

ART

Palaces of Memory: Critic John Vincler Excavates the Work of Artist Ali Banisadr

Ali Banisadr's first museum survey at Katonah Museum of Art in Westchester, New York, reveals the painter's deft transcendence of categorization.

John Vincler

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Ali Banisadr at Modern Art Foundry. Photo credit: Kristel Banisadr

“I’m very much interested in our collective memory,” the painter Ali Banisadr explains to me as we stand before a series of paintings that were about to be packed away for his first solo show at the Shanghai outpost of Perrotin gallery late last year. I had been voicing my skepticism about the art critic cliché of describing his work, along with that of younger painters like Maja Ruznic and Nengi Omuku, as existing between figuration and abstraction. The longer you look at the Brooklyn-based artist’s paintings, the more concrete detail accrues, with those details quickly compiling into stories. They aren’t stuck *in between*; they act like portals collapsing past, present, and future.



Ali Banisadr, *These Fragments I have Shored Against My Ruins*, 2023. Photography by Genevieve Hanson.
Image courtesy of the artist and Mohammed Afkhami Foundation.

Banisadr and I met again more recently to chat about his first museum survey show, which is about to open at the Katonah Museum of Art, in Westchester County, New York. (It’s about an hour ride from Grand Central Station, but that won’t stop New Yorkers from characterizing their visit to the lower Hudson Valley with the phrase “going upstate.”) Time collapses here also, with nearly 20 years of work—including paintings, works on paper, prints and (debuting for the first time) five sculptures in bronze.

The show of some nearly 50 works will allow a view of the entirety of the scope and accomplishment of his art, including major works like *These Fragments I have Shored Against My Ruins*, 2023. Massive at approximately 7-by-15 feet, it’s one of his best paintings to date, the centerpiece of his knockout 2023 Victoria Miro solo show in London.



Ali Banisadr, *The Waste Land*, 2006. Photography by Jeffrey Sturges and courtesy of the artist.

One of the earliest works, *The Waste Land*, 2006, an oil on panel of only 9-by-12 inches (with another titular nod to T.S. Eliot), seems to show an explosion and a crater. The work recalls Banisadr's childhood experience of witnessing the bombing of his schoolyard during the Iran-Iraq War, before he left Tehran with his family, first for Turkey, ultimately arriving in California at the age of 12. Another large painting here, *It's in the Air*, 2012, borrowed from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, looks like an elaborate Hieronymus Bosch composition, the brushstrokes becoming untangled and poised to levitate off its surface.

Banisadr is among my favorite people to talk with about art. We've talked art in his light-filled Brooklyn studio surrounded by his paintings and numerous reference materials arrayed on tables and work benches (a selection of these will also be on view at Katonah). We've passed in and out of downtown galleries together in conversation, and we've met to look at Martin Schongauer and Dürer prints, Blake drawings, and Persian miniatures in the reading room of the Morgan Library. Banisadr's art is as infused with intellectual history as it is with art history. He looks, he reads, and has a seemingly infinite curiosity that informs and compels him in his own work. His show at Katonah welcomes everybody into the conversation.

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