ALI BANISADR

One Hundred and Twenty Five Paintings

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BLAIN|SOUTHERN

Ali Banisadr: Assaying the In-Between

Robert Hobbs

Chamse Chosrau und Schirin
(Khusrau spies Shirin bathing)
1460
Nizami Ganjavi, c. 1141–1209
Persian miniature
Gouache on paper
Shīrāz school of painting, Iran
Photo: Akg-images/Roland and Sabrina Michaud

Distinguished by their highly keyed palettes, competing velocities and multiple perspectives ranging from focused details to bird's-eye views, Ali Banisadr's apocalyptic semi-abstract paintings are populated by aggressively interacting hybrid figures, which become embroiled in intense engagements on proscenium-like stages. His richly allusive art with its stunning atmospheric effects encompasses a vast range of references, including Persian miniatures, late medieval Netherlandish and Renaissance Venetian painting, Japanese wood-block prints, films and comic books – all amalgamated under the aegis of dazzling Abstract Expressionist-like brushwork.

In addition to the tumult generated by these many encoded references, the extraordinary power of his work is largely attributable to the synaesthesia he experiences while painting. Banisadr remembers first becoming aware of the crossover between sound and vision during his childhood in Iran[1] when he was trying to make sense of the Iraqi bombs he was hearing. At the time, he found himself drawing 'monsters' in order to give 'these tremendous vibrations a visual aspect.'[2] The ensuing catastrophic rhythms and fiendish visages made his figures particularly mysterious and foreboding. This was an approach he rediscovered years later during a residency in Normandy in his second year of graduate school, when he set to work making a series of charcoal drawings in D-day battlefields. Being present at these World War II sites rekindled his memories of the Iran-Iraq war and his early synesthetic efforts to comprehend it. Since this time in France, Banisadr has relied on synaesthesia as a 'driving force' for all his work, which is predicated on the all-embracing concept of the battle of life – a prosaic as well as a mythic view – fuelled in part by his close and continued familiarity with the *Upanishads*.[3]

Banisadr's synesthetic capability enables him to effectively transform sounds into colours and images in his art:

> When I begin a painting, it is always based on an internal sound. As soon as I apply the brush, the sound begins, and I am able to compose the work based on the sounds I hear as I'm painting. It is the force that drives the whole painting and helps me compose the work and pull everything together.[4]

These sounds originate internally and range from being 'very heavy [and] machine-like' to becoming 'quiet tones in landscape or water' as well as 'flickering sounds [or] chimes'.[5]

