



ALI  
BANISADR  
WE  
HAVEN'T  
LANDED  
ON  
EARTH  
YET

GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC

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by Maryam Ekhtiar  
Metropolitan Museum of Art

The exhibition title, *We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet* captures the essence of Ali Banisadr's explosive canvases. It was inspired by a quote from a biography of Willem De Kooning that alludes to man's first steps on the moon. Banisadr's painting with the same title is a meditation on human progress. It explores the incongruous notion that, in spite of incredible technological and scientific advances, we remain bafflingly primitive, unrefined and prone to doom. Given the media's constant rumblings of war and revolution, his compositions provide a biting commentary on the troubled dark side of the human condition in the twenty-first century. This is Banisadr's fourth major solo exhibition, presenting yet another phase in the young artist's vibrant career. In keeping with his signature style, these paintings reflect the remarkable level of sophistication and complexity that lie at the core of his oeuvre.

His large panoramic canvases contain layer upon layer of vigorous brushstrokes that explode like shrapnel from an unnamed place and detonate before our eyes. They thrust us into chaotic fields, where conflict is not only visceral but audible.<sup>1</sup> A place where myth, memory and fact coalesce. Geological in nature, these tectonic layers embed centuries of history and memory and act as the site where the artist's personal story intersects with the history of our times and an encyclopedic understanding of art history.

Banisadr's compositions are never static. They constantly move and shift, guiding the viewer's eye through large expanses of canvas. Ironically, beneath these cacophonous layers, there is an underlying order and logic. This paradoxical quality reflects the artist's fascination with battle scenes in the sumptuous sixteenth-century illustrated manuscripts of the Persian national epic, the *Shahnameh* of Firdawsi. Filled with countless figures on horseback engaged in intense battle, these illustrations at first glance appear dense and chaotic. But upon closer inspection, they exhibit an underlying logic that grounds them and infuses them with balance and refinement. They are gorier than any present-day violent feature film, yet reflect the unusual ability of the painters to instill order in chaos and imbue the compositions with a coolness intended to delight rather than disturb. Banisadr's paintings possess some of the same underlying forces. In *Selection*, 2011, for example, he uses gold paint throughout, particularly above the horizon line, evoking the luxuriousness of the finest Persian manuscript illustrations.

The layers of unrelenting brushstrokes in Banisadr's paintings vacillate between a macro- and a micro-experience and allow the eye to zoom in and out of the painting. On a micro level, the more you look, the more you see. Buried in the layers is an apocalyptic underworld inhabited by indefinable figures engaged in obscure activities surrounded by bizarre objects and bodies of water. The figures are carnivalesque and contorted; some are even dressed as clowns. This visual device is reminiscent of the grotesque creatures that hide in the flamboyant rock formations in the sixteenth century paintings of the *Shah Tahmasp Shahnameh* by the master painter, Sultan Muhammad. Two paintings that come to mind are the *Feast of Sadeh* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1970.301. 2) and *The Court of Gayumars* in the Saddrudin Aga Khan Collection.<sup>2</sup>



*The Battle of Pashan Begins, Folio from the Shahnameh (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp*  
 Attributed to / zurückzuführen auf: 'Abd al-Vahhab and Muzaffar 'Ali (active late 1520s–70s; d. ca. 1576)  
 Iran, Tabriz, ca. 1530–35  
 Opaque watercolor, ink, silver and gold on paper  
 10 3/4 x 9 5/8 inches, Page: 18 11/16 x 12 5/8 in  
 Aquarell deckend, Tinte, Silber und Gold auf Papier  
 27.3 x 4.4 cm, Seite: 47.5 x 32.1 cm

Gift of Arthur A. Houghton Jr., 1970  
 1970.301.37



Ali Banisadr, *Selection*, 2011  
 Oil on linen, 66 x 88 inches  
 Öl auf Leinwand, 167.6 x 223.5 cm



Sultan Muhammad  
*The Feast of Sada: From the Shahnameh (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp*  
 ca. 1525  
 Colors, ink, silver and gold on paper,  
 18.5 cm x 12.64 in  
 Farbe, Tusche, Silber und Gold auf Papier,  
 47 cm x 32.1 cm

The Metropolitan Museum

The grotesque monsters in these paintings are not always recognizable at first glance, but pop out as one zeroes in on a detail. They symbolize the presence of evil and lurking dangers in an untouched paradisiacal setting.

