

CONTROLLED EXPLOSIVES

ALI BANISADR INTERVIEW

- RAJESH PUNJ

When I begin a painting, it is always based on an internal sound, and as soon as I apply the brush, the sound begins, and I am able to paint on the basis of the noises I have in my head. It is the force that drives the whole painting and helps me compose the work, and pull everything together.

Introduced to his imagination as vibrations, Tehran born, New York based artist Ali Banisadr explains, “When I begin a painting, it is always based on an internal sound, and as soon as I apply the brush, the sound begins, and I am able to paint on the basis of the noises I have in my head. It is the force that drives the whole painting and helps me compose the work, and pull everything together.” Less violent than the explosions that littered the landscape of his youth, Banisadr sees his paintings as about the ripening of his own imagination. His canvases appear as these aesthetic avalanches of both accident and incident, in which the irrevocable imagery of fragmented figures contoured into these action spaces, are the tormented dreams of the artist’s inscrutable mind. Works in which a whole cannon of colours is whipped up into a frenzy, to provoke his characters to come to the fore. And as Banisadr has mentioned previously of his work, of arriving ‘in the middle of the action’, and of the painting ‘slowly unfolding and unveiling its content to you’ - as though a series of theatrical crescendos are captured in the blink of an eye.

But what are we really looking at, when we care to concentrate on Banisadr’s canvases? It is as though his mind has run riot, pouring out a whole cast of characters that appear involved in their own private war - with our witnessing it only making it worse.

Individually Banisadr’s works demand a level of attention that much of visual reality is less deserving of, as works like *We Haven’t Landed on Earth Yet*, 2012, *History* 2012, and more recently *Foreign Lands*, 2015 recall something of the foreboding spirit of Hieronymus Bosch’s painted prophecies, and the visual anxiety of the works of Americans Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning. It is as if in paintings like *Age* 2015, Banisadr becomes the

^ Ali Banisadr, *The Gatekeepers*, Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, Paris, Salzburg, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

< Ali Banisadr, *Bots*, Courtesy of the Artist and Blain Southern, London, Berlin, New York, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges



audience for an unspeakable act, that as the painter he characteristically codes and decodes. Exhaustively recalling and recording individual events as raw details he robustly meshes together in a violent sea of paint. That once resolved are likely to ripen our starving curiosity, as much as they might riddle and eventually revolt our senses. Likened to the twisted wreckage of a car crash strewn across a concrete carriageway, Banisadr's paintings are intended to momentarily paralyse us, as they appear as much emblems of euphoria as they are episodes of our end - as favour is expelled by fear.

In situ at Het Noordbrabants Museum, in Hertogenbosch, Holland, Ali Banisadr's collected paintings, born of the animated insides of his mind, appear ready to riot, as they penetrate the museum walls like graffiti tags. That the artist explains as to do with his 'throwing everything of

^ Ali Banisadr, *Hold the Fort*, Courtesy of the Artist and Blain Southern, London, Berlin, New York, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

> Ali Banisadr, *The Charlatans*, Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, Paris, Salzburg, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

his imagination into a work', as if exorcising his body of all the ills that have interfered with his childhood. Tellingly Banisadr appears more comfortable looking to the works of others as troubled as he, such as 16th-century painters Hieronymus Bosch, and drama of Pablo Veronese. Who for their macabre, as in the case of Bosch, and Veronese's mannerist style, were to shape Banisadr's visions, in a way that has allowed him to cure the canvas of its flatness, by introducing an impressive sense of perspective, that the artist for his post-modern approach, goes onto play within his paintings. Crucially as much as he creates space for the character-filled foreground to flourish, Banisadr returns to the background, only to re-flatten it in places. With what appears are adverse weather conditions that penetrate the canvas like decorative diseases. As he divulges so eloquently, "Usually towards the top of the painting, where the deep space is, I want to create certain elements that flatten the painting, but also compositionally it brings the eye back to the situation and circumstance of the painting."

