



FIRE AND ICE

Lilly Wei

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.

Robert Frost, "Fire and Ice"

Over the past ten years, Ali Banisadr has made an international reputation for himself with vibrant canvases depicting sweeping panoramic vistas in which abstractions edge into the figurative and vice versa. Steeped in surreal, apocalyptic imagery and distinguished by Banisadr's tortuous brushwork, his paintings carry veiled references to art history and contemporary issues alike. Constantly assimilating stimuli from politics, film, theater, comic books, music, and literature into his pictorial vocabulary, Banisadr is something of a visual prodigy.

A recently completed canvas titled *Trust in the Future* (2017) demonstrates that Banisadr's painting is never predictable: it is a monochrome. Spanning nearly seven by ten feet, the work is not only a stellar example of how compelling his expansive canvases are but an indication of his continual experimentation. Since the artist is best known for the splendor of his palette and the extravaganza of seductive colors of northern Renaissance, Venetian, and Persian provenance, seeing a large monochrome painting alongside a group of three smaller canvases distinguished by the use of the same deep indigo induces astonishment. Often, Banisadr's lush coloration suggests paradise but is a feint. Instead, the viewer is given something more ambiguous, unsettling, and ultimately more riveting.

Toying with the unexpected by merging formal beauty and hallucinogenic visions of chimeras and grotesqueries

Detail, *Treasure*, 2016 (page 18).

is one of Banisadr's great strengths, which is magnified by another stylistic development: the shift in perspective. The vast bird's-eye panoramas one has come to associate with his earlier works are now replaced by a tighter focus. Banisadr puts the viewer at eye level, pulling him closer into the scene and intensifying its impact. The three zones of classic landscape—foreground, middle ground, and background—give way to two divisions. The action is pushed toward the front of the pictorial plane, showcasing larger figures with clearer contours and more defined attributes. In contrast to works such as *Motherboard* (2013) or *Contact* (2013), in which the characters are so enmeshed by the expressiveness of the paint handling that the eye is challenged to tease them out, *Trust in the Future* possesses an atmosphere of being zoomed-in. This close-up greatly concentrates the painting's force.

At first glance, the sole use of indigo might suggest that *Trust in the Future* may be at a beginning stage, awaiting the addition of other colors. But further examination reveals a subtly tonal, twilight world animated by Banisadr's bravura brushwork. The procession of blurred, agonistic figures stretches across the lower half as if on a stage. The density of the image is balanced by the ethereal realm above, rendered in splattered arcs and with droplets of blue-black paint. The reduction of color to indigo and its shadings bring the composition's construction to view with startling clarity. The rhythms of its structure become visible without distraction; the figures are clearly legible.

The deep hue of indigo gives rise to a dystopian ambience often associated with the milieu of coldly half-lit, portentous paintings, films, or novelistic works. The grisaille world of Picasso's war-devastated *Guernica*,

Dante's *Inferno*, George Orwell's grimly authoritarian *1984*, or Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, based on a Philip K. Dick's bleak notions of a futurist world, resonate with Banisadr and may have prompted his title for *Trust in the Future*.

Banisadr hadn't set out to make a monochrome painting and was himself surprised by the final outcome. He began with an indigo of his own formulation and assumed "it would go somewhere else." However, the painting reached a stage at which it emanated the sound of sharp blasts of Arctic air and hummed with the soft whisper of snowfall followed by the crunch of footsteps on a frozen crust—sensations apparent to the artist that invoked a mood he had for some time and had at last succeeded in capturing.

Much has been written about Banisadr's synesthesia and how it propels the production of his paintings. For Banisadr, colors emit certain sounds, an internalized noise, like the grinding or screech of metal on metal or the tinkling of splintering glass. It is not music. He associates each sound with a specific color and shape that comes from the painting and helps guide him in its creation. This might be why, even for nonsynesthetes, the paintings are sensed as remarkably percussive. We see with the brain as well as the eyes.

