in the chopped air afforded by its weakly attached blades. Again, I considered the mad possibility that I was more interested in *not* seeing Fra

facing page
The Golden Ticket (detail)
2015
Oil on linen
121.9 × 152.4 cm (48 × 60 in.)

Fra Angelico
The Thebaide, c. 1420
Tempera on panel
75 × 207 cm (29.5 × 81.5 in.)
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
Courtesy: Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali ® Photo Scala, Florence 2004
Photo: Scala Archives

Angelico's frescoes than I was in seeing them, precisely because of the prophetic power I was sure this non-event would cast on my future, on those multiple versions of myself that lay dormant within me and that would, no doubt, stick their progressively balding heads out to claim their moment in the sun. I picked up a book and began to read. I no longer remember if I was reading Ruskin or James. What I do remember of that summer is that I hardly spoke to anybody. I spent my days thinking about art and literature, envisioning the pair as an infinitely expanding catacomb where time is continuously interred and exhumed, atomized and recycled. I was lost in the Labyrinthine Mausoleum of Time. I had divorced the illusion of progress and linearity. At one point, while reading about Fra Angelico, saint and painter who went by many names (Brother John of Fiesole, Blessed Angelic One, Angelic Brother John), I learned that he, or more precisely, all of the versions of him, the selves that corresponded to each of his given names, had died in Rome's Papal States in 1455. Lost as I was in the bliss of solitude, I remember thinking to myself, so what? I die a little every day! A fool's thought, but perhaps that is how one lives within art, by going to the edge of the abyss and obtusely diving in. But what, you might be wondering, does any of this have to do with the radical sensibility of Ali Banisadr, a painter equally deserving of multiple names (Painter of the Void, Architect of Infinity, Builder of Labyrinths, etc.), and before whose work I sit in firm contemplation in another room, another stifling summer, before that same fan which I stupidly carried with me to America, across that wide cold pond? Everything, or perhaps nothing at all!

ALI BANISADR

Ah, Ali Banisadr: voyager of infinity, chronicler of time, connoisseur of the chimerical ways in which time folds over itself and advances on us in one great heap. I have managed through the discovery of his work to retroactively amplify the prophetic air generated by my spectacular failure to see Fra Angelico's work. Banisadr's fantastical world is a cosmos so rich and complex, so uniquely capable of reflecting the Labyrinthine Mausoleum of Time, that I cannot help but imagine him dusting with his paintbrush the catacombs of history, disinterring the past, sifting through exhumed realities in order to produce his own strange and stratified brand of dust with which he paints phantasmagoric worlds of epic proportions populated by hybrid creatures in a constant state of flux. What draws me to his work like a moth to a light is the atmospheric disturbance I sense in his paintings and which I believe is fueled by the artist's foolish flight into the abyss, a flight that I know from experience activates subterranean energies, the subtle tensions between surface and depth, the known and the unknown, the material and the immaterial, and to which Banisadr lends a striking visual dimension. In his paintings, the levers that power social reality are purposefully deactivated. Reality's gauzy curtains are pulled back to reveal the raw subtext of life, a relentless collision of what has already been with what is on the cusp of becoming.

I may never see Fra Angelico's *Crucifixion* (c. 1420–23), *Noli me Tangere* (c.1115–20), *Birth of Jesus* (c. 1437), *Annunciation* (c. 1438–45), *Deposition* (c. 1432–34), *Descent from the Cross* (c. 1432–34). Instead, I have devoured Banisadr's *Time for Outrage* (2011), *Prisoners of the Sun (T.V.)* (2008),

facing page
Age (detail)
2015
Oil on linen
167.6 x 223.5 cm (66 x 88 in)

Diego Velasquez
Las Meninas
1656
Oil on canvas
320.5 × 281.5 cm (126.2 × 110.8 in.)
Museo del Prado, Madrid
Photo: AKG images