The sky has always served as an excuse for artists to explore abstracted space, from John Constable's *Study of Clouds*, to Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, and Banisadr's *Skies*, like the apocalyptic scenes themselves, appear almost biblical, as he takes

mythology on a modern adventure. Most noticeable in works like *At Once*, 2015, in which his linen triptych looks to have been engulfed by a monsoon of paints and protagonists, that impress upon the painting an orgy of activity. Seeing his works as a bridge between the abstracted and the real, that Banisadr transforms from visions into visual evidence. "For me, the works have always been between abstraction and figuration, and I think it is because I want to get as close to my own imagination as I possibly can, and of the way the imagination works, in dreams and hallucinations things are always sort of slipping away out of your hand. You can see something but it is not static, it is moving and it is changing all the time. Even your memory of a person or a place is always changing. So I have become very interested in this 'state of flux'. And I want to show that the paintings work in the way imagination works." For all of the physical fall out, with his suffering from the terrorism of war, and his subsequent displacement to another country, Banisadr appears preoccupied or imprisoned by the sounds and sensations in his head. Other works include *The Charlatans* 2009 and *The Magians* 2009, that for their vast involvement of space, enjoy the same kind of panoramic atmosphere as works by the 17th century Flemish masters Peter Snayers and Sebastian Vrancx. Who between them painted incredible scenes dedicated to the action and activity





of war. Banisadr's works appear to see space in the same way, by opening the canvas up to the world, and his unlimited vision of it. "I always like contradictions between deep space and flatness. I mean to say that you can be working on a canvas that is flat in order to create 'deep space'. But then I also want to show that there is a fight going on between the deep space, in the painting, and the flat surface as well."

And like German painter Gerhard Richter, Banisadr sees everything as though through emotional glasses. The world painted as real, is cruelly and crudely meddled with, abstracted in such a way as to demonstrate that everything we hold true, is likely a lie. Abstraction in this sense, for all its visual confusion, angles towards a greater truth, that representation alone cannot come close to. For Banisadr his paintings serve as a confession of the terror that has initially

^ Ali Banisadr, *The Building of Icarus*, Courtesy of the Artist and Blain Southern, London, Berlin, New York, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

> Ali Banisadr, *Foreign Lands*, Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, Paris, Salzburg, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

shattered and then shaped the rest of his life. As he emphasises, "The sounds and vibrations from the explosions during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war had a profound impact on my childhood, and the way I dealt with the destruction was to retreat into my own world to try to make sense of my surroundings. At the time with my having to take refuge in the makeshift shelters, and the isolation drew attention to the sound - of the vibrations rather than the visual experience."

At Het Noordbrabants Banisadr has included key paintings from the last eleven years. As though revisiting his worse nightmares, these works introduce an audience to the agony and ego of the artist. Thus the exhibition, situated between the art and design museums, is a terrific challenge to one's own imagination, as Banisadr's paintings appear like detonation devices, illuminating the harmful and very heavy ideas of conflict, as he experienced it, and we come to see it. And to conquer his fears, Banisadr has encrypted them, in paintings that are as much thematic as theatre. For the artist to decorate, even camouflage everything, has allowed him to positively create something from the destruction of his dreams. Saying of the ambiguity of his works, "I like the ambivalence of not knowing if this is a real event or possibly a play, are these figures wearing costumes and masks? Are they actors? It is like walking into a play, and into the middle of a performance, and trying

to figure out what has already happened, before your arrival, and what is likely to happen after you leave." In a conflict-zone the only way one leaves is to die trying, here Banisadr sees the liberty of coming and going in an exhibition or performative space, as the return of his freedoms - the right to paint and explain everything as he chooses.

Interview.

Rajesh Punj: *Being aware of your work already, from exhibitions at Blain Southern, London, and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, can you explain the nature of this show? For the choice of works are we looking at a retrospective here in Holland?*

Ali Banisadr: This exhibition is my first museum retrospective in Europe. It brings together a decade's worth of paintings and drawings from 2008 until now. It's been great for me to have this chance to reunite with some of the older paintings that I haven't seen since they left the studio. The catalogue that accompanies the show includes an essay by the Art Historian Robert Hobbs.

RP: *I want to understand the location of the exhibition - your having chosen the Het Noordbrabants Museum in Hertogenbosch, Holland. It might initially appear as a mismatch, but the more one comes to understand your work, the greater the relationship to the institution, and its remarkable collection. How*



important was that to you that we can see traces of Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Snayers and Sebastian Vrancx in your work?

