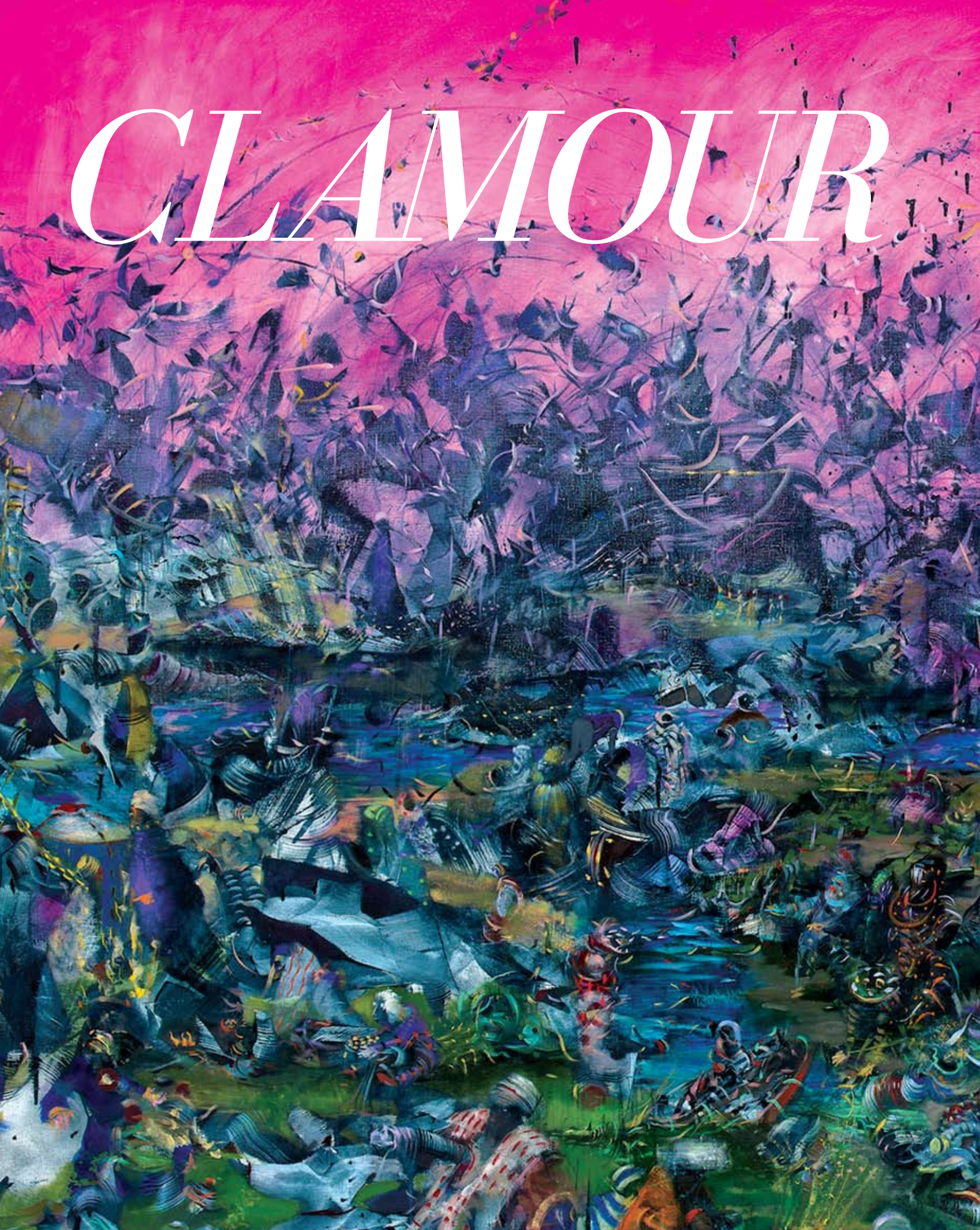


CLAMOUR



AND COLOUR

ALI BANISADR

Nuances of a time spent in the shadow of the Iran-Iraq war seep into the works of Iranian-born, New York-based Ali Banisadr. **Media Farzin** meets the artist who nostalgically and colourfully weaves beautiful depictions of carnage and chaos.





li Banisadr's studio is a very neat place. Brushes are tidily grouped in scrubbed coffee canisters. Tubes of paints are organised by colour and frequency of use. The surfaces are clean and work-ready. Against the light pouring through the wall of windows, bamboo shoots frame an industrial view of Queens. The bookshelves hold art books – *Tintoretto*, *Caravaggio*, *Courbet* – and a few paperbacks – Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* and Edward Saïd's *Orientalism*. "These aren't my reading books," he offers, "those are at home." The pin board next to the worktable is covered with magazine clippings: a ground-up view of Isfahan's Shah Mosque, all dazzling azure tile work; a panoramic shot of an oil spill, the water stained a deep brick red.