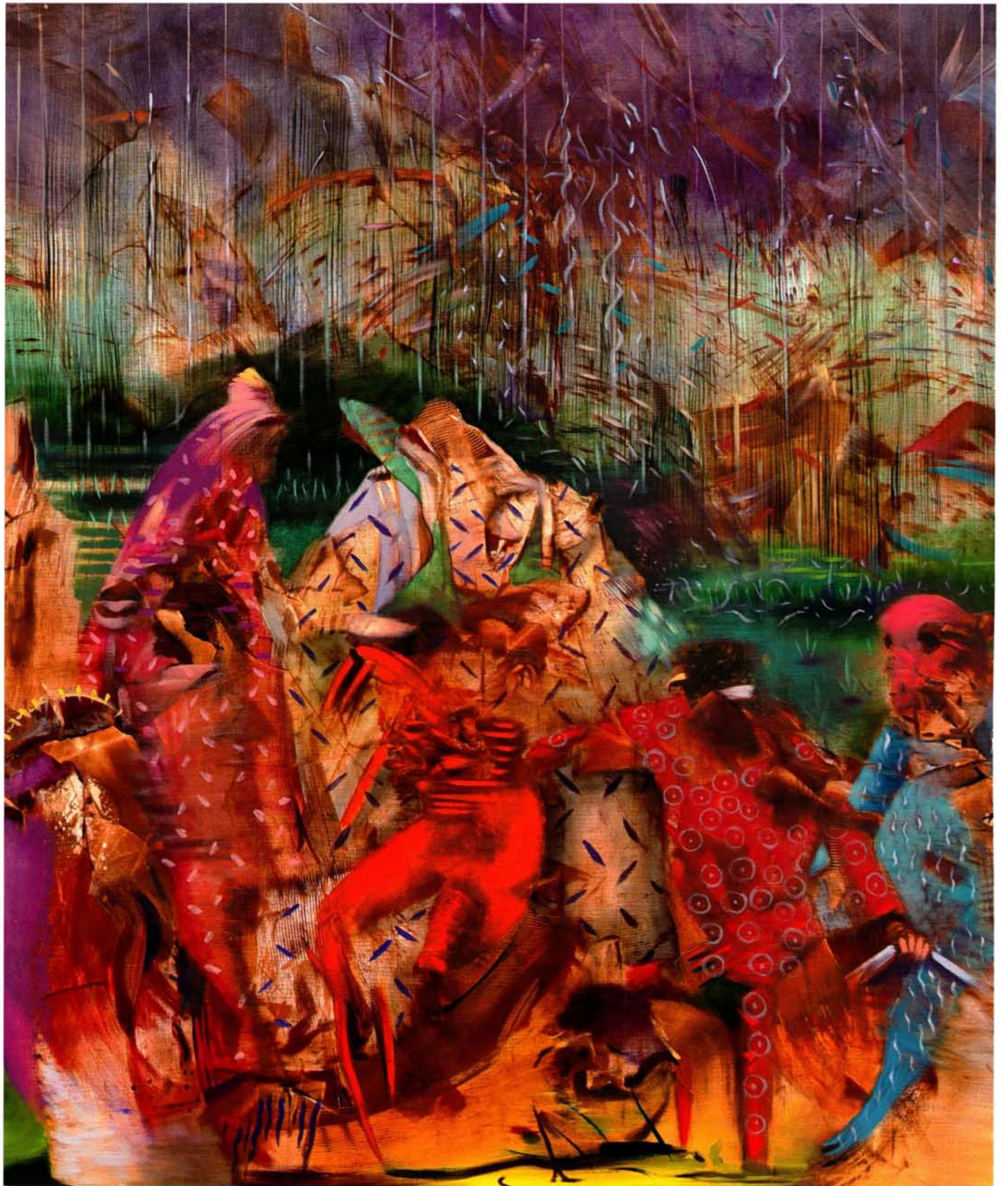
Synaesthesia enables Banisadr to 'follow the imagination' by beginning a work without preliminary drawings, empowering him to transform his intuitive insights directly into something suprapersonal. It is as if he were 'stepping into another realm' where 'time does not exist,' and 'things are in a state of flux'. A dialogue with the work ensues, with the clarity of being 'half-awake

facing page
Aleph (detail)
2013
Oil on linen
167.6 × 224 cm (66 × 88 in.)

