

ALI BANISADR



Portrait of Ali Banisadr. Photo by Ali Khadra.

ALI BANISADR, *Mosaic People*, 2017, oil on linen, 167.5 x 223.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York.

Nightmares and Dreamscapes

BY ANNA WALLACE-THOMPSON

One does not simply look at Ali Banisadr's paintings so much as one watches them, waiting for a grand finale to unfold. When faced with these canvases, we become voyeurs, drawn to the operatic splendor of some apocalyptic, perverse theater group unaware of our presence. Each of the artist's paintings is a tableau, a set piece from the end of days in which a grotesquery of carnivalesque figures dredged up from the depths of imagination, myth and hell, shuffles along deep in conversation. Arcs of paint and blurred limbs give the impression of constant motion, our eyes darting from place to place, never resting, always seeking.

This intensity has come to characterize Banisadr's oeuvre, as has a plush color palette coupled with melting, blurred brushstrokes. Each work is evidence of the artist's magpie-like accruing and parsing of current and historical events, influences and stimuli, as well as the result of his synesthesia condition, in which sounds and colors collide, slip and smash into each other. "I feel like I'm a bowerbird," admitted Banisadr. "I take from so many different places, be it art history, paintings, etchings, films, literature or everyday life, when I'm walking down the street and see a specific color that just clicks. Past, present, future—you digest everything around you, and then it becomes your own personal vocabulary."

Born in Iran in 1976, Banisadr and his family were prompted to uproot and move to Turkey, and then California, after the first Gulf War. The artist spent his teens and early twenties on the West Coast before moving to New York in 2000, where he still resides. It was here that he received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts, followed by an MFA from the New York Academy of Art. Nearly two decades after arriving in the United States, there is little of the Middle East left in his accent, except for when we discussed Iranian theater and the soft, singsong tones of Farsi come through.

As an Iranian living in New York, especially now, one could peg Banisadr's practice as one that responds to politics. Although the work is political—the artist admitted he "hadn't realized how political [his] works had become"—Banisadr veers away from specific events and statements, preferring instead to symphonize myriad threads and stories, focusing on the human condition and the wheels of history. Early traces of this approach are evident in a work created in the year he graduated, *The Waste Land* (2006). The painting was inspired

by a trip to Normandy Beach, and evokes memories of exploding bombs from the artist's childhood. Alongside TS Eliot-like evocations of desolation is an explosion in angry ochre tones, which swirls among sandy beiges and grays. A tiny crater at the center of the image speaks volumes of Banisadr's ability to capture a sensation, feeling or sound in a few deft brushstrokes.

In the ensuing years, Banisadr's aesthetic has become almost synonymous with that of Hieronymus Bosch due to his *Garden of Earthly Delights*-type panoramas characterized by earlier works such as *Fishing for Souls* (2009), an aquamarine riverside scene in which myriad small figures appear as if bathed in heavenly light. In these paintings, his figures take on the appearance of bizarre beasts, as if they had stepped out of the pages of Borges or were dreamed up by a demented puppet designer. This (somewhat gleeful) apocalyptic sensibility is important to the artist. "I always want to create something that has never existed before," said Banisadr. "I don't want my figures to be instantly recognizable; I want them to be something that I gave birth to, even if they have roots in historical mythological sources. I want them to be hybrids of our imaginations."

There have been two major shifts in Banisadr's practice recently: the first is the introduction of a monochromatic palette, which lends to his new work a sense of narrative focus. An example of this is the gigantic two-by-three-meter painting, *Trust in the Future* (2017), which was painted entirely in variations of indigo to emulate the powdery crunch of snow and the icy blasts of arctic winds in a frost-filled miasma of sharp flurries. In contrast, *We Work in Shadows* (2017) presents a nightmarish cluster of figures presided over by an ominous rust-hued cloud reminiscent of spears and violence. When viewed together, as they were in a recent Sperone Westwater show in New York, the canvases seem to mirror Robert Frost's poem *Fire and Ice*, an intentional comparison on the artist's part. "I wanted to paint an underworld, and I wanted to create something that was the opposite of snow and ice and cold, something fiery, deep within the earth," said Banisadr. "I had Dante on my mind, and these levels of hell he travels through. This is like our psyche: we dig within ourselves, and this to me was a metaphor for my paintings. I dig deep within my imagination to bring out these things that come to the world, our physical world."

Another new development is the definition of the characters in his paintings. Previously, his figures were more abstracted, and flit in front of our eyes like mirages, dissolving into brushstrokes upon closer inspection. "The figures began demanding more, they wanted to be developed more," said Banisadr. "One always wants to step into an unknown visual territory that one hasn't been to before." As such, the characters now bear more significance, evolving from being simply auxiliary details. Instead, we are faced with a cast who take on roles in the grand tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, or even Iranian *taziyeh* plays. Banisadr explained: "In theater, or opera, you are presented with figures in costume and automatically you know that this one is the authority figure, that one is the jester, and so on. I like the duality between looking at the 'real' figure and their costumed 'role.' I've always liked not knowing which is which." Additionally, he noted, artists often play the role of the jester—the one figure who, through comic refrain, is able to express uncomfortable truths. This role of artist as jokester is particularly relevant given Banisadr's inclusion in the recent major group show, "Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians," which ran at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto this year and examined themes of social and political upheaval in the various identities of Iran.

Banisadr has also begun to enlarge the size of the characters, making them harder to ignore. An example of this is in *Mosaic People* (2017), where characters congregate and move toward the viewer, as if bursting out of the painting. "Usually my figures are in dialogue with each other, in their own world. But these people are referencing the refugee crisis and here they are leaving their land," said Banisadr of the painting. This work is also significant for its use of fragmentation—despite the greater emphasis on the final silhouette, the figures possess a quality of blurry pixilation, a nod to erosion of identity as borders shift and discourse is pushed around new, and even future, states of globalization and nationalism.

For an artist whose work has for a long time drawn on the rich tapestry of art history, this new focus on the future is an intriguing one. "I am questioning the idea of progress," he says. "Are we headed toward technological paradise or ecological disaster? Have we really come as far as we think?" It's certainly a heavy question, and perhaps one that these new, bolder figures, can answer.