I comment on the tidiness as Banisadr offers me a bowl of almonds and cashews. "There is so much chaos in my head," he smiles, "that I need to keep my surroundings organised." Despite the tousled curly hair, there is an air of compact neatness to him and an easy friendliness that I find hard to place – it's not typical of New York, which has been his home since 2000, nor of Iran, which he left in 1988. California, perhaps, where he spent the interim years? It may well be the cosmopolitan acceptance of a frequent traveller, a quality as hard to define as the slight Iranian inflection beneath his slow, clear American English.

ORDER IN CHAOS

His studio speaks of organised habits, but also – given the relative absence of artwork – of brisk sales. In the four years since Banisadr graduated from the New York Academy of Art, the 35 year-

li Banisadr's studio is a very neat place. Brushes

Opening spread: (Detail)
The Marvels of the East.
2011. Oil on linen. 182.9 x
243.8 cm. Image courtesy
Leslie Tonkonow Artworks
+ Projects, New York.

Right: *It Happened and
It Never Did*. 2011. Oil on
linen. Diptych. 182.9 x
274.3 cm in total. Image
courtesy Leslie Tonkonow
Artworks + Projects,
New York.



There is less of individual figuration than the impression of swarming movement.





Banisadr's paintings re-organise the chaos of the world... hinting at all sorts of comic frailties and bizarre mutations.

old artist has achieved a quiet, yet steady, market success. The paintings form a unified body of work, each canvas another god's-eye view of a painted world. On first encounter, they evoke the minuscule grotesques of Hieronymus Bosch; on closer inspection, they reveal a larger wealth of art historical references, from medieval manuscripts to abstract expressionism. Their synthesis of past and present, however, is much more than the sum of their parts. The magic lies in the firsthand encounter with the painted surface: the unphotographable mass of energetic details that turn each painting into an electric-cinematic experience.

Of the four paintings on the studio walls that day, *Black 4* – still unfinished – is the most striking. Figures emerge from a matte black ground, rubbed or scratched onto the linen support. Blues and blacks are predominant, broken up by showers of creamy yellow and

sudden shocks of bright green or purple. The crowded scene suggests a story of some kind, a cosmic, primeval struggle being enacted in multiple episodes. Hints of medieval dress, a turned back or a masked face lead the eye around the composition. But look too closely, and lines will separate into abstract brushstrokes and patches of colour. The stories dissolve into the rhythm of colours and shapes, leaving an impression of decadent destruction, something like Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* viewed through the wrong end of a telescope.

This oscillation between human narrative and abstract materiality forms the core of Banisadr's work. Each piece elaborates the movement to a different key, like variations on a musical theme. Most have bright-hued palettes, such as *The Shrine* (2011), which I find on the opposite wall. It is a smallish oil on panel, with a smooth texture that sets off the bold brushwork. The canvas is defined by the opposing pull of its elements: insects rising up from the midsection towards the deep blue sky, a jostling crowd bearing down below. Again, there is less of individual figuration than the impression of swarming movement. If the shrine of the painting's title is nowhere to be seen, the faithful are vividly present.

EXPLODING MEMORIES

Despite their detailed surfaces, movement in these paintings is strongly rhythmic, even musical. Sound was an early reference point for this stage of Banisadr's work. In 2006 he visited the site of the Second World War Allied invasion in Normandy. Contemplating the invisible violence, he thought of air raids in Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war. "Remembering the vibrations and shattering glass during the bombing led me to the idea of translating these sounds into images in my work," he says. Upon his return, he began a series of charcoal drawings and paintings of explosions, stark studies in chiaroscuro.

He then carried the experiment onto an altogether different way of painting, one that connects the memory-sites of Normandy and Tehran to what he calls an "encyclopaedic" view of world history.

Black (2007) was one of the earliest paintings in this new approach, and retains some of the darkness of its motivating episode. The palette is one of sombre greys, with shapes outlined in twists of viscous paint. The scene has no gravity, no horizon line, and no definable location or identity. Fleshy bodies float like acrobats in a circus ring – or the condemned falling through the seventh circle of hell – shot through with brownish-red accents that could be dried blood or licks of fire. Like the paintings that would come after, *Black* is less a representation of an event than a snapshot of forces and movements, set to the hum of circus music and the hubbub of spectators.