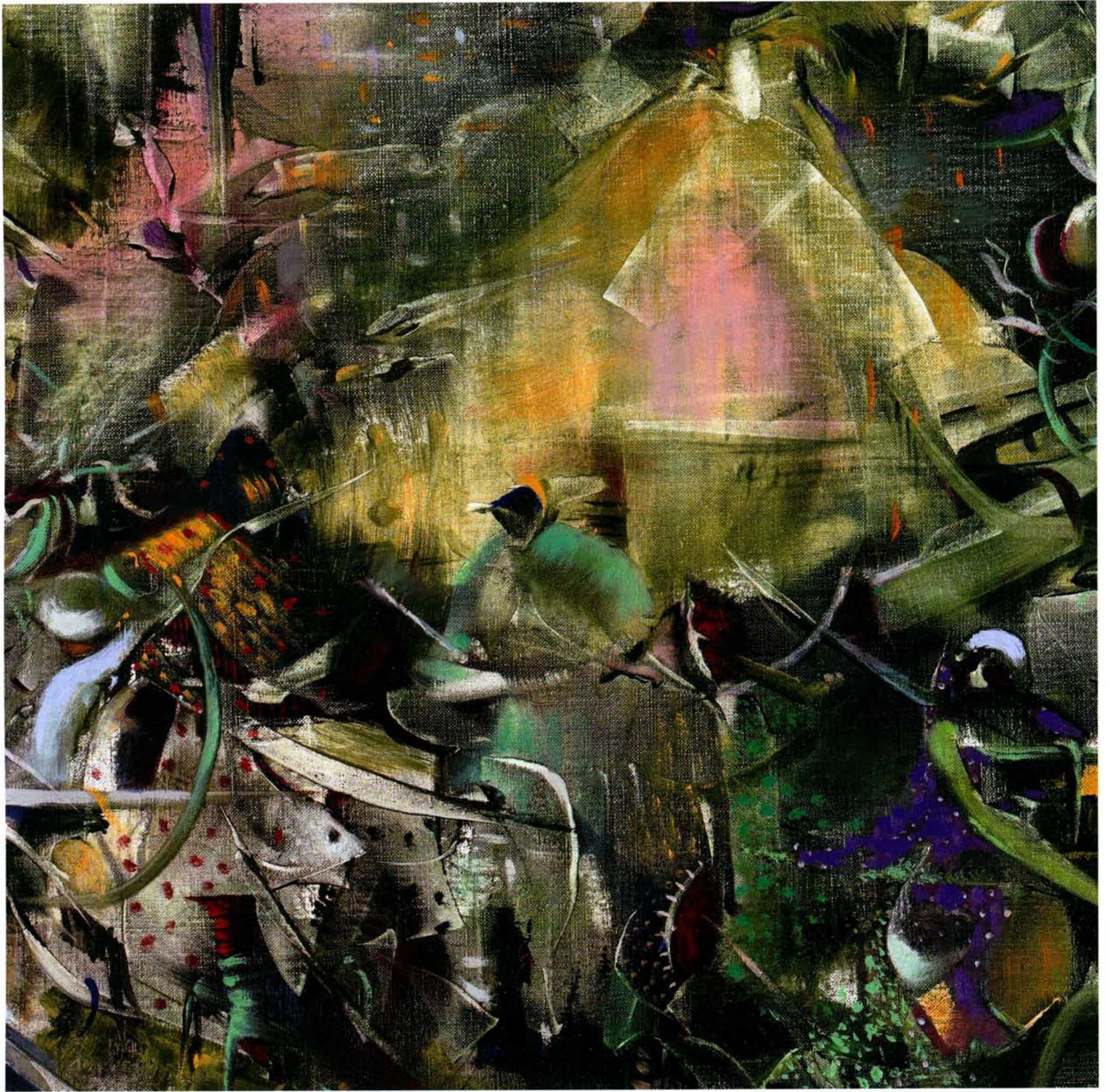
and half-asleep when everything, strangely enough, makes a great deal of sense.' Far more than a mere blending of different sensations, synaesthesia has the extraordinary capability of awakening a consciousness of new dimensions in creative individuals. Coupled with prodigious sensitivities, it can exhilarate their ability to transgress not just traditional barriers between the senses, but also the walls separating interior and exterior worlds, thus resulting in profound experiences of both acute immanence and lofty transcendence. These synesthetic crossovers allow the individuals experiencing them to feel immersed in the present – even as they appear to look down on these freighted moments with intensified understanding.

Listening to recorded music enables Banisadr to catalyse his predilection for synesthetic experiences. While he never learned to play an instrument, he enjoys an eclectic array of music that varies from opera to piano, Frederic Chopin to Miles Davis, and Radiohead to Daft Punk. In addition to braiding together sound and sight to achieve a heightened awareness, synaesthesia enables Banisadr to develop a distinct preference for 'things in-between,' objects 'rising and falling, going forward and back,' so that 'everything [is] in a stage of becoming, transformed into something else, [leaving] nothing solid – not knowing is important,' thereby enhancing in his work an overall thematic of on-going metamorphosis by conjuring up associations with dynamic, competing life forces.

The Wedding Feast at Cana
1563
Paolo Veronese, c. 1528–1588
Oil on canvas
677 × 994 cm (267 × 391 in.)
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Photo: Akg-images/Erich Lessing



At Once (detail)
2015
Oil on linen
Triptych: 152.4 × 731.5 cm
(60 × 288 in.) Each canvas:
152.4 × 243.8 cm (60 × 96 in.)