Wish You Were Here (2007), *Language of the Birds* (2018), *The Game of Taming* (2018), *The Building of Icarus* (2018). Despite having been born nearly six centuries after Fra Angelico, Banisadr's work, which is, in its own right, a window with a view onto the riddle of infinity, will forever function in my life as a preamble to his artistic ancestor's whose work will, in turn, function as a postscript to Banisadr's. This temporal reversal or circuitous dance redoubles my pleasure: it is a physical manifestation of the reversal of the flow of time to which I so willingly fall prey and that is mirrored in Banisadr's own decentred exploration of history, temporality and spatiality. Through his work I finally reaped the benefits of my great experiment in negative capability.

To celebrate my victory, I wrote to Banisadr. I asked him, in reference to *P.S.10*: 'Is that impish charcoal drawing which appears in various manifestations across many of your paintings, and which is represented in distinct form in *The Game of Taming* (extended beak, beastly teeth, brush in hand), a self-portrait or an alter-ego?' I had been thinking of Velázquez's representation of himself in *Las Meninas*, an all-time favourite of mine, a quixotic celebration of the infinite multiplication of time and space, of the great riddle of infinity. I told Banisadr, 'Listen, this figure brings a whole constellation of words to mind.' I provided him with the list: paranoia; humility; fear; privacy; danger; suspicion toward self; suspicion toward other; desire to hide from view; gentle spirit. I begged him to pick the ones that apply. He wrote back two simple determined words: 'ALL APPLY!' I was as happy as a whirling dervish. As for the image of that strange old bird with beastly teeth in *The Game of Taming*, he confirmed what I had suspected all along. It is a self-portrait: 'A bird like creature, linked to a pre-historic animal, which has evolved from a dinosaur perhaps, but as always it can be a metaphor for a painter, using an ancient medium to speak about the present day. I had *Las Meninas* in mind.' His words.

If I had to trace just one of the many literary and artistic lineages to which Banisadr belongs (Fra Angelico, who I hold singularly responsible for the meeting of our minds aside), I would choose the following: Uccello—Bosch—Goya—Schopenhauer—Kandinsky—Picasso—Mohasses—Borges—Banisadr. But this is a myopic list, far too limited to encompass Banisadr's range of influences. After all, Banisadr is a painter within whose consciousness the residue of previous artists' aesthetics is preserved, distorted, multiplied. I'd like here to draw from Jorge Luis Borges's essay *When Fiction Lives in Fiction*, a meditation on the way that certain works of art, most notably *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704), 'doubles and dizzyingly redoubles the ramifications of a central tale into digressing tales, but without ever trying to gradate its

Paolo Uccello
The Battle of San Romano
c. 1435–40
Tempera on wood
Middle panel: 182 × 323 cm (71.7 × 127.2 in.)
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
Photo: AKG Images

