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Ali Banisadr at work in his studio in Brooklyn.



BEST PRACTICES

Ali Banisadr Paints a Picture

In Brooklyn, an artist looks to history to create abstractions for today

BY ANDY BATTAGLIA

PERCHED ON A TABLE NEXT to curled tubes of paint and crusty brushes in Ali Banisadr's homey Brooklyn studio was a copy of an epic poem that, over its thousands of years of history, has been told and retold—including by Banisadr himself. "My wife complains that I can't stop talking about *Gilgamesh*," the artist said, with a laugh, about a storied Mesopotamian text that has consumed him. "I like

the idea of something ancient that speaks to our time. I get visions in my head—of the places, the characters, the atmosphere. It just keeps giving."

The geographic origin of *Gilgamesh* syncs with Banisadr's roots in Tehran, where he was born and lived before moving to Turkey and then to the United States when he was 12. And the tale it tells resonates with powerfully pent-up and urgently searching paintings

of the kind he made for a recent exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, and a solo show opening at Kasmin Gallery in New York in May.

"*Gilgamesh* is supposed to be a hero, but he's a failed hero looking for immortality," said Banisadr. "He's going after the monster Humbaba who lives in the forest, to kill him, but he is the monster himself because all Humbaba is doing is protecting the forest from anybody cutting down trees. When *Gilgamesh* kills him, that goes against the divine rule of the world and everything starts to fall apart. In my work there is never a hero—it's more about the idea of animism. I feel like everything is important: trees, figures, hybrids, earth, sky, air. All of these things are important because they're all energy."

Reading epic poems (other favorites include *The Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*) is just one part of a diligent research process that Banisadr undergoes to channel different energies into his paintings. On the same table as *Gilgamesh* were books about the Renaissance master Titian, the melting cores of planets, race and caste in the U.S., and the bubonic plague—all subjects that have occupied him during an anxious year given by lockdown and calls for social change. Synthesizing these materials, Banisadr said, primes him to enter into states of mind that enable him to see what he sees when he peers into ever more elusive realms of abstraction.

Color Theory
Tools of art wielded by Ali Banisadr to make drawings and paintings in his light-filled Brooklyn studio.

“Research is important in getting my mind ready for what’s going to happen when I stand in front of a painting,” he said. “I’m feeding myself all this stuff so it’s fresh in my mind, and once there is something there and I see it, I get a sense of familiarity—like I know this thing. That’s when I go after it. I’ll see a hint of a finger and then I could imagine the rest of a body, part of the head, a fragment of a foot. And I always love the space where you can’t figure out what it is—like when you’re traveling and you wake up, half-asleep, and see an object in your hotel room that you can’t place. Dreams and hallucinations have always been interesting to me.”

Entering into such states is easier in a studio just a few doors down from the apartment he shares with his wife and two young daughters. “Orhan Pamuk said it’s good to work in a place where you dream,” Banisadr said of the Turkish novelist awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006. “I’ve always liked not looking at a workspace as a workspace.”

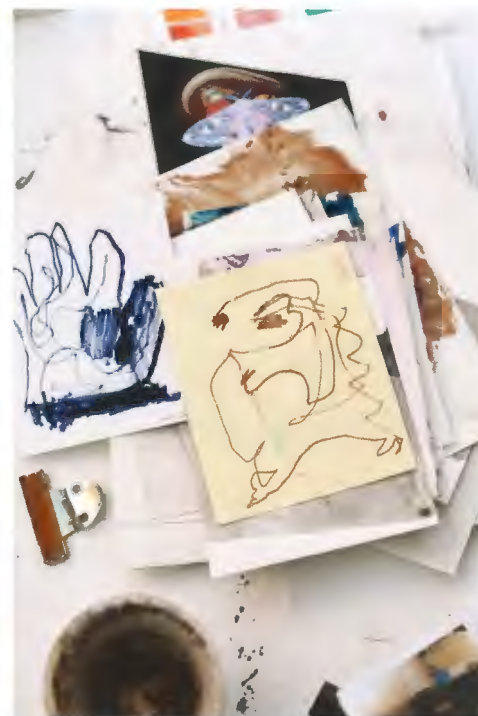
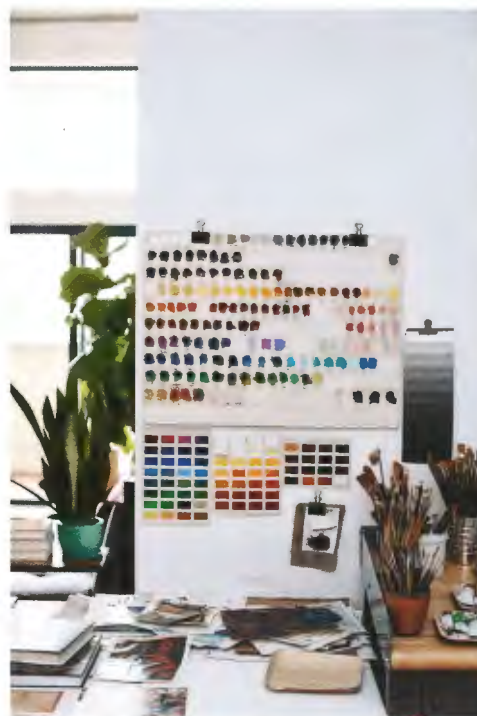
And a regular meditation practice helps. “There is a place I have to go to in order to see, a trancelike place I have to put myself in, in order to be able to connect with a painting and know what to do. When I meditate, I go into these places where visual things come and go and move around.”

