

Impulse to paint

By Shirine Saad



Ali Banisadr brings the subconscious to colorful life

On a large canvas, splashes of dense color – petroleum blues, pale yellows, flame reds and atmospheric washes of greens – evoke a dreamlike, apocalyptic landscape. Walking closer to the painting, small figures appear in stain-like shapes, defying the work’s abstraction. As the eye reads from bottom to top, the figures disappear into the luminous skies. The grand narrative is reminiscent of the complex compositions of Hieronymus Bosch and the dark landscapes of Peter Brueghel. And of course, Picasso’s great masterpiece “Guernica,” which hangs on painter Ali Banisadr’s studio door alongside other inspirational images, including Francis Bacon’s “Pope Innocent X” and Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment.”

Banisadr, a 36-year-old Iranian-born painter now living in New York, says the small figures in his paintings are also inspired by miniature Persian paintings. An avid student of art history, he strives to create a fiercely personal painting style that draws from his artistic masters and

his interest in psychology. “I’ve been trying to push the possibilities of painting,” says the handsomely dark painter, sitting in his massive Long Island City studio. He is getting a series of large and smaller paintings ready for a solo show at Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in Salzburg. Banisadr has been widely exhibited, including at the Saatchi Gallery’s “Unveiled: The Art from the Middle East.” His works are also in Saatchi’s permanent collection as well as those of the Metropolitan Museum, British Museum and François Pinault Foundation.

On the bookshelf rest art history books covering different epochs and styles; they are flanked by neatly aligned fruit and nut containers. There is no water or kitchen in this space, and Banisadr stays here for long hours every day, layering colors and textures aimlessly, building the paintings spontaneously as he goes, translating the sounds in his head. The result has a rhythmic, almost calligraphic quality, which points back to Banisadr’s beginnings as a

graffiti artist in California, where his family moved in 1988.

Banisadr had started drawing as a child in Teheran in the midst of continued bombings, translating his reactions and the awful ambient noises into art. As his family fled their country's troubles, he became interested in psychology, which he took up in college. "I've always been interested in the subconscious," he says. "I try to bring out what is in my imagination in a clear way."

Banisadr's art was then heavily influenced by Basquiat's expressive figures. Moving to New York for art school, he deepened his knowledge of art traditions, with a particular interest in less-explored areas like Islamic and Japanese art. "I always wondered why certain traditions were skipped in art history classes," he says.

Developing his own style, he embraced abstraction and started exploring the impact of large masses of color. His "The Night Air" (2010) is painted in overwhelming blood red, and his "Black 3" (2009) is covered in different tones of one unique emerald green. As for the hundreds of figures haunting the landscapes, they remain a mystery. Are they engaged in wars? Conspiracies? Betrayals? They are inspired, of course, by current events and the war between East and West, but they are also universal. For Banisadr, his work "exists in a space between recognition and abstraction, or the mystifying space of the subconscious."

Ali Banisadr's solo exhibit "We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet" is on view from May 26-July 14 at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 2 Mirabell Platz, Salzburg, Austria, tel. 43.662.881.393, www.ropac.net