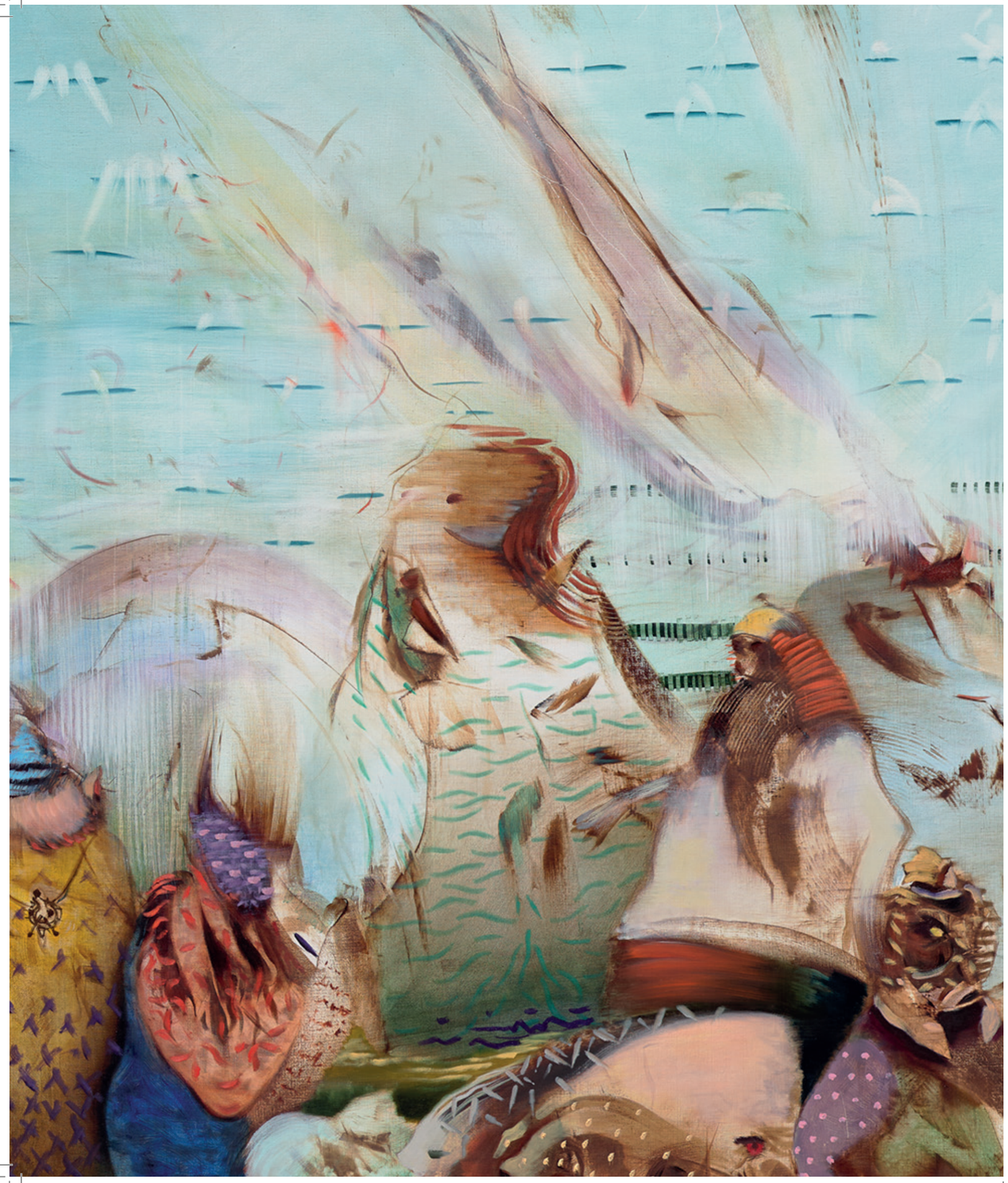
Fishing for Souls
2009
Oil on linen
76.2 × 91.4 cm (30 × 36 in.)

realities, and the effect (which should be one of depth) is superficial, like a Persian carpet.' Borges, having gone through an arsenal of literary figures whose works contain traces of other books, and painters whose paintings contain images of other paintings, concludes his essay with the following quote: 'Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that dreaming and wakefulness are the pages of a single book, and that to read them in order is to live, and to leaf through them at random, to dream. Paintings within paintings and books that branch into other books help us sense this oneness.'

