

# ALI BANISADR MATRIX 185



OCTOBER 22, 2020 – FEBRUARY 14, 2021  
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

# SEEING RED

*People are always afraid of what they don't understand, but artists always step into the void—the unknown. The unknown territory is where it is worth exploring.*<sup>1</sup>

—Ali Banisadr

Did Ali Banisadr anticipate the heightened global unrest caused by the coronavirus pandemic? Artists have historically been cited as prophets; their acute sensitivity to the world has allowed them to forecast future events. Banisadr's painting *Red* (2020), completed in early January 2020, depicts a chaotic, dystopian world beneath a toxic red sky hung with an ominous blue sun (or moon). The work left his studio in January to be shipped abroad, destined to be presented at the Art Basel Hong Kong art fair in mid-March 2020. By early February the art fair was cancelled due to the severity of the coronavirus outbreak and the declaration of a global health emergency by the World Health Organization. *Red* was returned to the artist's studio where the composition assumed a new layer of relevance within the context of the worldwide pandemic.

Banisadr's paintings are never about one subject, but more like a subconscious chain of events. However, he traces some initial stimuli for *Red* to a then-current event, the United States' drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020, that killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, considered the second most powerful person in Iran.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath, Iran raised a blood-red flag of revenge over the blue Mosque of Jamkaran in Qom. Its red color signified blood spilled unjustly and simultaneously called for retaliatory action against the United States. But for Banisadr, red also connects to the American President and his signature extra-long red necktie symbolizing the Republican party. In more general terms, the artist also cites color theory, in which red can mean urgency and danger. With the painting back in the studio for the coronavirus lockdown, Banisadr sensed the need to make adjustments, including adding floating crowns menacing one figure.

With layers of meaning, each painting resolves a complex research project that spans from the personal to the universal and encompasses his many interests: art history, literature, music, ancient history, popular culture, and current events. For every painting, a new group of texts, images, and printouts cover his studio tabletops, which he refers to as "mood boards." From here, the artist's process relates to artistic synesthesia, which he describes as "an interior place [where]...the senses are super enhanced which makes you extra sensitive to energy, sounds, visual things, colors, taste, etc. Sometimes it can become very intense, the experience of the senses bordering on each other." This simultaneous perception can be traced to his childhood. As a boy in Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), he would escape to the



basement during Iraqi bombings, making sense of the terrifying sounds by drawing monsters. His mother recalls these moments of which the artist has no memory. Today Banisadr follows a sense of inner sound, approaching his artworks like musical compositions in which his gestures translate sound into energy, rhythm, and color.

Travel and living in different cultures inspire his work as well. In 1988, his family left Iran and moved to Turkey, then California. Banisadr has now lived in New York for twenty years after initially moving there to attend art school. International travel to unfamiliar places also fuels his creative curiosity. He assumes the perspective of an outside observer in his compositions. Seen from a bird's-eye view, the large, horizontally-oriented landscapes—oscillating between representation and abstraction—present stage-like settings teeming with masses of hybrid figures. Variesly human, animal, vegetable, and even machine, there is no central focus among the figures, only movement. *The Prophet* (2020) and *The Caravan* (2020), two new paintings in the exhibition, bristle with activity. Banisadr describes these works as inhabiting the “between space” of hallucinations and dreams rendered in intense color palettes with an “infinite variety” in methods of paint application.



THE PROPHET, 2020 (TOP)  
THE CARAVAN, 2020 (BOTTOM)





Banisadr's populated views are reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's (c. 1450-1516)<sup>3</sup> fantastic narrative paintings and Pieter Brueghel the Elder's (c. 1525-30-1569)<sup>4</sup> peasant scenes. They depict intangible worlds that balance order and chaos, energy and entropy, and his figures seem to be in a constant state of transformation. In this time of instability and change, from the coronavirus to the Black Lives Matter movement, Banisadr's masses in motion, or commotion, feel especially connected to the political rallies, protest marches, and street riots that have dominated recent headlines and international discourse.

In addition to figurative landscapes, the artist also works on a small scale in paintings and prints, such as in *Only Breath* (2020), and *The Levanter* (2017). Vertically oriented or square, the small paintings can be understood as portraits or focused narratives. The two paintings are also primarily monochromatic, one in violet and the other in blue. Nothing is planned in advance. Banisadr begins with a blank canvas and follows an inner sense of sound, building the image from fragmented abstraction to emerging figuration. There is a musical element to the process. He continues to work until the notes of the painting achieve an inner harmony, which is when the sound quiets; then the painting is complete, except for the title.