A prodigiously gifted draftsman and colorist, Banisadr values painting for its materiality and recalcitrance. He calls himself "a painter in the tradition of painting," looking toward not only past masters but his contemporaries such as Neo Rauch, Chris Ofili, and Dana Schutz, artists he feels a kinship with as they face—and master—similar concerns that revolve around the act of painting. For Banisadr, that act consists of essentially two modes. He begins with expressive, free-form brushwork rapidly

applied to the canvas while "trying to create a feeling, to achieve an overall level of energy." Here, his sites are set on creating a visceral, abstract atmosphere. Working in this associative, nonlinear fashion "involves a lot of body movement," the artist laughingly remarks.

Banisadr calls his second mode "miniature mode," referring to the further development of the painting, in which he pictorially explores ideas via carefully placed marks rendered with an array of fine-tipped brushes. Shifting between these two modes stimulates the artist, encouraging him to seek equilibrium within the composition while harmonizing its overall energy. He refines, adds, erases, and adjusts until the disparate parts gradually draw together into the finished work. When nothing stands out or appears out of place to him, he knows the painting is done.

Banisadr's paintings constantly challenge him—they are always on his mind, and possible solutions can present themselves anywhere, anytime—while in a museum, leafing through art books, watching a film, listening to music, reading, or walking down a street. It's hard to pinpoint his influences with any certainty and one needn't do so to appreciate the paintings' visual allure. Banisadr's omnivorous collecting of formal painting resolutions is his personal act of appreciation and appropriation and has long been integral to his process. His works are a kind of memory palace, a repository of pictorial and cultural hints, where traces of Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Breughel, and Francis Bacon, among countless others, may be found, enriching the viewer's reading.

At the moment, Banisadr is once again deeply engrossed in the etchings of Albrecht Dürer and Martin



Martin Schongauer (German, Colmar ca. 1435/50–1491 Breisach), *Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons*, ca. 1470–75. Engraving, 11³/₁₆ x 8¹/₁₆ in. (30 x 21.8 cm)

Schongauer, the latter's *Temptation of St. Anthony* (c. 1470s) being of particular interest. Crisp, finely incised lines enliven the print, and the image's spikey angles and background sequences of short, abrupt marks make an appearance in somewhat altered guise in Banisadr's *Myth* (2016) and a number of other new works. Its influence is also seen in the group of three 16-inch monochromatic squares titled *Beyond the Sea 1–3* (2017). Each

of these semiabstract seascapes whirls furiously at hurricane force with a spin similar to the Schongauer. Several of the paintings in this exhibition employ a circling, centralized composition, and some of Banisadr's creatures seem cloned from body parts gathered from Schongauer's fiends.

Most of Banisadr's work is distinguished by a baroque palette, which is typically flamboyant, but in this group of works tends toward more sober shades. *Myth*, measuring 66 x 88 inches, is one of the most lyrically hued canvases, aglow with numinous blues and pinks. *The Rise of the Blond* (2016) and *Treasure* (2016), two identically sized large paintings, are cooler, more subdued, and dissonant in color, in reaction, perhaps, to a world in turmoil. Their subjects seem both topical and timeless. One might read *Treasure* as a scene of embarkation or disembarkation with multiple implications and brushwork that seems to verge on pixelated dissolution. A theme arcs through Banisadr's work: the notion that appearances can be compromised, capricious, and taunting, that reality is complex.

Another 66 x 88-inch canvas with the evocative title *Mosaic People* (2017) brings to mind the ornate tiles and tesserae that adorn mosques or Byzantine churches. Banisadr's interest in pixilation is apparent in his pronounced use of dots and dashes that, when read as a nod to the digital image, make the scene seem enlarged almost to a point of disintegration or breaking up. As if caught in the blast wave of a detonation or a storm, the forces leap upward into a pearled sky; the work is a tour de force of swirling shapes both exhilarating and disquieting. The furor above reiterates the disorder below, where creatures of fantasy interact enigmatically.

The ascendant movement, from dark to light, reflects the artist's statement that light signifies hope. Though abstract, the beautifully rendered, variously textured upper register recalls Banisadr's enthusiasm for the final scene of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), in which the products of American consumerism are catapulted up and rain down—a bonfire of vanities.