Banisadr's paintings are a visual record of this oneness. Banisadr gives visual aspect to time's multiplicity by embuing the figures closer to the bottom of his paintings with a dense materiality. In the bottom half of his paintings, his brushstrokes tend to be sharp and intense, suggesting great movement, which, from a narrative point of view, always brings with it the potential for friction, violence, and conflict. Here, his hybrid creatures—part man, part animal, part machine, part divine—are intensely engaged with one another and their environment; they are attached to their physicality and that attachment is a dark harbour where violence can easily erupt. But, as we approach the top of the canvas, these hybrid creatures, which are simultaneously ancient and futuristic, begin to lose their form. Their physicality dissolves and their self-protective boundaries give way, inviting us to witness an ethereal quality that evokes impermanence and unity. Banisadr's paintings betray his deep awareness of the impermanence of the world and of self, of the ever-moving belt of time that shepherds all of life toward an infinity we can sense and of which we form a part, but which totality remains beyond our grasp. He is not afraid to plunge into the abysmal depths, to walk our collective catacombs in search of vertiginous truths. He is a painter of the grotesque, hell-bent on blending together traditions and techniques with essential differences, capable of superimposing artistic strategies in order to innovate, to push forward the boundaries of his artform. He is a painter who insists on the explosive potential of liminality and metamorphosis. He is a painter of the sublime.

And since we are speaking of the sublime, I would like to put forward a subliminal theory, a theory of Dalínian proportions: that Banisadr's paintings are *supratemporal*: while the event they display is unique to each painting and viewer, they have in common an energetic charge that is the product of Banisadr's capacity to simultaneously engage with and synthesise the deep past, the remote past, the near past, the present, this very instant, the near future, the far future, so on and so forth to infinity. His paintings treat time itself like a revelation: a stratified, layered, constellatory event that is simultaneously material and ephemeral. What is traditionally viewed as mutually exclusive, antagonistic or binary states—death/life, old/new, transcendent/material—are represented as part of a continuum, launching us into a realm of dynamic potential where a rhapsodic future can be dizzily glimpsed.

overleaf
Myth (detail)
2016
Oil on linen
167.6 × 223.5 cm (66 × 88 in.)



IN CONVERSATION WITH ALI BANISADR

Negar Azimi

Negar Azimi: It was such a pleasure to see your work in the flesh at the studio recently. Up until now, I'd experienced it through documentation, mostly in books, and was always struck by your bravura, as well as the work's scale and quality of spectacle. You are a gifted draftsman.

Ali Banisadr: Thank you.

NA: And yet, in the studio, I was especially taken by the smaller-scale work, along with some of your work in progress. These experiences felt fresh and welcome. A little like an unexpected visitation.

AB: That's good to hear.

NA: But first, since we're getting to know each other, in other words, in the midst of a beginning of sorts, could you tell me a little bit about how one of your paintings starts out in life?

AB: It generally starts with a mood. The mood may or may not have been around for a while. It might even take the form of a colour.

NA: I've read that you experience synaesthesia.

AB: I do.

NA: What does that encounter, or mingling between the senses, look and feel like?

AB: Often it looks like chaotic abstraction. At first, it feels like I could move in one of many directions. At best, one of those directions speaks to me. Then I pursue it. It's an intuitive dialogue. Things slowly come together.

NA: What role do accidents play, if any?

AB: A big one. If something works, great. If it doesn't, I might go back and subtract from the painting.

NA: So there are fortuitous accidents and less fortuitous ones. Is it fair to say that once you start a painting, you're going in blind, in the sense that you don't really know how it's going to end?

AB: I have no idea what's going to happen.

NA: What's your relationship to failure like?

AB: I mean there's a lot of failure and a lot of frustration. Sometimes I destroy the work I've done. But then again I've never failed and then put the painting away completely and said to myself, 'I'm going to start a new painting'.

NA: That's fascinating. I'm trying to think about how that process, that refusal to put a work away and that persistent layering, might play out in other arts—like writing or music.

AB: I feel like I need to go on no matter how long it takes. I keep going back until something happens.

NA: So whatever a work comes to be holds all that came before it. The so-called failures too. Failure might be its own kind of gift.

AB: Exactly.

NA: And those orphans, or the parts that you got rid of…

AB: Mm-hmm.

NA: Do you still consider those part of the painting?

AB: Sure. They're like ghosts. Sometimes, by getting rid of something, other things come to be. The painting may morph into something better.