Banisadr's titles come to the artist over time spent with the completed painting. And titles are important, often with multiple references. As a small work, *Only Breath* was painted surprisingly quickly, according to the artist. Its urgency was signaled by its strong sense of color, a rich and vivid violet with red accents. The work depicts four figures, one dominating the foreground with a visible gloved hand. Pattern, especially



spots (or droplets) dot the surface. The artist made *Only Breath* in the midst of a pandemic that inhibits breathing. Breath also speaks to protest, one's voice being heard. The title also evokes some of the last words spoken by George Floyd, "I can't breathe." Finally, *Only Breath* is the title of a famous poem by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi<sup>5</sup> (a favorite of Banisadr) that reminds us that despite our differences, we are all just human. Banisadr's allusions are varied and speak to the past, present, and future.

Banisadr's boundless interests have inspired multiple companion projects at the Wadsworth Atheneum. The artist created a video collage of works located throughout the museum that inspire him. The collage presents specific details to which his artistic eye is drawn and reveals how he sees these works. This is a regular practice that he shares on social media.<sup>6</sup> A small installation from the collection—drawn from the pool that resonated with him as he scoured the museum's digital catalogue last











winter—accents the new paintings and prints in this project. Works from different eras and cultures—Banisadr clearly doesn't believe in borders—populate the salon-style installation that includes a panel painting after Bosch, several prints from the *Los Caprichos* and *Los Proverbios* series by Francisco Goya, woodblock landscape prints by Utagawa Hiroshige, and an assemblage by Joseph Cornell. With Banisadr's *Foot Soldier* (2016) hanging among them, their affinity is evident: strange and vivid worlds often animated by curious or monstrous creatures.

And with sound as a key component of his artistic process, Banisadr has also created a music playlist that relates to the exhibition. These companion projects will be accessible both in the gallery and remotely on the Wadsworth's social media channels and on [thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org).

Banisadr's expansive MATRIX project encompasses his engagement with the world, from the personal to the universal, across time and cultures, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. Driven by impulse and an artist's eye, Banisadr observes and considers societies past, present, and future and acts as a social critic on the human condition.

#### **PATRICIA HICKSON**

The Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

# ALI BANISADR

Banisadr is the subject of upcoming solo exhibitions at the Benaki Museum, Athens; and Museo Stefano Bardini & Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. He was recently the subject of solo and two-person museum exhibitions at Gemäldegalerie, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna; Het Noordbrabants Museum, Den Bosch, Netherlands; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, FL. In 2013, his work was included in *Love Me/Love Me Not, Contemporary Art from Azerbaijan and its Neighbors*, The 55th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale; and *Expanded Painting*, Prague Biennale 6. Banisadr's work is included in

significant public collections worldwide, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; the British Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum der Moderne, Salzburg; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Banisadr is the subject of a forthcoming monograph, published by Rizzoli, to be released Spring 2021 to coincide with his upcoming exhibition at Kasmin Gallery.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### PAINTINGS

*Exterior*, 2015

Oil on linen

16 x 16 in.

Courtesy of the artist

*Interior*, 2015

Oil on linen

16 x 16 in.

Courtesy of the artist

*Foot Soldier*, 2016

Oil on linen

10 x 8 in.

Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

*Treasure*, 2016

Oil on linen

66 x 88 in.

Collection of Joshua Rechnitz, New York

*The Levanter*, 2017

Oil on linen

24 x 24 in.

Private collection

*Red*, 2020

Oil on linen

48 x 60 in.

Collection Het Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch (The Netherlands)

*Only Breath*, 2020

Oil on linen

20 x 16 in.

Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, New York

*The Prophet*, 2020

Oil on linen

66 x 88 in.

Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, New York

*The Caravan*, 2020

Oil on linen

66 x 88 in.

Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, New York

*The Healers*, 2020

Oil on linen

82 x 120 in.

Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, New York

### PRINTS

*Cannon Hidden in Roses*, 2019

26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 31  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

Hand-colored aquatint with photogravure, spitbite, drypoint, and burnishing on paper

Courtesy of the artist

*Nocturne*, 2019

26  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 31  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

Hand-colored aquatint with photogravure, spitbite, drypoint, and burnishing on paper

Courtesy of the artist

### INSTALLATION

Unidentified Artist (Netherlandish, c. 1550-1575)

*The Temptation of St. Anthony*, c. 1550-75

Oil on panel

The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1938.605

American, born in Tehran, Iran, 1976  
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

After Pieter Brueghel the Elder  
(Flemish, c. 1525-1569)  
*Avaritia (Greed)*, c. 1558  
Engraving on paper  
Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.31

Persian  
*Laila and Majnun, page from the Khamsa  
(five poems) of Nizami*, 16th century  
Ink, watercolor, and gold on paper  
Gift of Kirkor Minassian, 1921.440