Star Wars: Episode IV (film still)
1977
Directed & written by George Lucas, b. 1944
Photo: Akg-images/Album/Lucasfilm/20th Century Fox

This in-between is evidenced in his overlapping of artistic styles and strategies, ranging from the Flemish painting of Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder to sixteenth-century Venetian art, particularly Paolo Veronese's pageantry as evidenced in *The Wedding Feast at Cana* – a long-time Banisadr favourite in the Louvre – as well as the infamous Mos Eisley Cantina in *Star Wars Episode IV* with its monstrously conceived, yet endearing intergalactic pirates. Banisadr's preference for the intermediate is also found in his richly saturated hues, recalling Veronese's work but also landscapes after rainfall when 'colour is so intensified ... [and] everything [appears as a] hallucination.'

Banisadr finds the phantasmic universe he paints 'encyclopaedic,' especially since 'the work goes in and out of time ...'. Two of Banisadr's favourite films focus on discrete forms of life and the spaces between them, synchronising a wealth of sound with a vast assortment of imagery. Both are by Ron Fricke. The first, *Baraka* (1992), shot in twenty-four countries, moves from nature to technology and from ancient cultures to more recent ones. The second, *Samsara* (2011) – a word referring to impermanence – considers many different forms of spirituality; it was filmed over four years in twenty-five countries.

Not surprisingly, one of Banisadr's favourite books is Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk's highly acclaimed *My Name is Red* (first published in 1998; English translation in 2001). An elaborate Rashomon-like tale in which the murder of the miniaturist Elegant Effendi (by either one or more sixteenth-century Ottoman court painters) is considered from the perspectives of several unusual protagonists, including a corpse, a coin, Satan, two dervishes and the colour red. Originally trained as an artist, Pamuk narrates his story through painting, in particular through Persian miniatures and the western Frankish tradition.

In their utilisation of multiple voices, both *My Name Is Red* and Banisadr's art rely on Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossia; a concept fundamental to this thinker's view of novels' special purview,[6] defined in his essay *Discourse in the Novel:*

> Heteroglossia ... is *another's speech in another's language,* serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse.* It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author.[7]

Transposed into the realm of visual art, heteroglossia accounts for both the artist's own goal and also the intention of the work of art itself – the two may be aligned but they can also contradict one another. Invoking heteroglossia, a viewer can acknowledge the multi-layered richness of expression found in certain works of art and their ability to connote many diverse perspectives. In turn, it can often bespeak competing ideologies and open-endedness. Considered in terms of Banisadr's art, heteroglossia enables us to circumscribe the range of references his work utilises, and they constitute the on-going dialectics between past and present, painting and film, as well as fine art and popular culture in general. In one of Banisadr's many informal notes to himself, he observes:

facing page
It Was Written (detail)
2012
Oil on linen
40.6 × 40.6 cm (16 × 16 in.)

> You have to move through cultures. If, for example, I just look at Western culture's history and art movements, I am limited, but as soon as I start thinking about other cultures and movements of the same time, there are infinite possibilities.[8]

The dynamic interaction of the many embedded references in his art can be aptly understood in terms of another Bakhtinian poetic concept; the Grotesque[9] – a type of becoming predicated on uniting entities with essential differences. In *Rabelais and His World,* Bakhtin cites the speech that is often referred to as the Renaissance's own manifesto; *Oratio de hominis dignitate (Oration on the Dignity of Man),* given by philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in 1486. In his *Oratio* della Mirandola posits the idea that since humanity's superiority is conceived as being predicated on its own free will, it is capable of moving far beyond static, preordained forms of being characteristic of most flora and fauna, thus it is able to enter the enlightened state of ceaseless becoming. Bahktin then summarises the exceptional ability della Mirandola attributes to human beings:

> All the other beings remain forever what they were at the time of their creation, for their nature is ready-made and unchanging; it receives one single seed… But man receives at his birth the seeds of every form of life… Man can become a plant or an animal, but he can also become an angel and a son of God… [making him] open, uncompleted… [and thus he] can combine in himself the higher and the lower, the near and the distant, and can penetrate into all the secrets hidden in the depths of the earth.[10]

In his examination of the Grotesque, Bakhtin also cites the first chapter of the French novel by François Rabelais entitled *Pantagruel* (published c. 1532) for epitomising this open-ended approach to life. He begins to define the Grotesque sensibility by noting how the 'grotesque figures [in this narrative] are interwoven with cosmic phenomena.'[11] While the skins of humans form an 'impenetrable' defence, 'the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth and impervious surface of the body and retains only its exercises (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths.'[12] The ambiguity of Banisadr's figures seems to fulfill the basic tenets of the Grotesque as these denizens merge human and ancient features in fanciful masks and hybrid figures.

