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ALI BANISADR

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# ALI BANISADR

Interview Kate Neave

*In his studio in Brooklyn, New York, artist Ali Banisadr works with an intense focus on each of his monumental paintings, one at a time. With some of his canvasses measuring over four metres in length, they can take as much as two months to complete. It's easy to see why. Inspired by contemporary events, but informed by in-depth historical research, his artworks trace topics through history, bringing together a complex fusion of figures and symbols to transcend cultures and timeframes. His approach results in work which feels both vital to this contemporary moment and historically significant.*

Banisadr draws us into these large-scale vibrant paintings with a strong sense of rhythmic movement. He holds our attention through an instinctive feel for colour enhanced by his synaesthesia. With his first solo presentation of works exhibited at Victoria Miro Gallery in London, accompanied by a detailed publication providing context to this phenomenal new body of work, Banisadr helps us decipher these fascinating new canvases in a conversation spanning Ancient Egypt, Renaissance painting and the Women's Rights Movement in Iran.

**KATE NEAVE** I'd love to know where you start in creating these really dynamic, large-scale paintings. What does your process look like?

**ALI BANISADR** The work always starts with me staring at a daunting white canvas. I try to figure out how I'm going to begin and then a day comes when I'll have the energy to tackle the painting. It'll go from a white canvas to a sort of performative gestural abstract piece in grey, very like a Grisaille [a painting technique using shades of grey] in some ways. That beginning part is very intuitive. I just begin creating these sort of fragments that end up having infinite possibilities of being something. Within these fragmentations I start seeing possibilities, figures, whole worlds really. There are a handful of colours that I use, which I always make myself and I've come to realise open up worlds for me. They have certain moods and they have certain sounds. So the paintings begin in that way.

**KATE** That sounds like such an intuitive process, but then alongside you're also creating visual tables, which bring together historical reference points from literature, or from art, which feed into each work, is that right?

**ALI** Yes, my visual tables are empty at the start and then as I begin a conversation with the painting, the painting itself starts to call up into my memory certain things I've seen or certain things that I want to bring into the work. Parallel to my painting, there's a whole research aspect of my practice that informs it. I'm researching things, reading and making visual notes. I'm going down many different rabbit holes all at once. All these rabbit holes are based on current events and certain things catching my attention at that time. These moments send me down a path of researching topics throughout history. I look at literary sources but mostly I'm looking at visual sources, and these things start to pile up on

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tables everywhere in my studio.

**KATE** Do these historical references make their way into the paintings?

**ALI** I never use them directly because I'm more interested in how our collective memory holds these archetypal images within us, and then how these archetypal images change and morph based on the topics that I'm interested in. So the visual table slowly starts to accumulate while I'm working because I only work on one painting at a time. And then when the painting finishes, the table gets cleared out. It is a very organic process where I create this sort of spider web of connections that itself starts to ask for stuff. That's always interesting to me because then I'm learning something too, from the painting itself.

**Kte:** That's super interesting. I hadn't realised that a sort of feedback process takes place where the painting is actually starting to inform your thinking.

**ALI** I like that word, feedback, when you said that it started to make me think of a guitar or microphone by a speaker, that starts to make that feedback noise. It's like magnets. You bring them close, and something has to happen between the two things, between me and the painting. If that magnetic field is not happening then I know to not do anything, to just wait.

**KATE** And there is a sound element to the paintings as well, isn't there, because you sometimes get inspired by a sound as the starting point?

**ALI** Yes, that's true. The colour has a mood, and the mood has a sound. And then a line has a sound, and then a shape has a sound and texture has a sound. But then, once these sort of living things, the figures and such, start to emerge out of these fragmentations then they start to have a sound too. They're like notes, and as my eyes move around in the painting, there are these different notes. The challenge is always to make the notes become an orchestra when you step back and you look at the entire painting. So, the challenge of the entire process of working on these large paintings is about the micro and the macro. You're creating these miniature details but then also you're looking at the expansive field and trying to make sure that everything is in tune with each other. I'm always conscious of - and I learned this from the Renaissance painters - the fact that you can create certain pointers and arrows to direct the eyes from one place to another. You want the eyes to move and discover, because the paintings





are ultimately the result of exploration and research. They're the chalkboard where I'm trying to figure stuff out and understand the world.

**KATE** I wanted to ask you specifically about the painting *Numinous* because there is a figure in it with an artist's palette and a candle and a snake. It feels like you've personified the artist as a snake charmer trying to tease out truths on the canvas.

**ALI** Yes, absolutely. The figure you're talking about, he's kind of kneeling in a position of surrender too. He's surrendering to the painting and he's juggling a serpent. He's juggling a candle, as you said, and his palette. Philip Guston is fresh on my mind because I saw the show at the Tate Modern, but I've also been reading his writing for so long. One of his best quotes is where he describes when you're in the studio and you have the voices of everybody there and slowly these voices start to disappear. Then hopefully, you disappear. I absolutely understand what that means because when you're really painting is when you're not even aware of yourself being there, or time or anything else, you're just sort of in this other zone, this other portal. So to put the artist in the painting, it's almost as if I went into the painting. I think in all the paintings in the show, there is a presence of the artist or the creator in some ways because ultimately, that's what I'm doing. I just have a stick with some pigments and I'm trying to understand the world on a flat surface.