Utagawa Hiroshige (born Ando Hiroshige)  
(Japanese, 1797-1858)  
*New Year's Eve Foxfires at the Changing Tree, Oji*  
From the series *One Hundred Famous Views  
of Edo*, nd  
Woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. Jared K. Morse, 1954.49

William Blake (English, 1757-1827)  
*The Lord answered Job...*, nd  
Engraving on paper  
Collection of Jane Clark Carey, 1982.80

Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746-1828)  
*Nohubo Remedio (There Was No Remedy)*  
From *Los Caprichos*, c. 1799  
Etching on paper  
Collection of Susannah Shickman,  
T.L.2011.24.30.23

Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746-1828)  
*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos  
(The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters)*  
From *Los Caprichos*, c. 1799  
Etching on paper  
Collection of Susannah Shickman,  
T.L.2011.24.30.42

Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746-1828)  
*Subir y bajar (To Rise and to Fall)*  
From *Los Caprichos*, c. 1799  
Etching on paper  
Collection of Susannah Shickman,  
T.L.2011.24.30.55

Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746-1828)  
*La Lealtad (Loyalty)*  
From *Los Proverbios (Proverbs)*, 1815-23  
Etching and burnished aquatint on heavy laid paper  
Bequest of Warren H. Lowenhaupt, 1967.622

Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746-1828)  
*Disparate Volante (Flying Folly)*  
From *Los Proverbios (Proverbs)*, 1815-23  
Etching and burnished aquatint on heavy laid paper  
Bequest of Warren H. Lowenhaupt, 1967.628.

Utagawa Hiroshige (born Ando Hiroshige)  
(Japanese, 1797-1858)  
*Mountains and Streams in Winter*, 1857  
Color-printed woodcut  
Gift of Mrs. Jared K. Morse, 1954.50

Max Ernst (German, 1891-1976)  
*The Night (Act 2, Scene 4: Balcony Scene)*  
From *Romeo and Juliet*, nd  
Oil on canvas  
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner  
Collection Fund, 1933.470

Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-1972)  
*Untitled*, nd  
Mixed media  
Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial  
Foundation, 1996.34.4

Roberto Matta Echauren (called Matta)  
(Chilean, 1911-2002)  
*Untitled (Personage Transparence)*, c. 1941-42  
Graphite and colored crayon on wove paper  
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner  
Collection Fund, 1942.280

Arshile Gorky (American, born Armenia, 1904-1948)  
*Untitled*, 1941-43  
Pencil, ink, and gouache on paper  
Anonymous gift, 2005.36.2

Hans Hofmann (American, born Bavaria, 1880-1966)  
*Untitled*, 1948  
Black ink and colored crayon on wove paper  
Gift of Mr. Herrick Jackson, 1976.109

Charles Burchfield (American, 1893-1967)  
*Study of Bats in Flight*, c. 1954-63  
Conte crayon on wove paper mounted on cardboard  
Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.34

Ali Banisadr American, born Iran, 1976  
*Foot Soldier*, 2016  
Oil on linen  
Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York



## VIRTUAL GALLERY TALK

Ali Banisadr  
Friday, October 23  
5 pm

## ONLINE DISCUSSION

Ali Banisadr and Robert Hobbs  
Friday, November 20  
5 pm

## VIRTUAL GALLERY TALK

Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of  
Contemporary Art  
Thursday, January 14  
12 pm

## ART BASEL ONLINE VIEWING ROOM

Ali Banisadr in Conversation with Patricia Hickson  
Available via [thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org)

Visit [thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org) for program Zoom links.



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM  
MUSEUM OF ART

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Banisadr quoted in Robert Hobbs, "Ali Banisadr: Assaying the In-Between," in *Ali Banisadr: One Hundred and Twenty-Five Paintings* (London: Blain Southern, 2015), p. 18. The artist's quote was drawn from a group of notes sent to Hobbs cited as "Selected Notes: November 2012-November 2014," and attributed to an email to Hobbs dated 13 November 2014.

<sup>2</sup> All specific references to Ali Banisadr that are not noted have been drawn from a series of conversations between the author and the artist in 2019 and 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Hieronymus Bosch (Dutch/Netherlandish, c. 1450–1516) is best known for the otherworldly triptych panel *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1515) in the collection of the Museo Prado, Madrid.

<sup>4</sup> Pieter Brueghel the Elder (Dutch/Flemish, c. 1525-30–1569) is known for his paintings of peasant scenes and landscapes filled with groups of figures.

<sup>5</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi (Iranian, born Afghanistan, 1207–1273) was a mystic. *Only Breath* expresses that all people share the qualities that make them human, regardless of religion or race.

<sup>6</sup> Banisadr creates such video collages on his own and shares through his Instagram stories @simorgh3.