Even though Bakhtin's references to the Grotesque make it seem clear and conformable to a prescribed set of predicates, this sensibility is 'the slipperiest of aesthetic categories,' according to literary scholar Geoffrey Harpham.[13] One of the reasons for this is that the Grotesque traditionally threatens a given society's view of normalcy by opening new and often strange possibilities, involving fusions of formerly separate groupings. In the twenty-first century however, after decades of ground-breaking reassessments of traditional views on such subjects as nationalism, the storage and retrieval of information, and both ethnicity and gender as fixed and not fluid, there have been increasing doubts over exactly what comprises the standard view. In former times the

Control (detail)
2012
Oil on linen
76.2 × 91.4 cm (30 × 36 in.)

The Lower Depths (detail)
2014
Oil on linen
61 × 61 cm (24 × 24 in.)

The Garden of Earthly Delights
1500–1505
Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1450–1516
(Creation/Garden of Earthly Delights/Hell)
Oil, grisaille on wooden panel
220 × 389 cm (87 × 153 in.)
Museo Nacional Del Prado, Madrid
Photo: Akg-images

Grotesque was able to shock; for example when one type of entity, say a machine, was found germinating or even erupting in a biological form. By mimicking the human body, this machinic element caused a feeling of panic; it threatened one's views of the strict boundaries operative in the world. Such hybridisations no longer confound or displease; instead, they reaffirm the dynamism of a world in which new and radical fusions are expected.

English literature scholar and science-fiction specialist Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. has eloquently phrased the traditional Grotesque as a 'steady "descent" into interiors, into the "grottoes" of being in the hope of finding a core, but always finding more transformation.' His observation can be updated by leaving out the phrase 'the hope of finding a core,'[14] since becoming – as evidenced by Banisadr's work – no longer searches for a centre and instead places its emphasis on an on-going non-teleological dynamic. Banisadr wrote:

> I keep thinking about the relationship between animal-man-god-machine. Convergence of the different manifestations between animals, the spiritual world, technologies, and so on.[15]

Rather than viewing the Grotesque as perhaps superannuated,[16] it helps to conceptualise this artistic and literary sensibility as characterising the norm of a no-norm endemic to our fast-paced and ever-changing world.

A prolonged acquaintance with the grotesque beings that populate Banisadr's canvases reveals his profound acceptance of a much more fluid sense of identity. It is an attitude that resonates well with the French psychiatrist and theorist Félix Guattari's concept of transversality – where an individual's habitual subject positions are multiplied ensuring no single one prevails. Instead of monolithic definitions of selfhood, Guattari advocates 'partial' ones that he defines as

'pre-personal, polyphonic, collective and machinic'. He elaborates by highlighting that the process of énonciation (embracing a specific characterization of selfhood through the acceptance of a given subject position) is never complete. 'Fundamentally,' Guattari writes, 'the question of énonciation gets decentered in relation to that of human individuation. Énonciation becomes correlative not only to the emergence of a logic of non-discursive intensities, but equally to a pathic incorporation-agglomeration of these vectors of partial subjectivity. Thus it involves rejecting the habitually universalising claims of psychological modelisation.'[17] Viewed in terms of Banisadr's work, his array of ambiguously conceived figures and their many masks are indicative of an enhanced sense of self. One that is much more attuned to twentieth-century globalism than those predicated on inextricable alliances with the nation state, so that one is, in Banisadr's case, at the same time an Iranian expatriate, beginning in 1988, and an American citizen as well as a citizen of the recently developed global universe.