NA: I like the idea of ghosts hovering in and around the work. Earlier, you used the word chaos and I believe you were using it metaphorically. Still, from a distance, a lot of your work, certainly the earlier work, does seem to depict, literally, chaos and conflict. You know, bodies falling on top of each other, spectacular, delirious debris, like an exploding piñata of the unknown.

AB: For some people my work comes across as a succession of battle scenes. I don't see it that way.

NA: Can you tell me more?

AB: There may be tension and conflict, but there's also harmony. Harmony in fragments. I throw it all on the canvas and then I go about piecing it together, trying to make sense of it. I don't know if that answers your question?

NA: It does. But here's another one: at some point, does the painting take on a life of its own? Does it exit your control?

AB: Definitely, the painting starts to have a life of its own and I'm just simply nurturing the painting. The painting wants to go in certain directions and I am a helper…

NA: The painting has its own will, you seem to imply. It is endowed with agency.

AB: Yeah. The times that I've tried to force my ideas onto the work, it falls apart. I feel like there's something stronger than myself at play. The painting is stronger than myself, or maybe it's the thing that's guiding me to make the painting that's stronger, smarter.

NA: You speak of harmonising, and yet I see a lot of unreconciled elements in your work. The opposite of harmony. I stand

in front of one of your paintings and it's often terribly ambiguous in ethos: are things coming or unbecoming? Are they unravelling or are they coming together? Falling or rising? Apocalypse or bacchanal?

AB: Interesting…

NA: And then of course there's further unsettledness, care of the fact that we never know quite where we are, what time it is, etc. The paintings resist past explanations. They don't yield to tidy conceptions of what an artwork can be. They don't give themselves away, as it were.

AB: Tell me more.

NA: To me, your paintings are never one thing, but rather, they're many things. They're the past and the present. They're ancient and contemporary. An exuberant mess… And that's perhaps why 'harmony' to me is an odd way to describe your end point. I associate your work not with harmony but with a certain discordance. If I were thinking about a sound, it would be loud, perhaps even stressful at times. Robert Hobbs once invoked Mikael Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia in connection to your work, and I found that so on-point—the state of holding contradictory impulses within a single work. I find that prospect really exciting.

AB: I think I understand what you're saying, and I agree with it. There are chaotic sounds and they're all somehow merging at best, or more often bumping into each other. It's often about holding opposite views in my head at the same time. Sometimes there isn't one answer but many and they may be in conflict with each other. One doesn't always have to settle for one or the other. I like the notion of heteroglossia. My work ends up giving the viewer choices.

NA: Could the most productive part of the painting be that element of disruption?

AB: It could, but then I have to get rid of it. And once that goes away, then the painting comes together. There's loudness and then there's quietness. There are contradictory things. There's a certain type of harmony that I find in organizing chaotic fragments into a unified symphony. But at some point, I know that I'm done. That I don't need to do anymore. No more additions, no more subtractions.

NA: It sounds like you're trying to reach a sort of understanding in, or maybe through, your work.

AB: That's true. I think it stems from a problem of language really.

NA: Language in what way?

AB: In my head. When I'm trying to make sense of things, language doesn't help me. It doesn't give way to clarity. Visual things tend to do that better for me. More so than language.

NA: You can't talk your way into understanding. Or be talked into it, either.

AB: Exactly. It's like a Tower of Babel situation. If you think about it too much, you won't make a painting.

NA: God confounds speech! Can you tell me more about how you find language limiting?

AB: When things are expressed in a poetic way, they sit well with me.

NA: Fascinating. So linear, or didactic language, doesn't suit you.

AB: Yes. When something is poetic, I'm able to participate in what I'm being told and I'm able to travel to different places in my mind with it. I think that's so much more pleasing than when it's a one directional kind of movement.

