Did Ali Banisadr anticipate the pandemic? Artist Banisadr, at the time the world had all completed in early February, painted a red sky hung with floating clouds to be shipped in mid-March 2020. The World Health Organization confirmed the coronavirus pandemic worldwide in March 2020.

The painting was completed in the aftermath of the United States’ drone strike that killed Qasem Soleimani in Qom. Its red color, the color of the American Revolutionary War, has been seen as a retaliatory action. Banisadr’s Republican party “red” is a signal to the American Progressive party “blue.”

Banisadr’s paintings are synesthetic with layers of meaning from the personal to the political. They are drawn from literature, music, painting, and elements of the surrounding environment. Banisadr’s paintings refer to synesthesia, which he describes as “the turning of one sense into another—taste, etc.” Somewhere in the synesthetic boundary between events and imagination, the artist—known as “Ali Banisadr” or “AB” for short—employs the color red to mean urgent danger, as in the coronavirus lockdown.

With layers of meaning derived from the personal—success stories, trauma, literature, music, politics, painting, etc.—and the surrounding political landscape, the color red is used as a signal to the surrounding world: a signal to the American Progressive party’s “blue.” With the American Progressive party “blue” referring to the color for the American Revolutionary War, the color red can mean urgent danger, as in the coronavirus lockdown.

As a boy in Tehran, Banisadr was fascinated by the color red. He used it to refer to synesthesia, which he describes as “the turning of one sense into another—taste, etc.” He used the color red to mean urgent danger, as in the coronavirus lockdown. This is a signal to the American Progressive party’s “blue.”
Did Ali Banisadr anticipate the heightened global unrest caused by the coronavirus pandemic? Artists have historically been cited as prophets; their acute sensitivity to the world has allowed them to forecast future events. Banisadr’s painting *Red* (2020), completed in early January 2020, depicts a chaotic, dystopian world beneath a toxic red sky hung with an ominous blue sun (or moon). The work left his studio in January to be shipped abroad, destined to be presented at the Art Basel Hong Kong art fair in mid-March 2020. By early February the art fair was cancelled due to the severity of the coronavirus outbreak and the declaration of a global health emergency by the World Health Organization. *Red* was returned to the artist’s studio where the composition assumed a new layer of relevance within the context of the worldwide pandemic.

Banisadr’s paintings are never about one subject, but more like a subconscious chain of events. However, he traces some initial stimuli for *Red* to a then-current event, the United States’ drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020, that killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, considered the second most powerful person in Iran. In the aftermath, Iran raised a blood-red flag of revenge over the blue Mosque of Jamkaran in Qom. Its red color signified blood spilled unjustly and simultaneously called for retaliatory action against the United States. But for Banisadr, red also connects to the American President and his signature extra-long red necktie symbolizing the Republican party. In more general terms, the artist also cites color theory, in which red can mean urgency and danger. With the painting back in the studio for the coronavirus lockdown, Banisadr sensed the need to make adjustments, including adding floating crowns menacing one figure.

With layers of meaning, each painting resolves a complex research project that spans from the personal to the universal and encompasses his many interests: art history, literature, music, ancient history, popular culture, and current events. For every painting, a new group of texts, images, and printouts cover his studio tabletops, which he refers to as “mood boards.” From here, the artist’s process relates to artistic synesthesia, which he describes as “an interior place [where],... the senses are super enhanced which makes you extra sensitive to energy, sounds, visual things, colors, taste, etc. Sometimes it can become very intense, the experience of the senses bordering on each other.” This simultaneous perception can be traced to his childhood. As a boy in Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), he would escape to the basement during air raids to paint monsters. His most recent move to Hong Kong in 2020 meant to unfamiliar places and “travel and living horizontally—painting at an outside observer, abstraction—presuming variously human, animal, the figures, only inhabiting the “blackness,” palettes with an...
always step forth exploring.

...basement during Iraqi bombings, making sense of the terrifying sounds by drawing monsters. His mother recalls these moments of which the artist has no memory. Today Banisadr follows a sense of inner sound, approaching his artworks like musical compositions in which his gestures translate sound into energy, rhythm, and color.

Travel and living in different cultures inspire his work as well. In 1988, his family left Iran and moved to Turkey, then California. Banisadr has now lived in New York for twenty years after initially moving there to attend art school. International travel to unfamiliar places also fuels his creative curiosity. He assumes the perspective of an outside observer in his compositions. Seen from a bird’s-eye view, the large, horizontally-oriented landscapes—oscillating between representation and abstraction—present stage-like settings teeming with masses of hybrid figures. Variously human, animal, vegetable, and even machine, there is no central focus among the figures, only movement. The Prophet (2020) and The Caravan (2020), two new paintings in the exhibition, bristle with activity. Banisadr describes these works as inhabiting the “between space” of hallucinations and dreams rendered in intense color palettes with an “infinite variety” in methods of paint application.
Banisadr’s populist fantastic narrative peasantr scenes. and entropy, and time of instability movement, Banisadr to the political recent headlines.