One can ratchet up both Banisadr's concern with the in-between and Guattari's transversality by considering them as responses to contemporary globalism; where some of the former sovereignty accorded nation-states has been passed over in favour of a much more open sense of self. Living in a decentred and deterritorialized world that is populated by hybrid personal and corporate identities, with increasingly less regulated economic and cultural transactions, this global self is able to pursue very flexible exchanges across what were once national borders. Just as in his life with its many different affiliations, Banisadr's art bespeaks openness to different times and places. It is an aesthetics of deterritorialization, bolstered by smooth transitions across divides once striated with rigid historical, national, ethnic and state borderlines. As Banisadr has noted:

> People are always afraid of what they don't understand, but artists always step into the void – the unknown. The unknown territory is where it is worth exploring.[18]

Notes

1. Ali Banisadr (born in Tehran in 1976) and his family left Iran when he was only 12. They first spent time in Turkey before heading to southern California then moving to the northern part of the state. His great-uncle is Abolhassan Banisadr, the first President of Iran (1980–1981) after the 1979 Iranian Revolution.
2. Ali Banisadr, *Interview with Author,* Brooklyn, New York, 23 September 2014. All cited Banisadr statements come from this interview.
3. The *Upanishads* are a collection of texts in the Vedic Sanskrit language, which contain the earliest emergence of some of the central religious concepts of Hinduism. The *Upanishads* are considered by Hindus to contain revealed truths concerning the nature of ultimate reality and describing the character and form of human salvation. With the translation of the *Upanishads* in the early 19th century these sacred texts also started to attract attention from a western audience. Schopenhauer was deeply impressed by the *Upanishads* and called them 'the production of the highest human wisdom'.

   Two possible finales to this battle of life in popular culture that have been important to Banisadr are Werner Herzog's overall post-apocalyptic film made after Operation Desert Storm, entitled *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), which was shot in the Kuwaiti desert, with its haunting oil fires, and which featured a Wagnerian sound track, as well as the concluding explosive dream sequence to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), particularly notable for its Pink Floyd music. Banisadr finds that he refers back to these films repeatedly, both for their spectacular imagery and for the ways the music and images interact. For him, these works and their music parallel the type of synaesthesia he experiences when painting.

   In an email to the author, dated 30 September 2014, Banisadr lists in addition to the Upanishads the following books that have been chiefly important for him: 'George Orwell's *1984*, Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red, Snow, Black Book* and other books; anything by Borges; the works of Rumi, Omar Khayyam, and Hafiz; Edward Said's *Orientalism*; Dante's *Inferno;* Homer's *The Odyssey;* Joseph Campbell's comparative mythology; and Boris Groys' criticism.'
4. Ali Banisadr, *Interview with Lilly Wei*, 6 February 2014. *www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ali-banisadr-interview.* Consulted, 10 October 2014.
5. Banisadr, *Interview with Lilly Wei.*
6. For an excellent analysis of Pamuk's novel from a Bakhtinian perspective, please see Barish Ali and Caroline Hagood, 'Heteroglossic Sprees and Murderous Viewpoints in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red,*' Texas Studies in Literature and Language 54, No. 4, Modern Turkish Letters (Winter 2012): pp. 505–529.
7. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 324.
8. Ali Banisadr, 'Selected Notes: November 2012 – November 2014.' This note is part of a group the artist chose and sent in an email to the author, 13 November 2014.
9. According to sixteenth-century Italian mannerist painter, architect, and historian of Renaissance art, Giorgio Vasari, the Grotesque was first developed in the fifteenth-century by Venetian painter Morto da Feltre when he discovered subterranean grottoes near Rome, notable for wall paintings featuring entwined human, animal and plant life.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 364.
11. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* pp. 328–329.
12. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* pp. 327 and 317–318.
13. Geoffrey Harpham, 'The Grotesque: First Principles,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), p. 461.
14. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 'On the Grotesque in Science Fiction' in *Science Fiction Studies* 29, No. 1 (March, 2002), p. 83.
15. Banisadr, 'Selected Notes: November 2012 – November 2014.'
16. Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 'On the Grotesque in Science Fiction', 'In short, the grotesque – with the help of technology – is becoming the victim of its own success.' p. 74.
17. Félix Guattari, 'On the Production of Subjectivity' in *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm,* trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 22–23.
18. Banisadr, 'Selected Notes: November 2012 – November 2014.'

Boris Groys in Conversation with Ali Banisadr

BG: What you are doing, it's in between realism and abstraction.

AB: There is always motion in the work. I don't like paintings to be still nor have a central point. I want the eyes to keep moving around the work, for there to be time for it to unveil itself.

BG: You have to look at the details, like a Bosch work.

AB: I remember being in Vienna for my birthday, and the only thing I wanted to do was see that Bosch painting; *The Last Judgement*. I was there for three hours.