The eeriness of Banisadr’s frightening underworld is intensified by the choice of color. Some compositions are painted in burning hues of orange, while others are in muted tones of blue and grey that recall the depths of a turbulent ocean (*At Sea*, 2011). In another work, *Melencolia I*, Banisadr responds to an engraving by the German Renaissance master, Albrecht Dürer (1417 – 1528) with the same title. The work by Dürer has possibly generated more interpretation and discussion than any other. It is packed with metaphors for despair, frustration and defeat, which are expressed visually through objects such as unused tools, an hour-glass that has run out and an empty scale. In this atmosphere of anguish, what seems to predominate is imagination and the lingering powers of knowledge, reason and wisdom. Banisadr’s *Melencolia I* exudes a similar sense of anxiety and uncertainty by representing the artist’s mocking commentary on the follies of our world. His works also allude to the compositional and coloristic attributes of Persian miniature painting, the phantasmagoric images of Hieronymus Bosch and the thick gestural brushstrokes of Willem de Kooning; and integrate the sweeping narrativity of cinema and quirkiness of graphic novels. This multi-valance is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Banisadr’s epic canvases.

In addition, sound, an integral force in Banisadr’s paintings, is rooted in his own personal history. His paintings recount a personal yet universal tale of war and destruction through the visual representation of sound or “synesthesia.” Growing up as a child during Iran’s eight-year war with Iraq profoundly impacted the artist’s psyche. During the bombings, he took refuge in the basement of his childhood home, where he painted. Painting provided solace from the sounds and sights of war as he tried to make sense of the horrors taking place around him. Banisadr’s canvases are intended not only to be seen but heard, and represent the artist’s aural dialogue with the painting. In his own words: “I know when a painting is finished by the sound it emanates. It sounds right to me...”

The paintings in *We Haven’t Landed on Earth Yet*, exhibit a spirit of innovation. In this work, Banisadr experiments with scale. Larger than any of the canvases he had previously painted, several are monumental. This shift in scale has led to more atmospheric compositions, in which the figures and strokes of paint are not as minute and densely-packed. In several of them a misty film envelops the dark field of the canvas, providing the images of the underworld with a heavy and wet quality (*Excavation*, 2011 and *the Visitors*, 2011). The exhibit also features a number of small intimate paintings that transport the viewer into the microcosm of the larger works. These works seem to be magnified details quoted from the artist’s panoramic compositions. They showcase his masterly hand and remarkable skill in manipulating gestural brushstrokes and working paint into sculptural creations.

Regardless of scale, Banisadr’s paintings of epic beauty are the result of years of soul-searching; they confront us with the absurdity and pointlessness of our existence at a time when war and upheaval predominate and shape our lives, but offer no solutions.



Ali Banisadr, *At Sea*, 2011  
Oil on linen, 36 x 30 inches  
Öl auf Leinwand, 91.4 x 76.2 cm



Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514  
Kupferstich / Copper engraving



Hieronymus Bosch  
*Garden of the earthly delights*,  
detail of the right panel  
*Garten der Lüste*, Detail des rechten Panels  
1480 – 1505  
Oil on wood triptych, 86.6 x 153.2 inches  
Dreitelliges Tafelbild, 220 cm x 389 cm

1 Pamela A. Lewis, “Defiant Beauty: Contemporary Iranian Art from the Permanent Collection at the MET,” *GALO (Global Art Laid Out)*. March 21, 2012. 2 Sheila R. Canby, *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp: The Persian Book of Kings*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

ALI  
BANISADR  
VOYAGER  
INTO  
THE  
UNKNOWN

by Greg Lindquist

Ali Banisadr's most recent paintings question the significance of our human advancement. With all our momentous developments in technology and science, what does it mean for our existence? What would it mean for it to all be taken away? Also in Banisadr's reservations is the role of the artist amid technology. In particular, what does it mean for an artist today to choose painting? In its most basic act, painting remains a primordial activity: smearing pigments and binder across a surface, we create an object external to ourselves that tells us something internal about ourselves. What is the role of the painter, then, among technology and science?

The painter, like the shaman, is a voyager into the realm of the unknown. Like the shaman, the painter returns with knowledge as treasure, recounting an internal journey into a frontier of the self, plunging deeply into the subconscious. Banisadr's paintings synthesize internal and external space, fusing the ethereal workings of the psyche with the physical facts of paint. For all the tools developed in our world to create, they cannot function without the imagination. Whether as viewer or creator, the visual language of painting speaks directly to our imagination. Painting, like shamanism, is a process of traveling within the psyche. For Banisadr, exploration in the studio is an internal process of searching.