In addition to fig and prints, such or square, the small. The two painting Nothing is planned inner sense of some configuration. There notes of the pain then the painting.

Banisadr’s titles painted surprisingly strong sense of c figures, one dom
Banisadr’s populated views are reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch’s (c. 1450-1516) fantastic narrative paintings and Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s (c. 1525-30–1569) peasant scenes. They depict intangible worlds that balance order and chaos, energy and entropy, and his figures seem to be in a constant state of transformation. In this time of instability and change, from the coronavirus to the Black Lives Matter movement, Banisadr’s masses in motion, or commotion, feel especially connected to the political rallies, protest marches, and street riots that have dominated recent headlines and international discourse.

In addition to figurative landscapes, the artist also works on a small scale in paintings and prints, such as in Only Breath (2020), and The Levanter (2017). Vertically oriented or square, the small paintings can be understood as portraits or focused narratives. The two paintings are also primarily monochromatic, one in violet and the other in blue. Nothing is planned in advance. Banisadr begins with a blank canvas and follows an inner sense of sound, building the image from fragmented abstraction to emerging figuration. There is a musical element to the process. He continues to work until the notes of the painting achieve an inner harmony, which is when the sound quiets; then the painting is complete, except for the title.

Banisadr’s titles come to the artist over time spent with the completed painting. And titles are important, often with multiple references. As a small work, Only Breath was painted surprisingly quickly, according to the artist. Its urgency was signaled by its strong sense of color, a rich and vivid violet with red accents. The work depicts four figures, one dominating the foreground with a visible gloved hand. Pattern, especially spots (or droplet pandemic that is heard. The title and breathe.” Finally the Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi wrote, our differences, our judgments, our past, present and future pool that resonates.

Banisadr’s bound Wadsworth Atheneum, the museum that eye is drawn and he shares on social pool that resonates.
spots (or droplets) dot the surface. The artist made *Only Breath* in the midst of a pandemic that inhibits breathing. Breath also speaks to protest, one’s voice being heard. The title also evokes some of the last words spoken by George Floyd, “I can’t breathe.” Finally, *Only Breath* is the title of a famous poem by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi⁵ (a favorite of Banisadr) that reminds us that despite our differences, we are all just human. Banisadr’s allusions are varied and speak to the past, present, and future.

Banisadr’s boundless interests have inspired multiple companion projects at the Wadsworth Atheneum. The artist created a video collage of works located throughout the museum that inspire him. The collage presents specific details to which his artistic eye is drawn and reveals how he sees these works. This is a regular practice that he shares on social media.⁶ A small installation from the collection—drawn from the pool that resonated with him as he scoured the museum’s digital catalogue last
winter—accents to
and cultures—Banisadr’s
installation that
Caprichos and Los
Utagawa Hiroshige
(2016) hanging and
animated by curiers

And with sound and
a music playlist that
accessible both in
and on the walls.

Banisadr’s expansion
from the personal
to the macrocosm
considers societal
human condition

PATRICIA HICKS
The Emily Hall Tremaine

CANNONS HIDDEN IN ROSES
WA MATRIX 185 Brochure-5.qxp_WA MATRIX 185 Brochure 10/20/20 5:13 PM Page 8
Banisadr is the subject of exhibitions at the Benaki Museum, Bardini & Palazzo Vecchio, the Netherlands; at Het Nieuwe Instituut Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; and recently the subject of museum exhibitions at the Fondazione Prada, Milan; the Fine Arts, Vienna; and Fine Arts Museum, Denver. Banisadr’s work was included in Documenta 14; Contemporary Art from Home to Neighbors, The 55th Venice Biennale; and Biennale 6. Banisadr’s expansive MATRIX project encompasses his engagement with the world, from the personal to the universal, across time and cultures, from the microcosm to the macrocosm. Driven by impulse and an artist’s eye, Banisadr observes and considers societies past, present, and future and acts as a social critic on the human condition.

PATRICIA HICKSON
The Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

After Pieter Brueghel the Elder (Flemish, c. 1525–1569), Avaritia (Greed), c. 1565. Engraving on paper. Bequest of Edward G. and Emily K. Stotesbury.

Persian Laila and Majnun, pages (five poems) of Nizami. Ink, watercolor, and gold. Gift of Kirkor Minassian.

Utagawa Hiroshige (Japanese, 1797–1858), New Year’s Eve Foxfire. From the series One Hundred Views of Edo, nd. Woodblock print. Gift of Mrs. Jared K. Mahony.