BG: I see the parallels. The composition made of an abundance of details. It's strange but your paintings remind me of two artists simultaneously; Bosch and Kandinsky.

Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450 – 1516), c, 1482, Last Judgement triptych, Oil tempera on oak 164 x 127cm Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna

AB: I appreciate Venetian painters too, like Veronese or Tintoretto. They were so focused on colour because they were exposed to all the trade with Turkey at that time, that's why they had their differences with the Florentines, who were focused on line, design and architecture. I have a relationship with Persian miniatures too, whereby the work becomes more of an experience as if looking at it under a microscope, moving through the painting to discover different things. That's what I like in literature – to read something and be taken to more than just one particular time, place and argument.

BG: Your work is always in movement, almost an explosion – a 'Zabriskie Point' feeling.

AB: It's amazing you said that, Robert Hobbs asked me to send him clips of films that I feel my work has a relationship with, and one of them was that part.

BG: Your work is like an explosion in one single movement, yet at the same time with many details. Is it chaos or something in between?

AB: Between chaos and order; I try to create order out of the chaos. It begins chaotic and all the figures emerge later.

BG: It always looks like there is an earth and a heaven present too.

AB: It's the space where I feel that these figures fit in to.

BG: This feeling of movement you create I think is very rare. This very complicated and detailed composition shows a unity of movement. The unity of a flow or an explosion creates the feeling of an event…of something performative.

AB: It's true.

BG: Because what is fixed is invented. It's cinematographic in a certain way because it catches a certain kind of event, a moment of change, a moment of flow. It's in the middle of something.

AB: It's not necessarily connected to current events, but something more than that. The way I see it, as you move up the canvas the characters free themselves, they become lighter and surrender to the elements of earth. They become ether. Whereas at the bottom, they're really trying to take control of their own identity – always in conflict with each other.

BG: So, you move from event to post-event. The day after – a retrospective of an event.

AB: Aftermath ...Something you wrote that's really stayed with me, is that in the past there was animal, man and gods. Man would strive to become a god or angel, moving towards 'that' direction. But now its animal, man, and machine, going backwards - towards the animal. That's really stayed in my head whilst working on this body of work. I feel that the top of the canvas, they're releasing themselves and maybe moving towards a higher realm. The bottom is where you find the machine and the animal. All in conflict with each other.

BG: From heaven to earth. There's an aftermath here, like after war.

AB: I've seen this with my own eyes, living in Iran as a kid during the war.

BG: You really experienced it?

AB: The bombing, the air raids; I witnessed so many ruins and chaos everywhere. When the vibrations and explosions of the air raids occurred my mother recalls I would make drawings to try to make sense out of what was happening. And I think that stays with me even now, where I still see the world as this chaotic, potentially dangerous place. Trying to make sense out of it in a visual way is the only way I can try to understand it.

BG: The work is a moment of destruction. Actually if you go back to Bosch too, that work *The Last Judgement* is about apocalypse. And Kandinsky started his abstract paintings with the concept of the apocalypse. In his earlier Munich paintings, there are always three riders of the apocalypse, there is a form of explosion and a sub-subject as a very small boat. A kind of destruction/revelation of Fate. The moment of destruction it creates is also a form of clarity about the fate of things, and the fate of the subject.

AB: And the boat, is that supposed to represent a journey? Like man's journey into the world? This world?

BG: Yes, dangerous. Because he was an admirer of Schopenhauer, who describes human beings as being on the small boat on the surface of the world will.

AB: The world will…?

BG: A world will is an impersonal flow. It's not my will or your will, but an impersonal flow of things. We are on this surface, and can perish at any moment - go under. Kandinsky reacts to this part in this moment of explosion. It's flowing, but then something happens and there's a moment of time standing still – the end; the apocalypse is the end of the flow, and it's a catastrophe, but it's also a revelation.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944) 'Boat Trip (Lake), 1910, Oil on canvas, 98 x 105cm, St Petersburg, Sataatliche Ermitage

AB: This apocalypse of course is not just an apocalypse that takes place somewhere but it can also refer to the apocalypse of the mind. When certain ideas crumble and fall apart, simultaneously there is a revelation.

BG: But a revelation of what exactly? A revelation of nothingness? Or a revelation of too many things?