NA: Though I hate to essentialise, I can't help but wonder if that's the Persian in you—the circuitousness of our speech and above all our poetic traditions. This rhymes, somehow, with the movement in your paintings, which sometimes reminds me of the dizzying movement of a whirling dervish. Orientalism aside, have you ever read Donald Barthelme?

AB: No.

NA: He was a kooky writer. He wrote a beautiful version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1967) which is wonderful and mad.

AB: Wow.

NA: In his version, Snow White gets sexually serviced by the seven dwarfs, who in turn tend to vats of Chinese food. You get the point. But more importantly, even within the span of a single sentence, Barthelme's writing is shooting off in different directions. It's a quintessential heteroglossic text, I think. Then again, his writing certainly isn't for everyone. Some find it too pyrotechnic, too post-modern.

AB: I'll be curious to read him.

NA: You mention your moods being tethered to a colour. I was thinking about how some of the colours you use almost seem to be visiting us from the past. They feel historically-inflected, geographically-inflected.

AB: I'm obsessed with learning about colour, the story of where each colour comes from and so on. Take the Venetian painters; they were masters of colour. During the Renaissance they were so concerned about the movement of the viewer's eyes. The geometric aspects, the inclusion of little clues and symbols, and of course, the use of colour. This has always been really interesting to me.

NA: One's eyes do roam around your paintings a great deal. I feel like an active participant in every encounter with your work. Tell me, does the synaesthesia move both ways? Does a sound emit a colour and its inverse?

AB: Yes, it goes both ways. If I hear something, like a piece of music, it could create a parallel visual world in my mind. Likewise colour, shape, texture, all those things, could create different sounds.

NA: The metaphor of harmonising makes more sense now.

AB: It's hard to explain, but it's a way for me to know that this thing I'm creating has become what it wants to become. It gives me a signal and I understand that it's okay. It doesn't ask for anything more.

Ardeshir Mohassess
The men bent in prayer to God and the government airplanes arrived
1977
Pen and ink on paper
45.7 × 60.4 cm (18 × 23.8 in.)
Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
Photo: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

Hieronymus Bosch
The Last Judgement (detail)
c.1504–08
Oil tempera on oak panel
Central Panel: 164 x 247 cm (64.5 x 97.2 in.)
Each Wing: 167 x 60 cm (65.7 x 23.6 in.)
Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna
Photo: AKG Images

NA: What about the sound of wartime? You grew up during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Did this mark the beginning of your synaesthesia?

AB: It did. From age four to twelve, I experienced the war. Every other day or so I lived with the sound of conflict.

NA: And what of the sight of conflict? I feel like that particular war was more about invisible threats, especially for people living in Tehran.

AB: Exactly. It's often something that you can't really see but that you hear. Then your imagination runs wild. You hear the siren, you hear air raids or planes passing, you feel the vibration, then you hear the bombs being dropped and so on.

NA: That inevitably forms a person.

AB: But it wasn't all invisible. The next day you might actually walk down the street and see a building that's been cut in half or I remember an instance where a bomb was dropped in my childhood playground. It hadn't yet gone off, but it had left this giant crater in the middle of the playground and that image stayed in my head. It had a huge impact on my visual memory.

NA: How did the impact manifest?

AB: I made paintings later without knowing that I was actually recreating holes in the ground, like that crater. As a child, I began making drawings because it was a way of dealing with the experience of war, I guess, or making sense out of it. Linking sound to the visual became second nature.

NA: You've often used the metaphor of the stage in describing your work. And I used the word 'spectacular' earlier. There is spectacle in your work, too. Could we talk a little bit about the notion of the performance, the performative, the stage, and where that thinking comes from?

AB: I think my earlier work had an element of landscape about it. I adopted or recreated a bird's eye perspective of looking at space. Slowly, things shifted. In my current work it feels more like you're sitting in the audience and you're at eye level with the stage. I guess I wanted to step closer to my figures.

NA: Spectacle almost always implies an audience.