AB: The location was important for me because of its history - I made a visit to the fantastic (Hieronymous) Bosch exhibition a few years ago now, and was immediately taken by the museum, and the quality of its collection, and also found the city to be a very special place. So I was delighted to hear that the museum was interested in doing a show, and it only felt natural to exhibit there. To have the chance to be in the city where Bosch painted centuries before, and to visit his original studio was an honour. Also having the show in Holland where a lot of my favourite painters come from was another plus, from Bosch to Rembrandt to (Willem) de Kooning.

RP: *In the accompanying exhibition video you talk about the invasive sounds of war from your adolescence in Iran, and of how noise has become the nucleus of what appears on canvas. Concentrating on that for a moment, are the sounds violent or much more visceral, as reflected in the overall atmosphere of your paintings?*

AB: The sounds and vibrations from the explosions during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war had a profound impact on my childhood, and the way I dealt with the destruction was to retreat into my own world to try to make sense of my surroundings. At the time with my having to take refuge in the makeshift shelters, the isolation drew attention to the sound - of the vibrations rather than the visual experience. Such viciousness tormented me for years after, but not necessarily in a violent way. Since those memories were based on sound, they were, as you observe, more visceral. So when the noises manifest themselves in the work it's more of a guiding force that enables me to draw everything together, becoming almost orchestral. And the sounds don't solely reflect a particular time or place - they inform a combination of many experiences.

RP: *Thus if sound is your spark, how do you deal with it becoming entirely silent in your paintings?*

AB: I seek a silence that is achieved by having a flow of air through the paintings without any obstacles. When I finally achieve that on canvas, there is a quietness to the overall feeling of the painting, and when I arrive at this point I know the painting has reached its conclusion. The work ends up being an ordered disorder, and although there are still notes of sounds as the eye moves over the painting, since there is a rhythm, the sound becomes quiet and is contained within itself.

RP: *Should we look at the paintings as abstract, or are they fundamentally figurative, with a twist and the torment of (Francis) Bacon about them?*

AB: I am happy for the viewer to look at the paintings

and decide whether they are based on their own experience, without making any associations or categorisations. The painting itself can be a guide if you open yourself up to it.

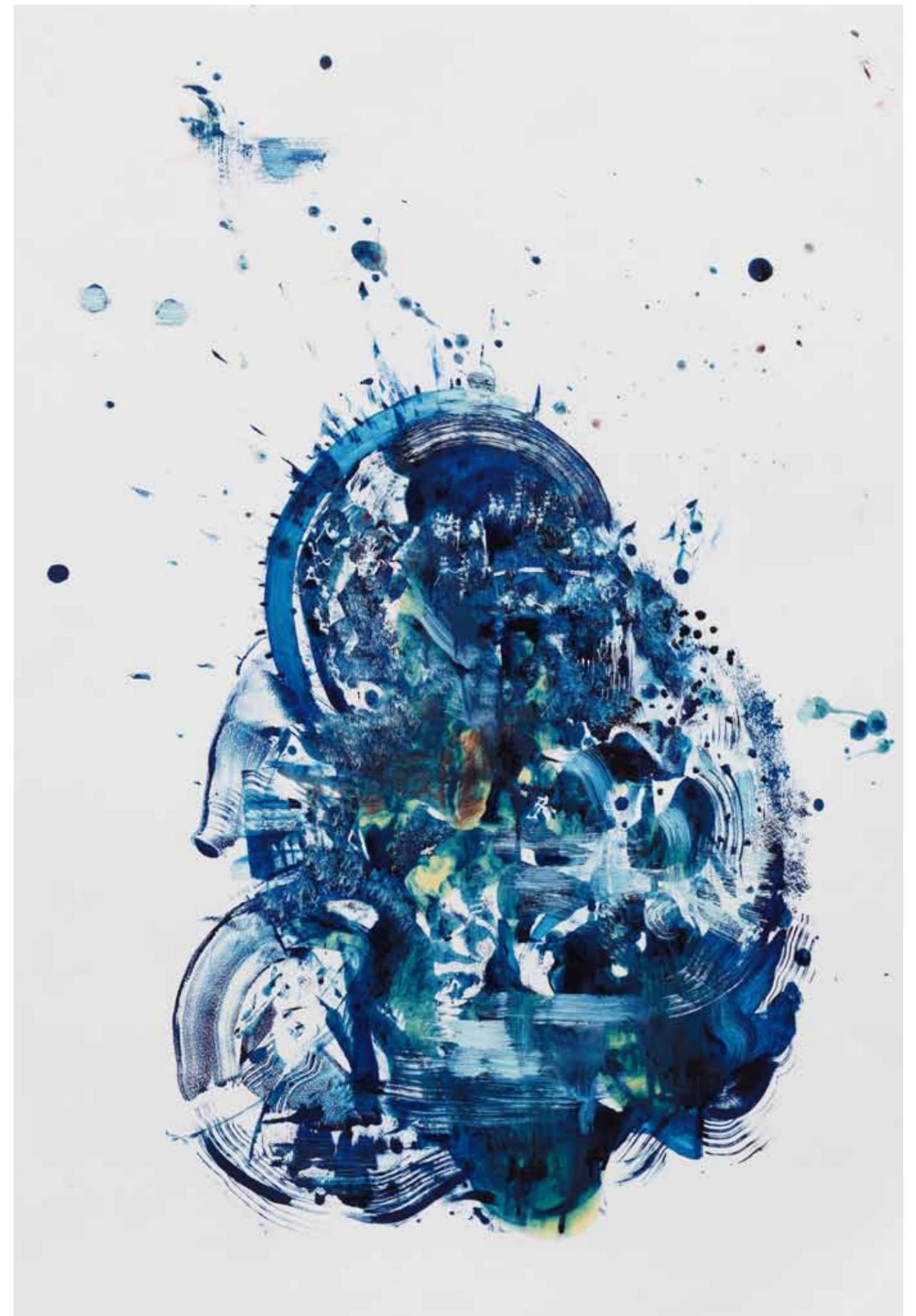
RP: *Does beauty belong to your work, or are these scenes more brutal?*

AB: As with anything in the world, you have to see both sides of the coin in order to get the full picture. Beauty and brutality often need to exist together, and I want to see them side-by-side. I always think about that quote from the actor Bruce Lee where he talks about emptying your mind, and being formless and shapeless like water. Having said, "Water can flow or it can crash, be water my friend."

RP: *I can imagine your initially applying washes of colour to the canvas, to create an aura that you ignite with a choice of secondary cannon of colours that fill the skies. That leads you to concentrate on all of the characters on stage and in the foreground. Am I right to envisage the painting coming together that way?*

AB: Indeed, the tops of the paintings are usually more airy and open, and the bottom parts, where the majority of the activity is, get heavier and harder. I like the way you describe it as I often see the paintings as a stage where a play is taking place. The backdrop is set and then the secondary cannons of colours, the figures, take to the stage.

> Ali Banisadr, *The World Upside Down*, Courtesy of the Artist and Blain Southern, London, Berlin, New York, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges





< Ali Banisadr, *Homo Deus*, Courtesy of the Artist and Blain Southern, London, Berlin, New York,
Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

Ali Banisadr, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Courtesy of the Artist and Blain Southern, London, Berlin, New York,
Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

v

AB: There are certainly stories within stories in the paintings and at times they are Shakespearean. I see the paintings as time machines where historical figures, figures from our time and figures from the future that dwell together.

RP: *So there is something significant happening in all of your paintings, an intense level of activity that draws a crowd to the surface of your canvases, which we, as much as we want, are unable to understand entirely, as though uninvited. How do we involve ourselves?*

AB: I think each viewer activates the painting in a different way, as they bring something of themselves to the painting, which can be a very different experience from the next person. I like the images in the paintings to ebb in and out –that they are in constant movement. I like this in-between stage where something is turning into something else, as a moment of transformation. You can see yourself as a viewer, looking from the top of a mountain and observing and judging what is in front of you, or you can see yourself as one of the figures within the painting. You can be an introvert or an extrovert.

RP: *When we spoke previously in Paris, you talked about your interest in your own imagination. Of your delving into your dreams as a way of retreating from reality. Does that relate to your childhood? And do you see greater truths to your intuitive visions?*

AB: I am interested in the imagination and dreams where fragmentations of imagery exist. It is your personal filter and it is always in flux. I am drawn to trying to capture this ungraspable vision and bring it to life. As a child you rely heavily on your imagination, and I think, as we get older we tend to lose that playfulness. I am always trying to make sure I do not lose the child in me, because he/she is the creative spirit within you. It's when you are the most open, the most honest and intuitive before being influenced by others, and that intuitiveness starts to wane.

RP: *If the characters of many of your canvases are on stage, do you see the paintings as plays?*

AB: Yes, I like the ambivalence of not knowing if this is a real event or a play, if these are costumes and masks, and a whole school of actors on stage. It is like walking on set in the middle of a performance, and desperately trying to figure out what has already happened, before your arrival, and what is likely to happen, upon leaving.

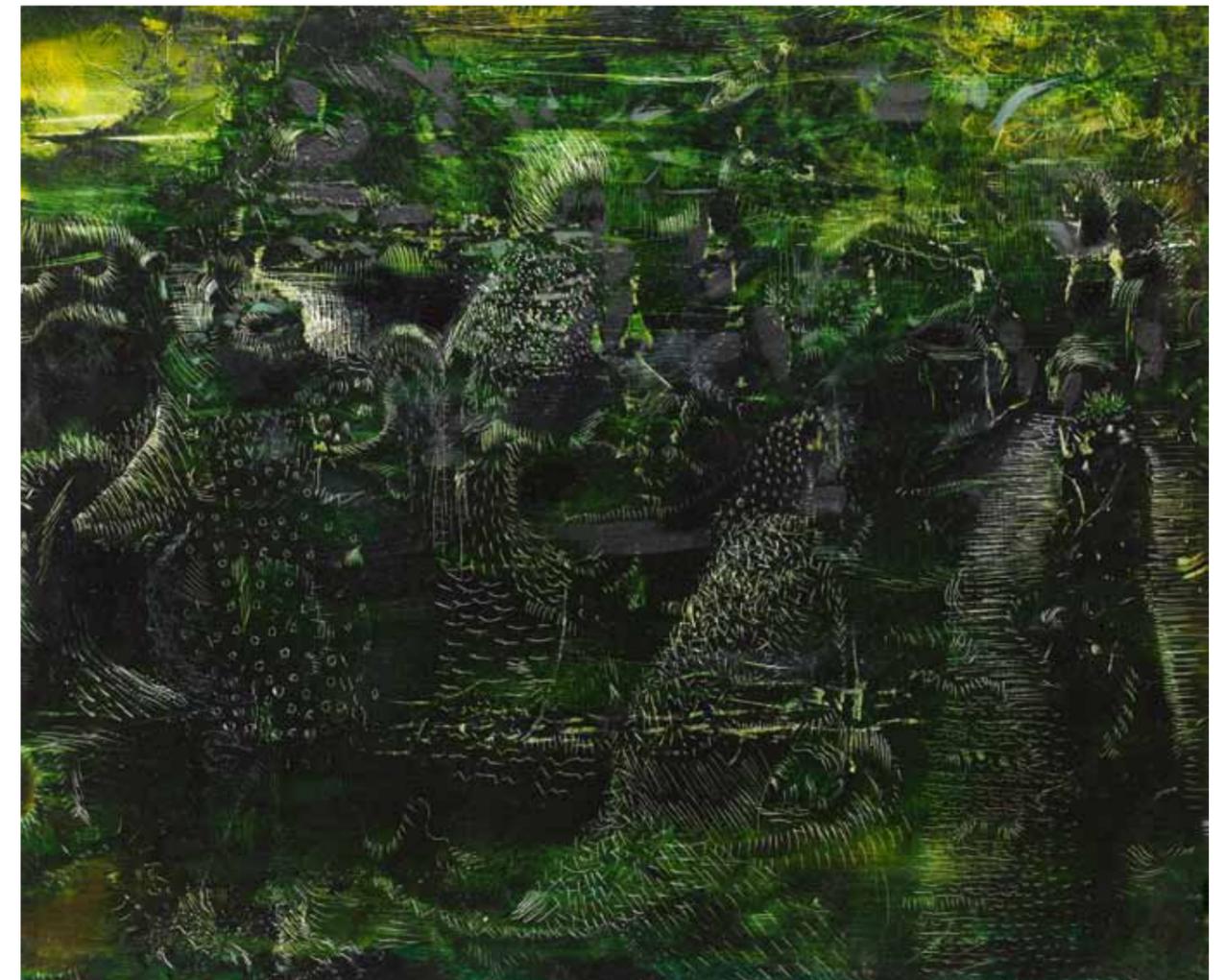
RP: *I want to understand your choice of titles; they appear almost biblical, are they? And what does that suggest about your works?*

AB: The titles always refer to things that are happening at the present moment in my life, they point to a combination of personal events, art history, and whatever that is going on currently in our world, and of my concerns about them. A title has to embody all of these things, so it can take some time to land on a title that makes sense for a painting.

RP: *Your paintings are composed of a choice of styles and approaches, from underlying abstraction and figuration, as we mentioned, to your turning paint over, of it somersaulting in spaces, and then being hold it more tightly, with these systemic stretches or dashes of paint. Is that reflective of everything of you - a mix of madness and manners?*

AB: Infinite variety is a fitting word for this.

RP: *There is something of the drama and deceit of (William) Shakespeare about your work, if we think of the abstracted figures as treacherous, tormented, and even tender. It sets the paintings alight, to think of there being narratives involved in the paintings - as a window onto another world. Do you want this kind of greater dimensions in your work?*



You can consider yourself invited into the scene, or you can choose to be an onlooker if that is what your experience is telling you to do.

RP: *You have talked as well before of our arriving at the painting at its climax. Is such drama important to the atmosphere you want to create on canvas?*

AB: I like stories that begin from a midpoint (In Medias Res), then the story goes back and forth in time instead of a linear perspective, instead it becomes cyclical.

RP: *With works like Foreign Lands, 2015, you appear to explore a whole host of colours on canvas, whilst with other works like The Wretched of the Earth 2018, you reduce every thing to one or two pigments, that create this darker, devilish air in the work. Why is that?*

AB: Each painting has a different mood, and the overall base colour determines what I am after. Each one tells me what it needs - some ask for colour and some don't.

RP: *One would think that you labour for days at a time over a painting, exhausting yourself, is that the case? Or do you approach your paintings differently? Entering into a work, to return to it at a later stage?*

AB: Each new painting is like a long chapter. It is very time consuming, not just labour but also my headspace, even my dreams become occupied. It is constantly on my mind and I try to find solutions everywhere to resolve the issues within the paintings.

RP: *Besides your interest in the Old Masters, and the obvious connection to British painter Francis Bacon, who are your influences, the artists that are of interest to you?*

AB: I have a range of interests - Ancient Egyptian art, Persian Miniatures, Japanese Prints, Bosch, Brueghel, Tintoretto, Velazquez, Goya, Max Ernst, Willem De Kooning, and the list goes on.

RP: *Can you explain a little more about your drawings that appear new to this exhibition, and to your practice? Do you see them as independent of your paintings, or are they part of the entire process?*

AB: The drawings are always independent, but companions to the paintings. In this exhibition I have included some large monoprints that are more 'portrait' or 'still-life', than landscape. On occasion in other drawings I try to capture one of the figures from the paintings and then develop the drawing so it can come back and help the figure in the painting, and in this way they become companions.

RP: *You talked to me before as well about your paintings being 'problems that require solving', which suggests that there is a tension to your work, an atmosphere of unease that is carried throughout*

the process. Is that how we should understand what you are dealing with in your works?

AB: The way I begin the paintings, the first step is pretty chaotic, then it is all about trying to make order out of the chaos and to solve problems. There are an infinite number of possibilities that I can see within the fragmentations, so it becomes a matter of long hours of sitting in front of the work and editing - of choosing the right path for each of those fragmentations.

RP: *Do you think you will ever arrive at a canvas when the show is over, the characters all gone, and the landscape entirely empty? As though the end of the world.*

AB: That might prove to be my last painting.

RP: *What do you think your younger self would make of your work?*

AB: That child within me is present and very much involved in the making of the works. I think that younger self would want to step into those worlds and explore them.

RP: *My final question, is of what matters to you most, in and outside of your work?*

AB: The Search

You can see yourself as a viewer, looking from the top of a mountain and observing and judging what is in front of you, or you can see yourself as one of the figures within the painting.

> Ali Banisadr, *The World Upside Down*, Courtesy of the Artist and Blain Southern, London, Berlin, New York, Photo Credit: Jeffery Sturges