AB: (Laughter) I don't know. For example, if I get overwhelmed with what's going on in my head, when I actually let go of it all is the moment of solution - when all the elements fall into place. For me, working it out visually doesn't give me an answer, but it does put things in place.

BG: So in your work the elements are in the moment of dissolving themselves, of destruction, or going into the abstract, into pure energy. Are they always on the verge of the solution?

AB: They're on the verge, exactly. They don't want to take responsibility and stand for something. Each thing is subject to change itself.

BG: What's interesting about your work is that everything is unstable, on the verge of disappearance, or at the moment of the solution. This kind of mortality, finiteness and instability of everything. Most interestingly you situate your painting in an event that takes place between materiality of these things dissolving into the abstraction.

AB: Absolutely, I also like to bring in something from my own personal history whilst thinking about work that's global. I like Neo Rauch for example.

BG: He also has this ambivalence between art movements. I thought about early Beckmann too in relation to your work, during the period of German Expressionism, but also in terms of the colours you use. Beckmann is much more realist than you are, but he also has this mythological abstract level.

AB: I do like Beckmann and early Otto Dix too.

“Frühe Mensch” (Eearly man) 1939 (reworked 1947/48).
Watercolour, gouache and pen and ink on paper, 49.8 x 64.5 cm.
Max Beckmann (1884 – 1950)

BG: Its an interesting tradition. But I think that tradition is almost, or mostly, lost here. In a very strange way, if you look at this tradition it’s both Beckmann and early Kandinsky, it’s kind of Nordic, literary, reflexive, and cruel in a certain way, because of metamorphosis and destruction. Americans are perhaps under the spell of the French tradition; the tradition of pleasure. Understanding colour as a source of pleasure; essential pleasure, sexual pleasure. There’s a friend of mine in France, he said; ‘The surface of the painting should be as the skin of a woman.’

(Laughter)

AB: Renoir.

BG: Yes. He has a strange French relationship. But you absolutely don’t do that.

AB: I am not attracted to that idea, no. German and Northern European artists interest me mostly.

BG: It’s very obvious, it is a different interpretation of colour. Colour interpreted as a means to convey sense.

AB: Exactly.

BG: To convey meaning; it’s actually a medium of a message. In French painting, Impressionist and after that, colour is a product and medium of pure sensuality. Those artists didn’t want to convey any meaning; they wanted to convey a sensual experience of pleasure.

AB: Like Seurat and similar artists, it can become very mechanical too, which in painting I try to fight.

BG: Because it’s not about feeling; it’s about surface and senses.

AB: Whereas, with the German painters you mentioned you really feel the paintings.

BG: But you feel there is always this, let’s say, claim of universality. Some claim of representing totality of the world. If you look at a French painting, it’s always a fragment, never a claim to show totality. Perhaps I am also spoilt here by the German way of thinking. I always try to do something in general; something total.

AB: I’m also impressed by German philosophy, you mentioned Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche, they were always interested in foreign philosophy, in the East for example. They brought it back into

their dialogue. I like the idea of thinking about all ideas from around the globe – that's why I like comparative everything; comparative literature, comparative mythology, comparative religion. Because then, if it echoes throughout all these different cultures, then it might be true.

BG: So let's say, you have a Western look but also an Eastern look for the detail.

AB: It's funny because some people think that the work is very abstract and then they get close and see tonnes of things going on. But at the same time, some people think it's really detailed and then get close and it becomes abstract. So from the outside; abstract, but at a middle position; material, then from a close position; it dissolves.

BG: That's a good strategy. That's how we are.

AB: Exactly.

BG: Because if you look at the human being it's like a point; as Lacan would say - we are always a point of a surface, we are always a point of a landscape, of the earth. So if you come closer, you see a human being, but if you begin to operate on it, like a surgeon, it dissolves.

AB: I watched a video a long time ago; 'The Power of Ten' by Charles and Ray Eames. You saw people lying in the park and then the camera started to zoom out, you saw the city, then you saw the state, then the country. You started to see the whole universe. The camera started to come back and it went in, in, in, in and came back to the people lying down in the park. Then it went inside of them. Inside of them was the same universe that the camera had pulled out of. That always stayed with me. The same universe exists inside of you that is outside of us.