Subsequent paintings take this crowd of actors and spectators as their main protagonists, allowing them to define the landscapes they move through (and leading to those inevitable comparisons with Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the

Facing page: *In the Name Of*. 2008. Oil on linen. 137.2 x 182.9 cm. Image courtesy The Saatchi Collection, London.

Below: *Prisoners of the Sun (TV)*. 2008. Oil on linen. 137.2 x 182.9 cm. Image courtesy The Saatchi Collection, London.





Banisadr gives us a hell with no afterlife: human violence perpetrated in the name of a million different gods, so grave as to be comic. This is a history painting that offers no moral lessons.

Elder). In the 2008 *Prisoners of the Sun* (TV), the crowds pour through a space that is framed at the top and bottom with TV colour bars, which, Banisadr explains, are another war memory: during nightly air raids in Tehran, the standard test bar image accompanied the cautionary announcements on television. But *Prisoners of the Sun* says nothing of this soundtrack of fear: its tiny people going about their minute adventures unhindered. I then ask him about the title. "It comes from a TinTin book," he grins. "I read them all in Farsi, then I read them again in English."

The comic book of the work's title is a telling reference. The *time* of these paintings – that is, the attentive viewing they demand – has more in common with a graphic novel or even a filmstrip than a painting proper. The eye must travel inside the frame and treat the details as a slowly unfolding drama. The process is more explicitly explored in a series of "drawings" from 2010. Each work includes one or several columns of repeating images, details that change slightly from one frame to the next. The works are made by working directly



Facing page: *2L*. 2010. Mixed media on paper. 57.2 x 76.2 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris and Salzburg.

This page: *Black*. 2007. Oil on linen. 61 x 71.1 cm. Image courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

onto a paint roller, which is then pulled across the paper to create repetitions of the same image. Each 'strip' is then painted over to bring out accidents of line and texture, revealing, in the process, Banisadr's engagement with the possibilities of surface incident.

CHANGING CONTINUITY

If the roller drawings are cryptically titled with letters and numbers, the titles of the paintings are evocative in a larger sense. In their range of references, from literary sources to recent events, they place the work within a lineage of history painting (albeit of the subversive kind). *Blackwater* (2010) is a small oil on panel work, with half-monster, half-human figures scratched into its murky greens. Without the title, the work is an expressive take on the medieval grotesque, funny and menacing in equal measure. But, given the addition of the title – *Blackwater* was the private American contracting firm now infamous for their brutal conduct in Iraq and Afghanistan – the work becomes

a parable of dubious transactions in dark times, of men who are hybrid monsters straight out of Francisco Goya's nightmares. *The Sleep of Reason Breeds Monsters*, reads the frontispiece to Goya's *Los Caprichos*. Banisadr's work borrows from the painter's 18th-century visual language, as well as some of his critical ambitions.

As with Goya, the human condition is both ghastly and often quite funny. Banisadr's paintings re-organise the chaos of the world to enact it on a vast painted stages, hinting at all sorts of comic frailties and bizarre mutations. The irregular geometric grid of the 2008 *In the Name Of*, for example, presents the action against a circus tent. All human and non-human detail is pushed to the bottom of this orange-red world, occasionally punctuated by upwardly floating bodies or a figure in a dunce cap, hung from a tree. If Bosch was the first painter to depict the gruesomeness of a Christian hell, Banisadr gives us a hell with no afterlife: human violence perpetrated in the name of a million different gods, so grave as to be comic. This is a history painting that offers no moral lessons.

What does it mean, then, to paint history in our time? "What I am ultimately searching for is truth," Banisadr says. But how do these works compete in the jostling marketplace of images and sound bites, blockbuster movies and YouTube journalism, fictional archives and relational aesthetics? Quite simply, they don't. The primary question of Banisadr's work is that of truth *in painting* (to paraphrase both Paul Cézanne and Jacques Derrida). This is truth that works through screens, occlusions, projections and suggestions – the many borrowed languages of art's long history. For Banisadr, as for Cézanne or Francis Bacon, the Limbourg Brothers or Persian Miniatures painter Kamal Al-Din Bihzad, the quest is to understand how art can organise the details of everyday life in order to reveal the movement of its forces and the vital rhythm of its sensations. The quest requires time, attention, presence and a command of art's techniques and history. The neat studio is optional. 📺

For more information visit www.ali-banisadr.com, www.tonkonow.com and www.ropac.net