AB: I've been thinking of everything we experience, especially politics, as spectacle. Politicians stand behind the curtain. Everything is like a game, a show. I guess it always has been.

NA: That puts me in the mind of the late

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
To rise and to fall (Subir y bajar,); Plate 56 from 'Los Caprichos
1799
Etching and burnished aquatint
21.4 × 14.8 cm (8.4 × 5.8 in.)
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Photo: AKG Images

previous page
The Rise of the Blond (detail)
2016
Oil on linen
167.5 × 223.5 cm (66 × 88 in.)

Iranian caricaturist Ardeshir Mohasses, who absolutely shared this sentiment. I noticed a book of his drawings in your studio. That gamey-ness or show-ness is seemingly innocuous, but could actually offer up a scathing commentary on the politics of the day.

AB: That's why his work has always been my favourite. His work might depict the 19th century, but it remains timeless. The brutality he shows can be applied to any nation really.

NA: That's part of what insulated him, I suppose. He wore history as drag.

AB: And that's where things from the past can shine a light on the present moment. Goya's *Disasters of War* (1810–20) series comes to mind—we can look at this work and ponder the brutality of war in any era. Or take Picasso's *Guernica* and its relationship to universal suffering.

NA: Bosch also seems to be an influence in your work.

AB: Bosch's work speaks to me like no other painting does. He was a social critic and, at the same time, understood something that people still can't figure out. I'm intrigued by his relationship to the occult, the unknown.

NA: Not unlike in a Bosch painting, there's no central or heroic figure in the picture plane in your own work. There's simply a lot going on. That decentredness, the presence of as many simultaneous realities as there are figures, reminds me of *My Name is Red* (1998), the novel by Orhan Pamuk, in which different characters recount their version of the murder of a miniaturist. It's a breath-taking form of meta-fiction. I understand you care a great deal for that book.

AB: I do. Everyone in the novel offers their own account of the murder. There they all are, each rubbing up against the other. Each one is important. Bosch has that quality of decentredness in his work. So do Tintoretto and Bruegel.

NA: What you're describing has a certain *Rashomon* (1950) quality, too. In that sense, it begins to verge on historiography, it's about how we tell stories, how we come to know the world, and in your case, *how* we see, *what* we see. Now, I don't want to stray too far from the subject of satire. I'm very much taken by the presence of animals in your work. I love your *Blackwater* (2010) etching, for example, which is dark and swampy and features some animal-like figures. That work summons up the sinister nature of the George W. Bush years. It put me in the mind of the beloved Iranian play from 1967, *Shabr e Ghese*, which offered up tremendous social and political satire, care of a world populated by animals. Did you ever listen to or see *Shabr e Ghese* as a child?

Pablo Picasso
Guernica
1937
Oil on canvas
349.3 × 776.6 cm (137.5 × 305.8 in.)
Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid
Courtesy: © Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2018
Photo: AKG Images

AB: I certainly remember *Shabr e Ghese*. When I hear it now all the words come rushing back. I'm sure the play impacted the hybrid figures in my work, which are mostly a mix of animal-vegetation-machine-humans. I guess I was always interested in creating things that don't quite exist. You might see elements of things that you know, but you can't really put your finger on how you know them, they're not named things; you can't say 'oh that's a rabbit' or 'that's a fish'. But they might have fish-like elements, or bird-like elements. I've also always been interested in mythological creatures, ancient Egyptian and ancient Near Eastern figurines. They were also part animal, part human, sometimes they were representations of Gods. Showing the animal within people almost echoes the way you might feel about them…

NA: There's an element of judgement in that statement. Or maybe I'm reading into what you're saying. I'm thinking of the late surrealist painter and teller of tall tales Leonora Carrington, who accorded animals a status higher than humans. For her, they were nobles. Or I think of the 'freaks' that Diane Arbus once called 'aristocrats.' Their difference sets them apart, but not necessarily in ways you might expect. Are your human-animal creations noble?

