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## Ali Banisadr: *The Alchemist*

By Susan Harris



Ali Banisadr, *The Alchemist*, 2025. Bronze, 16 x 17 x 9 inches. Courtesy the artist and Katonah Museum of Art.

### *The Alchemist*

Katonah Museum of Art

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Katonah, NY

*Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist* is a sweeping survey of the artist's last twenty years of work in which visitors bear witness to dazzling personal and collective worlds and embedded gestures that explode across and beyond the confines of the canvases. Alchemy, indeed,

lies at the core of the enigmatic topographies and difficult-to-discern figures in paintings that are distinctively grounded in a fusion of abstraction and figuration—not as painterly strategy but as an outcome of an intuitive, empathic process involving synesthesia, a phenomenon unique to certain individuals in which one sense triggers a response in another sense. Born in Tehran in 1976—two years old when the 1979 Revolution occurred and four at the start of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War—Banisadr transmuted the vibrations and sounds of air raids, bombs, and blasts into drawings as a means for coping

with and processing the violence. In 1988, he and his family emigrated to California via Turkey and his memories of the atrocities receded until 2006 when he experienced a personal and artistic epiphany.



Ali Banisadr, *The Waste Land*, 2006. Oil on panel, 9 x 12 inches. Courtesy the artist and Katonah Museum of Art.

The exhibition opens with small ink and charcoal drawings of explosions that Banisadr made after a visit to the sites of Allied invasions in Normandy which triggered his foundational memories of the Iran-Iraq War. One can almost hear and feel the power of the blasts in the vigorous handling of lines and smudged, smeared, and blotted medium. So, too, in *The Waste Land* (2006), a small oil painting from the same time of a churning, molten landscape with an indistinct figure walking toward an open, liquifying crater and an explosion of paint in the distance. Taking the title of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," the poet's response to the violence of World War I, Banisadr has described how the crater just appeared in the foreground, surfacing and connecting to memories of hearing explosions and seeing craters in Tehran. He observed the painting pouring out of him so rapidly that he simply gave in to it, grabbing rags, palette knives, twigs—anything close by to make it happen. Ever since, internal sounds and vibrations along with a devotion to research are his personal North Star for building the mutable, encyclopedic, and nonhierarchical worlds that define his art.

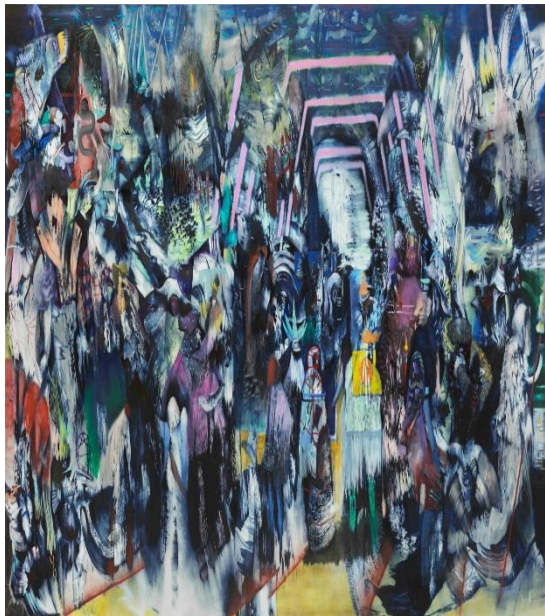


Ali Banisadr, *Things Fall Apart*, 2007. Oil on linen, 44 x 50 inches. Courtesy the artist and Katonah Museum of Art.

