



## THE SOUND OF PAINTING

Jeffrey Deitch

A distinctive artistic pantheon is enshrined on Ali Banisadr's studio door. Reproductions of iconic images are arranged like an altarpiece. There are paintings by Archimboldo, Bosch, Cranach, and Velázquez, a Dürer engraving, and a miniature painting by the great Persian artist Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād. From the modern era, there are images of Picasso's *Guernica*, a Bacon Pope, de Kooning's *Excavation*, and paintings by Anselm Kiefer and Neo Rauch. On a table in the studio's sitting area is a copy of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. This unique mixture of influences sets the stage for a visit with one of the most interesting young artists working in New York.

Studio view.



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Ali Banisadr has navigated his own path through art history. His paintings build on his ardent study of European Old and Modern Masters, Persian miniatures, the New York School, and favorite living artists to create his own artistic vision. He collapses a wide range of historical periods and cultural approaches to define his own version of contemporaneity. His work extends his personal reading of the continuum of painting into the present.

The operatic ambition and complexity of Banisadr's new work contrasts with the meticulous order of his studio. One might expect his exuberant paintings with their explosive form and imagery to emerge from the kind of chaos one sees in photographs of Francis Bacon's studio. Instead, his studio is like a scientific laboratory, spotlessly clean with his paint and brushes perfectly arrayed. Banisadr tempers his passion for painting with a deliberate, thoughtful approach. He creates a world of irrational fantasy based on a rational philosophical system.

All of the disparate images and structures in Banisadr's paintings are interconnected in a way that parallels the natural order of the world. His work is infused by a spirituality that ties all its elements together. The paintings embody a Spinozan concept of divinity. God is present in the interconnectedness of nature and in the organization of his contrasting compositional elements into a coherent whole.

An imposing new painting, *Motherboard*, mounted on an easel opposite the entrance, confronts visitors to the studio. It is a vibrant rendering of Banisadr's artistic world, constructed through a layering of five elements: the sea, the landscape, the figure, the sky, and the motherboard,

the digital platform that holds memory and ties everything together. The work fuses his rendering of the natural and the digital. The painting of nature is updated for the digital age. The composition is inspired by the flats of scenery on the stage of a theater, with one stacked in front of the other at various levels. There is no vanishing point, and deliberately no focal point. Every part is as important as the other. You can look at the painting from any direction. Like a digital motherboard, all components have to work together in order for the processing system to function. As in the theater, the eye has to keep moving.

Banisadr interconnects several concepts of space in the composition of *Motherboard*. There is illusionistic space with its sense of depth, a multipoint space characteristic of Persian miniatures, the theatrical space of scenery flats on a stage and the new digital space. These different approaches to representing space are merged into the artist's own portrayal of reality. He aspires to represent the point in the universe where all other points meet and you can see everything from every angle.

In contrast to the complex but ordered space in *Motherboard*, an encounter with *Contact*, the other large painting in the studio, is like walking into a flock of birds. There is a tension between the figures, half animal and half human, and the abstract vortex in which they are immersed. The form is convulsive, like a battle scene. Asked about the genesis of the work, Banisadr explains that his paintings begin with a sound and that his composition follows "the sounds within the painting." He recalls that as a child in Iran, he would make drawings based on the explosions he would hear during the Eight

Years' War with Iraq. His painting process is still guided by this fusion of sound and image. He likens his approach to synesthesia.

Banisadr's colors are vibrant and sensuous, and his painterly touch is light and playful, evoking the work of the great Venetian painters he admires, particularly his favorite, Tintoretto. The swirl of Eastern and Western imagery and his cross-cultural approach to composition evoke the Battle of Lepanto, the epic naval contest in 1571 between the Venetians and their Western European allies versus the Ottomans for control of the Mediterranean. The Venetians won the battle, but the influence of the Ottomans remained strong in the Venetian sphere. Like Venetian painting, Banisadr's work mixes European and Oriental influences.

Banisadr left Iran at age twelve, moving first to San Diego, then to Modesto, California, where he attended high school. He found his first American artistic inspiration in the San Francisco graffiti community, which in the 1990s was the most innovative in the country, with artists like Barry McGee and Margaret Kilgallen introducing a

new figurative vocabulary. After studying psychology in San Francisco, Banisadr moved to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts. Rather than studying the critical theory that was in vogue at many of the prestigious art schools, he was determined to learn artistic skills. At SVA, he took illustration and other classes to help perfect his technique. In his quest to further develop his skills, he then enrolled at the New York Academy of Art, known for its revival of the traditional academic art curriculum.

Banisadr's Persian background is more of a subconscious rather than a conscious influence. He is an American painter, advancing the history of painting from multiple cultures into a new contemporary hybridity. He fuses his virtuoso painterly skills, his philosophical vision, and his vivid imagination to create work that enters a dialogue with the great painters, writers, and musicians of the past and the technologically sophisticated innovators of the present. Like the artists he most admires, he has succeeded in creating his own artistic world.



*It's in the Air*, 2012. Oil on linen,  
82 × 120 inches (208.3 × 304.8 cm).  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.