AB: Some are noble, some aren't. They all participate in a role not so different from those in a play. They can change costumes and step into different roles.

NA: 'Becoming animal' according to Deleuze and Guattari, can also be a strategy for survival. A subversive or revolutionary tendency. The pair invoke it in a discussion of Kafka's writings.

AB: Do you remember this tale from Iran, in which somebody placed a drawing of a fox inside the beard of a figure on the Iranian currency?

NA: I don't! I want to know more. I'm assuming, given the presence of the beard, that this story takes place after the Iranian Revolution. In the era of the Islamic Republic?

AB: It does. I can't remember the exact details but I remember this was widely discussed—this person secretly putting

the fox in the beard. I found this interesting—an artist using their art as a weapon in this way. The possibility of embedding a secret in the artwork always stayed with me.

NA: Secrets. I love that. I do think your work, especially when it's a delirious hodgepodge, lends itself to searching for secrets or hidden clues. I want to shift a little to the new work that you showed me, some of which was strikingly monochromatic—a departure from the work that you've come to be known for. You described these as twisted and left-over debris, inspired by metal parts you had seen in a junkyard in Bushwick. There was also something a little anthropomorphic about them, it felt almost as if I was looking at contorted body parts. I loved these works. Could you tell me a little about this shift?

AB: I'm glad you brought up these paintings. There was a metal factory not far from my old studio in Bushwick and they had dumped all this metal into the alleyway. Over time, it rusted. I was taken by it. At the same time, I had been thinking about the robotic, and about the digital world, cyber space and so on. It's been weighing on me. We spend so much of our time in this space, in this cloud.

NA: Excellent pun!

AB: I've been wrestling with how I could bring this into the work. One of the earliest explorations of this theme was in a show I had in 2014 in which I produced a work called *Motherboard*. The idea was this: how do I paint the sound of the internet?

NA: What does the internet sound like? What does it look like in paint?

AB: You might have a landscape in which you have different spaces in the foreground, middle ground, and background, but then I wanted to bring this other element into it, the digital space. One way was dragging the paint a certain way on the canvas, then living with the sound it created.

NA: That translation from the digital to the canvas is fascinating. The digital has seeped into every aspect of our lives, not least our experience of surfaces, touch. Think of toddlers who arrive at

Motherboard
2013
Oil on linen
208 × 304 cm (82 × 120 in.)

restaurants and begin swiping their menus as they would an iPhone. The internet is also the ultimate rhizomatic space, which I imagine appeals to you. Again, things are shooting off in all directions at all times. Past and present are mingling. It feels very kindred, somehow, to your spectacular tableaus. I wonder, does the ubiquity of the digital depress or invigorate you?

AB: I feel ambivalent about the digital space. I'm interested in how it's currently impacting and changing us. I try to use it as a tool instead of becoming a tool, languishing in its grip. It's depressing if people prefer to live in the cloud world instead of the real world.

NA: You are hopeful. Perhaps I'm more cynical. I worry that the digital has already colonised our minds and bodies. It's as 'real' as it gets. Regardless, I feel the Internet in particular resonates with your interest in dramaturgy. Here we are, not least when it comes to social media, enacting archetypes, personas, roles and so on—many of which are fabricated.

AB: This is true. It is a carnivalesque stage. We're all actors of one sort or another. We're all implicated. Caught up in our own madness.

NA: That seems like a good place to stop.

Martin Schongauer
Saint Antony Tormented by Demons,
c.1470–75
Copper engraving
30 × 21.8 cm (11.8 × 8.6 in.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Photo: AKG Images

facing page
Beyond the Sea 3 (detail)
2017
Oil on canvas
40.6 × 40.6 cm (16 × 16 in.)

overleaf
Language of the Birds (detail)
2018
Oil on linen
167.6 × 223.5 cm (66 × 88 in.)