The exhibition proceeds chronologically with works that grow in scale and emanate a pulsating vitality through the orchestration of marks and virtuoso passages of paint that are, at once, multifocal and integrated. *The Center Cannot Hold* (2007) features an oculus that opens onto a sunny, verdant paradise brimming with an excess of diminutive, bucolic details, all rendered with merely a dab, stroke, or flourish of paint as in an Impressionist painting. By contrast is the surrounding dark, shallow, swirling foreground space that is strewn with bodies, detritus, and fires of destruction. Similarly apocalyptic, *Things Fall Apart* (2007) channels William Blake, Francisco Goya, and Hieronymus Bosch with naked bodies indistinguishable from puffy clouds falling from a blue sky onto a mound of dead or dying bodies in a hellscape below. In these and many of his works, Banisadr invokes paintings of Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder with their densely packed, weird, and whimsically intricate details, as well as themes of fleshly pleasure, sin, and hell. In *Obstruction 2* (2011), Banisadr brings a uniform, visual unity to the luminous cacophony in a tightly packed, shallow vertical landscape space. A strong sense of horror vacui together with immense scale (82 by 120 ¼ inches) in *It's in the Air* (2012) accentuates the frenzied ecstasy of elements that appear to be perpetually transitioning between states of action. These animated, vibrantly colorful works are in contrast with a group of monochromatic works, such as *Exterior* (2015), *Interior* (2015), *Trust in the Future* (2017) and *Language of the Birds* (2018) that are characterized by broader and more open gestures that occupy more open spaces. Recent pieces such as *Ministry of Truth* (2023) and *These fragments I have shored against my ruins* (2023)—the biggest painting in the show at 86 by 180 inches—feature larger, more detailed figures than the earlier tiny, ambiguous figures. Pink receding lines at the top of the latter painting form a receding futuristic tunnel that draws the viewer deeper inside the painting to an unknown beyond; the title is the cry of the dying fisher king at the end of the T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." The title of *Ministry of Truth* refers to the propaganda department of the totalitarian government in George Orwell's *1984*, which has been ominously compared to the Trump government.

A highlight of the exhibition are Banisadr's first forays into the medium of sculpture. He had always been impressed by ancient Near Eastern sculptures for being not merely sculptures, but deities that held power.

Director and Chief Curator Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe writes in her penetrating catalogue essay how the painting, *Changing Past* (2021), was Banisadr's response to images he kept seeing of the dismantling of monuments to overturn established orders, which led him to making sculpture. He describes first making sculptures as if they were paintings, but that once he surrendered to the material, the magic happened—the very definition of alchemy. Set on free standing bases within the galleries, five bronze sculptures come to life out of abstract forms as a uniquely hybrid species that is in parts human, animal, and extraterrestrial. *The Alchemist* (2025), whose rough, irregular surface articulation resonates with the twisting, fiery passages of painted apocalyptic intensity in the neighboring paintings, is a poignant creature before an offering, perhaps, with an open-mouthed expression of horror or fury. Elsewhere, *Animus* and *Anima* (both 2025) are bronze, totemic figures ascending like a tree trunk or torso, each topped with a bulbous form, and whose proportions and rough, wizened surfaces recall Alberto Giacometti's traumatized, post-war figures. Installed like sentries to the side of the colossal, medieval, and futuristic spectacle, *These fragments I have shored against my ruins*, these dignified yet whimsical and humble personages are appropriate companions for the journey.



Ali Banisadr, *These fragments I have shored against my ruins*, 2023. Oil on linen, 86 x 180 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Katonah Museum of Art.

The final jewel of the exhibition is the vitrine at the entrance to the museum that contains a rich and impressive array of visual images and reading material spanning centuries and cultures that open onto Banisadr's thoughts, inspiration, and process. The artist showcases a voracious curiosity for art, literature, poetry, cinema, music, history, current events, and technology, starting from ancient Mesopotamia through the European Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Surrealism up to the present. Banisadr shares here his love for writers such as Carl Jung, Orwell, Dante, T. S. Eliot, Jorge Luis Borges, and the Persian poets, as well as his deep connection to Persian miniatures, Chinese landscape painting, Tintoretto, Bosch, Diego Velázquez, Goya, James Ensor, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Star Wars—for starters. Banisadr's research feeds his impulse to learn about patterns through history in order to make sense of the world. In spite of the churning forces of catastrophe and destruction that occurred in his life and abound in his art, Banisadr transforms memories and observations into new worlds governed by enigmatic forces that somehow leave us looking at the light.

Susan Harris is a writer and curator. She is on the Executive Boards of *Printed Matter*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, and the International Association of Art Critics, United States section (AICA-USA).