

Art Review

## Ali Banisadr Paints a World in Calamity

Banisadr makes images that are relentless in their toiling motion — he paints as if bedlam is foundational to the world.



Seph Rodney June 15, 2025



Ali Banisadr, "The Waste Land" (2006), oil on panel; Collection of the artist (© Ali Banisadr)

KATONAH, New York — In calamity and in commotion — that's where I begin when I visit [\*Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist\*](#) at the Katonah Museum. The show includes paintings that are almost 7 by 10 feet and much smaller ones, such as "Black" (2007), which, at 28 by 24 inches, still manages to stagger me. It's composed of slashing brushstrokes of tan, reddish brown, and darker browns, with abrupt incursions of white and

prowling swipes of blue-gray against a background that subtly morphs from black at the top to a smoky wheat at the bottom. Looking at it long enough I make out the skeleton of a building struck by some force that ruptures its primary beams and struts; we see the moment before total collapse, when it tosses off a tumult of bodies, timbers, paint, and wreckage into the murk below.

One famous actress, describing her divorce, said that it was like taking all the precious things in her life and throwing them up in the air. Ali Banisadr's story includes his birth in Tehran, his coming of age during the upheaval of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), and his family's subsequent flight from Iran at the age of 12. The conventional art historical tactic would be to bring in his biography, to posit that surely the viewer can infer from paintings such as "Black" the violence and fog of armed conflict. Possibly, we can glimpse the brutality and confusion, loss and degradation. Maybe Banisadr's experience felt like the moment in the painting: the beloved aspects of his family and culture tossed willy-nilly into the sky to fall back to the earth in pieces. Having grown up in a chaotic house, I recognize the signs of disorder, and hate and fear its purposelessness. But artists' imaginations are not so prosaically documentary. Banisadr makes images that are relentless in their toiling motion, conveying no root cause to this, no demiurge. Rather, he paints as if bedlam is elemental, foundational to the world.





Ali Banisadr, "Black" (2007), oil on linen; Private collection (© Ali Banisadr)

Some of the work brings to mind the whirl and swirl of simultaneity that's in Julie Mehretu's paintings, but Banisadr has much more variation in style, and mostly flirts with complete abstraction rather than diving headlong into it — particularly when he simplifies his compositions. I also glimpse something like the hide-and-seek quality of Cecily Brown's work, though his work doesn't feel as beholden to one particular technique.

Take “The Serpent and the Key” (2019). Three or four, maybe five, figures are blurred as if a camera whose shutter speed is too slow is capturing their movement. The palette is primarily pale to dark blue, with highlights of lavender, green, and gold. A background figure with an orb for a head seems to hold an old, wooden key. Another figure, red-faced, wearing what might be a fez, bends down to charm a coiled snake, its tongue flickering forward, while some creature blurs above it, its intent unknown. There is a sweeping haziness to the whole, the horizontal brushstrokes more muted than those in “Black,” but just as kinetic, just as urgent, as if gale winds made their home in this place. He performs a similar set of moves in “Queen of the night” (2022) on a much larger scale, with foreground figures who have sea anemones or elaborately knotted ribbons for heads, and a throng of ghosts or angels or restless spirits billowing above them.



Installation view of Ali Banisadr, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (2023), oil on linen; Mohammed Aehami Foundation (photo Seph Rodney/*Hyperallergic*)



In the larger pieces, Banisadr makes the scenes more emotionally encompassing and fascinating, in some ways reminiscent of the narrative paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. But unlike Bosch, Banisadr isn't illustrative. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (2023), measuring 86 by 180 inches, is perhaps my favorite in the show. There is such ruination of action spilling out toward me that I can't tell whether the shapes are actual figures. But occasionally I can discern a head, sometimes wearing a crown, with an eye or two visible, and something like a body below that. The palette is so variegated that I can't say one hue is dominant. They vie with each other for attention and for space. Near the center is a series of pink bands expanding as they move toward the foreground, as if they represent a portal, and the denizens of some other realm had made their way through to trouble our own. It provides no orderly entrance or exit; this is reminiscent of life, despite our best efforts to make it mannered and civilized.

For those who want to see the artist's life figuratively represented, "The Waste Land" (2006) could be illustrative of his childhood experience of war. A hooded figure walks within a desert-like landscape that features one central, massive explosion. Rendered in red and black, it compliments another detonation nearby that disperses mostly brown and white material. In the foreground, a sinkhole opens up near the lone traveler and into it pours the earth and all that might slide with it. Why is this destruction so beautiful? Perhaps because as external witnesses we don't have to imagine doing the rebuilding.

Lately I've become convinced that one of the important ways to analyze painting is to understand what a work — or the figures or structures within — seem to be fighting for or against. What is deeply fascinating about the paintings in *The Alchemist* is that they contain characters who do both simultaneously: They contend against the centrifugal force of a world that, perhaps like ours, spins at over 1,000 miles per hour, and they struggle for their own motion, for agency in a realm that would be unbothered to leave them behind.



Ali Banisadr, "The Serpent and the Key" (2019), oil on linen; Private collection (photo Seph Rodney/*Hyperallergic*)

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Ali Banisadr, "Queen of the night" (2022), oil on linen; Private collection (photo Seph Rodney/*Hyperallergic*)





Ali Banisadr, "The Seer" (2022), pastel on paper; Collection of the artist (© Ali Banisadr)



Ali Banisadr, "Aleph" (2013), oil on linen; Collection of Jason and Padi Nazmiyal (photo Seph Rodney/Hyperallergic)





Ali Banisadr, "It's in the Air" (2012), oil on linen; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (photo Seph Rodney/Hyperallergic)

Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist continues at the Katonah Museum of Art (134 Jay Street, Katonah, New York) through June 29. The exhibition was curated by Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe, director and chief curator of the museum.