An inclination toward social concerns is all the more evident in Banisadr's 2017 suite of seven earth-colored works on paper depicting heads. Titled *Seven*, a number that is symbolic across cultures, the suite is unlike anything the artist has made before. Haunting and partially abstract, the depictions are violent, grotesque, or pitiable and conjure thoughts of soldiers, terrorists, or the maimed and psychologically impaired. These faces, distraught and clumped with paint suggesting blood, maimed flesh, or mud, express existential despair and human frailty. They seem distant relatives of Théodore Géricault's great painted portraits of 1822 of the insane, and they call to mind as well the contemporary French-Algerian artist Kader Attia's photographs of faces of World War I French-African soldiers mutilated in combat and given plastic surgery, crude in that day, by their French colonial officials as recompense. Attia's work points to the cruelty inherent in these inevitably failed "acts of repair" and Banisadr's faces suggest the same pollical sympathies.

Banisadr makes no claim to be an activist. However, as an Iranian-American artist and a civilized, sensitive human being, it would be impossible not to be affected by the political and social devastations roiling the globe. In talking about his work at a recent event, he said he hadn't realized how political his content had become.



The Waste Land, 2006.
Oil on panel
9 x 12 inches (23 x 30.5 cm)

But as he stated, "artists are antennae." Nonetheless, he is wary of agitprop, and thinks of his work not as reportage on current events but as a reflector of existential conditions, with multiple layers of meanings and readings. War; displacement; the loss of home, language, and culture; and environmental despoliation are subjects that reverberate profoundly with him. He and his family were forced to leave Tehran in 1988, wholly altering the course of his life. Intimations of these events linger, however masked or mitigated, and continue to inform his practice.

His concerns about oil become evident in an eponymous painting from 2016. The artist considers it "a monster" that has caused so much tragedy in the region—like the "blood of the Earth leaking away" he said. Personified as a rapacious creature erupting from the ground, the outlined head is perhaps a hook of sorts, or a variation of an oil rig's drill bit.

The themes in Banisadr's work have not been consciously or specifically extracted from his childhood experiences. However, a visit to Normandy Beach while he was studying at the New York Academy of Painting revived memories of a bomb exploding in the playground of his school, leaving behind an enormous crater and shattering all the windows. Compelled by this sudden recollection, he made a series of crater paintings. *Waste Land* (2006) is one of those paintings, a small but potent landscape dominated by a bomb bursting into fiery red, orange, and black in the desert. Such crater paintings might be considered an overt kind of exorcism and source of the concussive sensations his work emanates.

Kaleidoscopic fantasias, well equipped to comprise the waves of instability, turmoil, fear, and hope of a country

at war and under bombardment, became Banisadr's narrative structure early on, and it's clear that they suit Banisadr's temperament and intrigue his imagination. Fantasy worlds are not always escapist; they might also illuminate reality and bring us back to it.

Banisadr makes art, he says, to make sense of the world, to find a moral and spiritual compass. It is not about a re-creation. His paintings demonstrate how he sees and senses the world: as a place of many appearances, voices, and sounds; a place of conflict and chaos, hope and restoration; the incendiary and icebound exist within it, as much as cataclysmic and revelation. In his images, paint can detonate like a weapon, but it can also point the way toward something triumphant and enduring. In many ways, these recent paintings encompass his most complex and engaged body of work to date. They dazzle the eye and offer an intoxicating brew of imagination and reality fed by the artist's observations of the comedy and tragedy of human life.

"Fire and Ice," the title of a Robert Frost poem, is the thread that connects the works in this exhibition. Banisadr has said that he "likes the way something presents itself, as this did with this group of works." A dichotomy in the paintings brought to his mind Dante's *Inferno* and its ninth circle of Hell, where sinners are encased in ice. The image inspired him while he was working on his monochromatic painting, evidently much as it inspired Frost when he wrote his poem. The artist later saw a connection to Zoroastrianism. It's the way Banisadr wants his paintings to be taken—on many different levels and across time. "I enjoy it when something topical relates to something historical, like an echo of things in life."



Detail, *Oil*, 2016. Oil on linen, 66 x 88 inches

Fire and ice are momentous forces in Banisadr's work. The continents are separated by water, the earth is matter, and fire is the heat inside the Earth—or a metaphor for the subconscious. "When digging into myself, I hope to find the fire," the artist says.

Polarity pushes him forward. "It's about asking the viewer a question" he says, "I never want to be didactic, because I know that I also don't know; I can only question. Is it this or is it that?"

pages 12–13: Detail, *Trust in the Future*, 2017 (pages 38–39).