Cues are not limited to the visual realm for Banisadr, whose expressionistic sense of abstraction—full of lines that slash and swoop in cavernous depths of space among shapes that suggest figurative presences of human and nonhuman kinds—owes in part to experiencing states of synesthesia.

“I hear a lot of sounds from the work,” Banisadr said. “It could be sounds of heavy machinery or robotic sounds or organic sounds. It could be like something is falling or rising or breathing. All of these sounds pull me in to make things come out, and they have to all go together in a kind of orchestra. I imagine it all as air running through, and I’m just trying to open up chambers to let the air flow, so it doesn’t get stuck.”

For some of his recent paintings conceived in mind of underworld states, he heard “sounds of warmth and wombs and caves and protection—like a choir you could hear through a tunnel.” (A playlist he made to accompany such sounds included music by Air, Nicolás Jaar, Daft Punk, and Claude Debussy.)

Synesthetic sensations also figure in Banisadr’s reactions to colors, which in his work run from contemplative pastel washes to dramatic bursts of reds and greens and



blues. “Colors trigger a certain mood for me, of a place or a time or a temperature,” the artist said.

A canvas in its beginning stages hanging on his studio wall was slathered and smeared with a shade of brown that for him summoned “loud, jumbled sounds that are right now not going together very well but have the mood I’m after, of underworld places like caves.” Another canvas in a formative stage was deep indigo, though that could change.

Red, a painting that featured in his

Wadsworth Atheneum exhibition and will also be in his upcoming Kasmin show, started out as blue before shifting hues in January 2020—with a sense of impending crisis still off in the distance as the coronavirus started to make its way around the globe. “Something just didn’t feel right, like a sense of danger,” he said. “There was something in the air, and my antennas were catching it.”

While he assimilates what comes immediately to his eye and ear, Banisadr also grounds his process in the context of predecessors he reveres from centuries of art



A Vision Complete

Ali Banisadr's *Red*, a painting that started out predominantly blue but shifted hues in early 2020 when the artist began to sense a mood of impending crisis.

history. In 2019, six of his paintings appeared in an exhibition at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in the presence of *The Last Judgment* by his beloved Hieronymus Bosch. And numerous other artists and styles also occupy his mind when he is at work on a canvas. "I have different ways of visual thinking for solv-

ing issues," he said. "What would Hiroshige do in this situation? What would a Persian miniaturist do? What would de Kooning do?"

Then there are more workaday sources of inspiration. "It could be in the environment: I could walk down the street and see somebody wearing something and think, That's it!

You can look for answers everywhere."

Once a painting appears to be complete—typically after at least a month and sometimes several more—Banisadr hangs it on a different wall in his studio where it remains for a period of contemplation. After he's moved on to other canvases in the works, he keeps an eye on that wall. "A painting needs time to sit there, and I need to catch up to it," he said. "It could be a matter of a line or a couple dots, but it will tell me when it needs this or that. If nothing jumps out at me for maybe a month, then it's OK."

All the while, he monitors what he hears while peering into a painting. "Listening is the key," he said. "Earlier in my career, it was a fight. But now it's just listening, surrendering, and serving the painting. I'm a servant. I have my own ideas that I throw in, but a painting takes on a life of its own—and you have to respect that." ■

**“What would Hiroshige do in this situation?
What would a Persian miniaturist do?
What would de Kooning do?”**