**KATE** Your work tunes in to contemporary events but then looks at them through this long lens. It really has perspective and it does feel like it is seeking to understand the world around us. Your work *The Changing Past*, for example, was inspired by seeing monuments repeatedly torn down but it also evokes bigger themes of cultures and ideas changing over time.

**ALI** Yes, that's a good example of something that I started to notice happening, current event-wise, seeing images of these monuments being taken down. Then I start to feel that there's something very strong about this idea of taking down a monument and erasing something in our memory by doing that. So, it became really interesting to me and when something is really interesting, I delve into history as an archive. I started to think about iconoclasm throughout history, going back to ancient Egypt, the ancient Near East, and ancient Greece and so on. I could see a pattern in how we believe in something, we make a

monument of it to be a representation of our belief, and we hold it in high value for some time. Then we kind of change our minds about it and then we have a need to destroy it in some way. At the British Museum, I met with a really amazing curator, Dr Sebastian Rey. He's the curator for the Ancient Near Eastern department and an archaeologist also. When I told him about my interest in the history of iconoclasm, he showed me how, in the ancient Near East, when they wanted to destroy a monument, they wouldn't destroy the whole thing, they would just take away its power. So the monument is there forever but it no longer has any power. For example, they would blind the eye of an icon. Or, let's say, there was a finger, pointing to a symbol that was connected to divinity, they would just very carefully destroy the tip of the finger so that connection to the divine is cut off. I found it so fascinating that they didn't erase the memory, but they took away its power. And I was thinking: wouldn't that be interesting? If we did the same and leave monuments there as memory of something that we shouldn't do again. So, the painting is about this recurring theme of building and destroying and building and destroying.

**KATE** I wanted to ask you a little bit about your own background as well, because you have a connection to the ancient Near East since you were born in Iran, and I feel like Iranian culture has had an influence on your work. I know that Sufi poetry, for example, is something that inspires you.

**ALI** Yes, absolutely. Sufi poetry is something I grew up with. My grandmother was a poet. It was always around and it sort of makes you see the world in a poetic way, but also in a timeless way. Because this poetry from the 13th or 14th centuries still resonates. It's so essential to just being a human and observing the world that it's not fixed in time in some way. The Sufis were able to tap into something so timeless. That way of thinking and, of course, living in Iran, stayed with me and enabled me to be able to dissect the world in a deep poetic way. In Farsi, every word has such roots and depth to it and perhaps that's why, as I moved to US, I started to read epic poems like Dante [Alighieri] or *The Odyssey*, because I feel like they also hold these archetypal essences of everything.

Going back to my background, I'm also heavily interested in the ancient Near East, which is much older, older than anything. When I'm trying to understand visual history,

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I trace everything back there. In the show I have these figures that are called the Rebis figures. They're these deities, half male, half female in one body which can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamia. It's just the way my mind works. I like to trace things. I like to find patterns within history and trace them back and then create an archive of imagery. It's as if you're trying to solve some kind of problem where you start tacking up visual things and connecting them.

**KATE** This idea of building knowledge through connections links in with a Persian poem I know you love called *The Conference of the Birds*. It's the story of a search for the legendary Simorgh and eventually the finding of a collective knowledge.

**ALI** Oh, absolutely. Yes, that's a good point. It's a long, epic poem, the story of Simorgh. There are thirty birds that are looking for this sort of legendary bird that has all the answers, and then at the end of a long journey they realise that the thirty of them combined are in fact this bird. That's the story of life. Really, you're looking for yourself.

**KATE** Oh, that's interesting, I love that. *The Queen of the Night* is another painting that I really enjoyed looking at, because it touches on the theme of women's position in society in quite an interesting way. You've got all of these different figures taking on different roles, playing with genders and stereotypes.

**ALI** I was making this painting when the Women's Rights Movement in Iran was happening. All of these kinds of symbols started to kind of show themselves as I was working on the painting. In some ways it was a way for me to try to understand and deal with all the information I was consuming every day whilst also feeling helpless because I was in a safe place. The *Queen of the Night* is a relief in the British Museum that I've always been obsessed with. I just happened to see it again last year, and it spoke to me in such a fresh way. All the paintings have to hit all these different notes for me. They have to hit all these personal, historical, art historical, current event and cosmological notes.

**KATE** I read a quote in the catalogue of the show, where you said that as much as we think we're in control, maybe there's a bigger driving force pushing and pulling everything. And I wondered, do you see yourself as tuning into some something bigger?

**ALI** Yes, I think that's where the cosmological aspect comes in. I'm interested in catching something in the air - the song of

the universe, or whatever it is. You tune into it and then it's a matter of materialising it in some way in the paintings. I'm being a sort of a medium. I feel like my purpose is to try to tune in and materialise the invisible thing that's floating around. At least, that's the part that excites me. I feel like there are certain symbols that have spoken to me. They are not answers as such, but they are some kind of guidance to understand whatever is happening at the current moment.









Queens of the Night, 2022  
All images courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro