

ARTDEPENDENCE

magazine

AN INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE COVERING ALL SPHERES OF CONTEMPORARY, AS WELL AS MODERN AND CLASSICAL ART

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Anj Smith
Nicolas Provost
Rodel Tapaya

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH

Elizabeth Neilson and
Paul Luckraft from
the Zabludowicz Collection

BILL VIOLA:

“The work is always about
life and death, and of birth,
light and darkness.”

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ARTIST ONE ON ONE *By Rajesh Punj*

AN UNSPEAKABLE ACT

- AN INTERVIEW WITH NEW YORK BASED ARTIST
ALI BANISADR AT GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, PARIS

Painted whilst upright Ali Banisadr's canvases appear as these aesthetic avalanches of 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 imagination. Works in which a whole cannon of colours are whipped up into a fren-

zy, in order to provoke his characters to come to the fore. And as Banisadr has mentioned previously of his works, of arriving 'in the middle of the action', and of the work 'slowly unfolding itself and unveiling its content to you'. As though a series of theatrical crescendos captured in the blink of an eye.

*Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac,
Paris/Salzburg
photo: Charles Duprat*

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, with the advanced brushstrokes of American Willem de Kooning. Identifying as they did, that there is an exhaustive alchemy to applying colours to a canvas in order to create a scene that is as deserving of our attention as the edgy melodrama of our lives. It is as if in works like *Age* 2015 Banisadr is merely the messenger for an unspeakable act that as the painter he characteristically comes to code and decode in order everything returns to a more amenable silence. Exhaustively recalling and recording a whole series of individual events as raw details robustly meshed together in a violent sea of paint. That once resolved are likely to ripen our staving curiosity, as much as they might riddle and evidently revolt us. Likened to the twisted wreckage of a car crash strewn across a concrete carriageway, Banisadr's paintings are intended to grip us, as they appear as much emblems of euphoria as the episodes of our end. As favour is expelled by fear.

Artdependence Magazine: Essentially what would be interesting initially is if you can talk about your works for the current show *In Media Res* here in Paris, and then I am keen for you to discuss the works from your previous ROPAC show in Salzburg, Austria, in 2012. Because what intrigues me, from looking at works then and now is of the visual change that has taken place. Of your painting these vast landscapes of probably and improbably figures into these colour-field canvases; and with your Paris works of your now coming into them. Drawing the audience in by providing more detail, and at the same time appearing to engage with your contoured creatures much more.

Ali Banisadr: Yes of course, which is good because we have a work here from 2008, *Land of Black Gold*. I have not seen this particular work for eight years, and to see how small the figures were back then and how large they are now is pretty amazing. Six inches was the largest, and now the largest is three feet.

AD: So have you walked into the canvas, and into your community of characters in order to find something more?

AB: I think you are right. I think what has happened is that with the older work you are looking at it from a greater distance and the figures were smaller, and now as you say, you have gotten a little bit closer to the figures, but then there is still that deep space that existed before that still exists. It is just that you are closer to the closest figure in the foreground.

AD: And how do you comprehend these 'deep spaces' as you describe them, because they appear to be more than just coloured canvases, more than just celebrations of make-believe. There is something much more sobering about these scenes that is as much in the work of Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky or Hieronymus Bosch.

AB: Of course, for me I never think about labels or naming things once they exist. Because for me when I am making it at the beginning it is very abstract, and then from that abstraction slowly all these individual elements come about as recognisable forms. They appear as fragments to begin with, as pieces and fragments, but then through those fragments I see what they want to become. So it is just a matter of how much do I want to bring something

out or leave it. It is like thinking about a sculptor who has a slab of marble, and then they could chip away. How far do you want to go in bringing the figure out? I like to leave it somewhere in the middle in order the imagination still has room to see things that it wants to see. It is significantly still fragmented, and at the same time I want to show what I want to show. And I think in the older works possibly they were closer to the original slab of marble. A little bit of chipping away, and now I am chipping more off because I have learnt much more.

AD: So you have developed your 'nonsensical' language much more?

AB: Yes I think that possibly the figures are demanding to be more comprehensive, and show much more of what they stand for in the paintings.

AD: I can recall attending the opening and of looking at the detail of your canvases several times, over the course of the evening, and of deciding your works were finely balanced between formal figuration, and the superlative energy of abstraction. Is it something you seek to achieve in your works, of the recognisable and that which is impossible to comprehend?

AB: 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 can. And of the way the imagination works, in dreams and hallucinations things are always sort of slipping 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 your memory of a place is always changing. So I am really interested in that state of flux. And I want to show that the paintings work the way imagination works.

AD: And in terms of how you construct a canvas, can you explain what you are thinking of when you consider the location of details? Might you be playing god with these compositions, as the measure of your prophecies? And for that are you looking to the outside world for more recognisable references, or drawing entirely from your own imagination?

AB: It is a very organic method really, I never have any fixed references. I generally start very abstractly, and then all these figures come about afterwards. And then if there is any reference, art historical or otherwise, it comes entirely from the subconscious. It is very visceral and very natural, the manner in which it all comes out. Without my consciously trying to make reference to something, I really don't think it works that way, for me it is more about what the painting needs at that moment, and I consciously allow it to go that way, or encourage it to go in that direction. In order I can communicate with the painting, and see where it potentially wants to go. Sometimes I am in the studio and things are moving in the painting, and everything is going in a particular direction. And then it completely stops. I could go to the studio for two days and not touch a thing but just look, and look and look again. To decide where the next place on the canvas is I need to go to.

AD: So do you naturally return to a canvas some days later, until you are entirely satisfied or when the conversation comes to an end?

AB: Some days later, but it is always one painting at a time. I cannot go to another work because it becomes too much. In the painting itself there is so much happening that I am trying to get

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a grasp on, that if I go to something else it will just become overwhelming. And for me when I am not painting, I am still trying to solve the problem of the painting. I can take photographs of the painting, which I take with my phone, and then when I go to bed I am looking at them and thinking in my head of how I am going to solve this. And hopefully by the time I wake up in the morning something has happened.

AD: And is that how you see them, paintings as a series of problems that need to be solved?

AB: Yes they are visual problems that I need to solve yes.

AD: And in terms of perspective, in works like *Foreign Lands 2015* you successfully create this carnivalesque space that enjoys its own atmosphere, only for you to then deny that by marking space with these reoccurring dashes of paint, that drives 'flatness' back into the painting. Why do you pursue one only to then choose another?

AB: 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 a deep space. But then I also want to literally show that there is a fight going on between the deep space and the flat surface as well. So usually towards the top of the painting where the deep space happens I want to create certain elements that flatten the painting but also compositionally it brings the eye back to the situation of the painting. Basically the whole problem solving thing is in order that the eyes never leave the canvas. So you create barriers in different parts (of the painting), in order the eyes can keep moving, but they always stay within the rectangle of the canvas. The eyes never manages to escapes from the scene.

AD: There is clearly a strategy, for want of a better word, to how you choose to create a visual narrative, only to then deny that it exists. You appear to undo all of your hard work by wrestling with perspective and your painterly techniques, as you move effortlessly between abstraction and figuration. Everything becomes a negotiation never an easy exercise. Is that a way to look at it?

AB: For me if you want to call it 'visual philosophy', that is what it is because it is the way I see life. I accept it but then I am also open to denying everything. Accepting things in life as

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I see it or believe it, but then also on the other side there is room for denying everything as well. I could never believe and agree with some kind of understanding of the world or a philosophy, or whatever it is, one hundred percent.

AD: So how do you feel about more 'absolute' images, where information and ideas appear more concrete?

AB: It depends, but I think that anything that is absolute scares me a bit. Because it makes me feel very uneasy; when something is absolute and there is no room for questioning its very existence.

AD: And is that what you wish of the audience, to positively scrutinise your works in order to unpick them? Perversely that might suggest negotiated sabotage between you and your audience?

AB: Sure because they, (the audience), bring their own imagination to it, so people will ask me 'is it this?' (of a work), and 'yes it is', because they are bringing with them their own imagination to it in order to activate the painting in a way another person could not. I think that that is the power painting has, of each viewer looking at a work activates it and then takes away a different experience from the next person. And maybe in photography that is not the case, or possibly it is; but I think in painting it is different. Also I think with painting time is an important factor, because you could look at a Rembrandt (Harmenszoon van Rijn) painting which is from five hundred years ago, but it could still activate a contemporary issue that is going on in your mind now. Even with (Francisco) Goya or (Hieronymus) Bosch, or any other artist. You could look at an issue they were dealing with at the time, but you could apply that issue to something that is happening now. And then you have positively activated that five hundred year old painting to a contemporary issue.

AD: It is interesting your referencing (Hieronymus) Bosch, because your pervious catalogue has an introductory essay by curator Maryam Ekhtiar, in which she refers to Bosch as a prevailing influence upon your painterly approach. Do you see that as true?

AB: Bosch is definitely a big influence, and everytime I see one of his works I feel as if I really understand what he was trying to say. It is hard to explain it because you cannot 'decode', no 'unravel' the painting. But I think it speaks to me in a very interesting way. And again I think his work can become activated and contemporary based on the things that are happening right now.



Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg
photo: Jeffrey Sturges

AD: We have referred to it already, but those original works appear more like Bosch's malevolent landscapes for their distance, and with your current works you have walked into the canvas and engage with the characters more directly. Is that about you wanting to say more?

AB: Yes I think so.

AD: And by definition are the audience also coming to understand more of what is within the works?

AB: Yes, and when I look at the older works and compare the figures in the older works to the newer works, I think that in the new works that they are becoming surer of what they stand for. Of what they represent in the painting, and of what their role is. I think before the characters were getting there, but now they are more confident about what they represent in the painting.

AD: And the relationship between these contoured creatures, how do they sit for you within the canvas, side-by-side? Perfectly autonomous whilst being aggressively intrusive. It becomes an incredible task you undertake to achieve that perverse hijacked harmony; of volume and weight.

AB: As the figures slowly start to emerge I start to understand more about what they represent in the painting, and then of what their relationship is to the other figures in the painting. And then it becomes entirely about my solving a compositional issue, but also regarding the figures, of my positioning them within the canvas. I always feel that even though the figures have a relationship with one another, that they are also in their own world.



Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac,
Paris/Salzburg
photo: Jeffrey Sturges

AD: Your talking of figures being independent and interactive, how then do you arrive at such a balance within the works, whereby there is a kind of equilibrium to what borders on becoming visual chaos?

AB: Of the composition and the balance, when I paint I hear a sound and that sound is the very thing that helps me compose the works. And the noise to me is like the flow of energy within the painting. And when I am painting that is what really helps me to know which direction to go. When to stop? Which direction to turn the brush? What colours to use? And I think when the sound stops then I stop. And that way everything stops.

AD: And more practically where do you begin a work? With the foreground and the figures? Or do you move between the foreground and the background equally?

AB: It is never the same, it is always different. Usually it begins with my sitting in front of a blank canvas and just looking and looking again at the canvas, until part of something comes to my mind, and then I jump at it (the canvas) right away. It is like a quick instinct, and I will begin there and then I move around the canvas.

AD: And of the relationship between the works, is that something that exists? Or are they entirely independent of one another?

AB: Yes I work on one painting at a time, but then over time as I create a body of works their relationship to one another becomes very important.



Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac,
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photo: Jeffrey Sturges

AD: What I also notice with your works for *In Media Res* is of the variable sizes of the works, and of the inclusion of drawings. Is your selecting size intentional or less calculated than we might consider?

AB: Usually when I am working on one painting, if I have worked on a really large painting then maybe there is something I want to explore in a smaller painting. And once I have done that I can move on. It is always based on the last painting. While I am finishing up one painting I know what size I have in mind for the next work and then I go straight to that. And that is another reason to have the body of works all together to create that sort of relationship and conversation between them.

AD: Also I am intrigued by the drawings, are they 'preparatory' possibly or equal in measure to the paintings?

AB: I titled the drawings 'post-script' because I want to make sure that the audience don't think that I initially make the drawings, and that I paint from the drawings. Because the figures come out of abstraction, (they come as equally from the drawings as the paintings), just as they come from nowhere, and then they become this formed thing. And I want to capture one thing in the drawing, but then the drawing itself goes somewhere else. It begins with my taking something from the painting and giving it a life of its own. It goes somewhere else, and then maybe what happens in the drawing will come back and influence that particular part of the painting. So it becomes a conversation between the drawing and the painting, in which no one medium or method is more significant. And also since I started making the drawings this year (2015), they help me to think more about the element of line in my works. I feel like with my older works I have not used the line so much. The original figures that I created did not have a boundary so there was no line distinguishing figures and space. Now I see them as much more defined by the lines, and the figures are more contained within the lines.

AD: So for you it is almost as if you are in conversation with your canvas for a period of time, and then the conversation comes to an end.

AB: Or it doesn't end.

AD: A very good question, when do you know when you stop with a canvas?

AB: For me it quiets down, and that's why even if a work is finished it has to stay around me for a while, for me to know for sure it is finished. And if I come in everyday and the painting is sitting there, while I am working on a new painting, and everyday there is nothing that is bothering me about it then it is good, then it is done. But if I come in and there is always one little thing that I cannot figure out at the time, if there is something (that is problematic for me). Then one day I will know what it is, and it could be that I need to add a line or mark, and then I know 'okay now it is done'.