It is important to note that the figures in Banisadr's paintings have become increasingly more enmeshed with the paint and background as he has traveled deeper into the physical world of paint and his own internal landscape. While Banisadr's earlier more figurative work has been linked to the turmoil and revolution of his Iranian birthplace and childhood in Tehran, his current paintings are more enigmatic and undetermined. The figures are less explicit, thwarting frequent yet facile comparisons to Hieronymous Bosch, Pieter Brueggel the Elder, and Persian miniature painting. They lend only the impression of tableau action and circumstance that is completed in the viewer's experience. These new paintings venture farther into the realm of his probing imagination. In *Fabrication* (2011), for example, drips and scrapings in the sky coalesce into the suggestion of aviary forms; in the lower half of the canvas, figures' limbs emerge and recede but are never fully identified or resolved. These fleshly particulates confirm no cultural identify, ethnicity or circumstance: paint, here, is the only undeniable fact.

Banisadr links the elements to consciousness. If the land represents the conscious, water is the subconscious, Banisadr has expressed. His paintings indeed exist somewhere beyond the earth's corporeal landscape, located in an intensely internal, mythological and psychological dialog. They also collapse space and time in a way similar to the world of dreams. While Banisadr's work is not rooted in discernible image, several of these paintings suggest underwater or underworldly spaces such as *Excavation* (2011), *At Sea* (2011) and the exhibition's eponymous work (2012). In *Excavation*, although the space is loosely organized into ground and sky, this vista is obscured in a milky haze, as if peering through an algae-streaked aquarium glass or a fogged scuba mask lens. The scene is otherworldly yet still familiar. The rich ultramarines and phthalo greens in *At Sea* enclose a throng of figures and indistinct architectural elements such as ladders. In *We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet*, color implies the aquatic yet is not completely explicit. Although a gyrating horizon line lends the impression of gazing towards the ocean surface from its depths underneath, the painting at the same time embodies a celestial quality.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder  
*Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1559  
Oil on panel  
46.1 x 64.2 in, 117 x 163 cm

Gemäldegalerie der staatlichen Museen zu Berlin  
(Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz)



Sergej Ivanovitsj Borisov  
*Altay shaman with gong*, 1911 - 14

These suggestions of waterscapes or underworldscapes are grounded in the magical yet still tangible characteristics of paint. Banisadr has cited Willem de Kooning and Gerhard Richter as inspirations for challenging the material boundaries of painting on the surface of the picture plane and from within the canvas's frame. Like de Kooning and Richter, as well as Peter Doig and Luc Tuymans, Banisadr's paintings occupy a restless, ambiguous and indeterminate space between figuration and abstraction. These painters use subtractive and additive processes to image making, often obscuring imagery yet retaining a figurative detail that prompts recognition of a narrative.

What distinguishes Banisadr's process from these painters, however, is his initial entry into a painting. Whereas Doig and Tuymans begin with a photographic image, de Kooning often began with cut-up layers of figurative drawings, discovering abstraction as a result of splintering representation. In Richter's work, the squeegee-produced abstractions interest Banisadr more than the photorealist paintings because these abstractions push the physical boundaries of oil paint. In these works, however, Richter's striations of pure stroke begin and end with paint, rather than coalescing into imagery. Banisadr operates more like de Kooning, but in reverse. Banisadr begins only with the paint. Allowing the suggestion of figures and objects within the landscape to emerge and recede, he is in dialog with the imagery the paint itself implies. Similar to how Michelangelo said, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it," Banisadr's imagination creates imagistic order out of painterly chaos.

Like the world of the shaman and painter, literature provides a place of exploration and inspiration for Banisadr. Novels influence imagery that he translates into painting. He says, "If you're an artist and you're interested in what is going on inside of you, then you're interested in how other human beings have dealt with that. Reading a good novel takes you inside that person's world, the way that person thinks, the way that person sees the world." Artists, in particular painters, have had intimate rapports with writers and poets for centuries, perhaps for their need to listen to the unarticulated. Like the undiscovered spaces of dream and literature, painting also expresses the unknown. Ali Banisadr's paintings also explore and express this uncharted topography. Without a need to speak, his paintings invite the silence in listening to what exists within and outside of oneself.



Willem de Kooning  
*Excavation*, 1950  
Oil on canvas  
81.7 x 100.2 in, 205.7 x 254.6 cm

The Art Institute of Chicago



Willem de Kooning  
*Woman*, 1965  
Charcoal on transparentized paper  
80 x 35.8 in, 203.2 x 90.8 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Gerhard Richter  
*Abstract Painting*, 1992  
Oil on aluminium  
39.4 x 39.4 in, 100 x 100 cm

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