Banisadr is the subject of upcoming solo exhibitions at the Benaki Museum, Athens; and Museo Stefano Bardini & Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. He was recently the subject of solo and two-person museum exhibitions at Gemäldegalerie, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna; Het Noordbrabants Museum, Den Bosch, Netherlands; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, FL. In 2013, his work was included in Love Me/ Love Me Not, Contemporary Art from Azerbaijan and its Neighbors, The 55th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale; and Expanded Painting, Prague Biennale 6. Banisadr’s work is included in significant public collections worldwide, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; the British Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum der Moderne, Salzburg; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Banisadr is the subject of a forthcoming monograph, published by Rizzoli, to be released Spring 2021 to coincide with his upcoming exhibition at Kasmir Gallery.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

PAINTINGS

Exterior, 2015
Oil on linen
16 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Interior, 2015
Oil on linen
16 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Foot Soldier, 2016
Oil on linen
10 x 8 in.
Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

Treasure, 2016
Oil on linen
66 x 88 in.
Collection of Joshua Rechnitz, New York

The Levanter, 2017
Oil on linen
24 x 24 in.
Private collection

Red, 2020
Oil on linen
48 x 60 in.
Collection Het Noordbrabants Museum, ’s-Hertogenbosch (The Netherlands)

Only Breath, 2020
Oil on linen
20 x 16 in.
Courtesy of Kasmir Gallery, New York

The Prophet, 2020
Oil on linen
66 x 88 in.
Courtesy of Kasmir Gallery, New York

The Caravan, 2020
Oil on linen
66 x 88 in.
Courtesy of Kasmir Gallery, New York

The Healers, 2020
Oil on linen
82 x 120 in.
Courtesy of Kasmir Gallery, New York

PRINTS

Cannon Hidden in Roses, 2019
26 ¼ x 31 ½ in.
Hand-colored aquatint with photogravure, spitbite, drypoint, and burnishing on paper
Courtesy of the artist

Nocturne, 2019
26 ¼ x 31 ½ in.
Hand-colored aquatint with photogravure, spitbite, drypoint, and burnishing on paper
Courtesy of the artist

INSTALLATION

Unidentified Artist (Netherlandish, c. 1550-1575), The Temptation of St. Anthony, c. 1550-75
Oil on panel
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1938.605
American, born in Tehran, Iran, 1976
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

After Pieter Brueghel the Elder
(Flemish, c. 1525–1569)
Avaritia (Greed), c. 1558
Engraving on paper
Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.31

Francisco Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828)
Disparate Volante (Flying Foal)
From Los Proverbios (Proverbs), 1815–23
Etching and burnished aquatint on heavy laid paper

Utagawa Hiroshige (born Ando Hiroshige)
(Japanese, 1797–1858)
New Year’s Eve Foxfires at the Changing Tree, Oji
From the series One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, nd
Woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. Jared K. Morse, 1954.49

William Blake (English, 1757–1827)
The Lord answered Job..., nd
Engraving on paper
Collection of Jane Clark Carey, 1982.80

Joseph Cornell (American, 1903-1972)
Untitled, nd
Mixed media
Gift of The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, 1996.34

Roberto Matta Echauren (called Matta)
(Chilean, 1911–2002)
Untitled (Personage Transparence), c. 1941–42
Graphite and colored crayon on wove paper
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1942.280

Arshile Gorky (American, born Armenia, 1904-1948)
Untitled, 1941–43
Pencil, ink, and gouache on paper
Anonymous gift, 2005.36.2

Hans Hofmann (American, born Bavaria, 1880–1966)
Untitled, 1948
Black ink and colored crayon on wove paper
Gift of Mr. Herrick Jackson, 1976.109

Charles Burchfield (American, 1893–1967)
Study of Birds in Flight, c. 1954–63
Conte crayon on wove paper mounted on cardboard
Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.34

Ali Banisadr American, born Iran, 1976
Foot Soldier, 2016
Oil on linen
Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

FOOTNOTE
2 All specific references to a group of figures are updated to 2019.
3 Hieronymus Bosch (Dutch, c. 1450–1516) is in the collection of the Museum of Art.
4 Pieter Brueghel the Elder (Flemish, 1525–1569) is in the collection of the Museum of Art.
5 Jalal al-Din Rum i (Iranian, 1207–1273) is in the collection of the Museum of Art.
6 Banisadr creates such video work...

2. All specific references to Ali Banisadr that are not noted have been drawn from a series of conversations between the author and the artist in 2019 and 2020.

3. Hieronymus Bosch (Dutch/Netherlandish, c. 1450–1516) is best known for the otherworldly triptych panel The Garden of Earthly Delights (1515) in the collection of the Museo Prado, Madrid.

4. Pieter Brueghel the Elder (Dutch/Flemish, c. 1525–30–1569) is known for his paintings of peasant scenes and landscapes filled with groups of figures.

5. Jalal al-Din Rumi (Iranian, born Afghanistan, 1207–1273) was a mystic. Only Breath expresses that all people share the qualities that make them human, regardless of religion or race.

6. Banisadr creates such video collages on his own and shares through his Instagram stories @simorgh3.

VIRTUAL GALLERY TALK
Ali Banisadr
Friday, October 23
5 pm

ONLINE DISCUSSION
Ali Banisadr and Robert Hobbs
Friday, November 20
5 pm

VIRTUAL GALLERY TALK
Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
Thursday, January 14
12 pm

ART BASEL ONLINE VIEWING ROOM
Ali Banisadr in Conversation with Patricia Hickson
Available viathewadsworth.org
Visit thewadsworth.org for program Zoom links.