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'Reviews: Ali Banisadr - Benaki Museum'

By Cathryn Drake

ATHENS

Ali Banisadr

BENAKI MUSEUM

The seventeen paintings and prints in Ali Banisadr's exhibition "Ultramarinus: Beyond the Sea," curated by Polina Kosmadaki, swarmed with inchoate figures and dynamic forms that incited viewers to search for sense in the face of inherent natural disorder. Banisadr's works were displayed together with Ming- and Qing-dynasty ceramics, from the Benaki Museum's collection, that are adorned with decorative motifs

in the vibrant blue pigment derived from cobalt oxide, obtained from Persia by Chinese artisans who exported their wares to markets in the Middle East and Europe. Called *ultramarinus* by Venetian traders, the precious blue hue became a conduit for cultural exchange and transformation, a passage reflecting the artist's own emigration from Iran to the United States as a young child in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War.

A Ming-dynasty incense burner placed in the center of the room bore a resonant line from twelfth-century Persian apothecary and poet Attar of Nishapur: "He who approaches the seller of perfumes / himself acquires part of the sweet fragrance given forth by those scents." Banisadr's imagery is mutable, the shapes materializing, shifting, and dissolving under the gaze and the alchemy of myriad cultural references and contexts. Adjacent to a Qing-era dish adorned with two writhing azure dragons, the painting *Rhizome*, 2019, depicted an icy black-and-blue tempest with monsters or rodents, shark fins or angel wings, and a feminine wraith engulfed in expressionistic chaos. The palette echoes Hokusai's iconic woodblock print *The Great Wave*, ca. 1830-32, while the cacophonous composition recalls Picasso's terrifying representation of war in *Guernica*, 1937, as well as sixteenth-century battle scenes by Persian miniaturist Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād—pictures that similarly burst beyond the frame and explode perspective to compress narrative and negate order.

Land of Black Gold, 2008, has a backdrop of blue squares suggesting a chessboard underlying the mayhem of a carnivalesque scene wrought in strokes and daubs of incandescent color. Medieval peasants and masked troubadours coexist with myriad mythical creatures among a tumble of architectural structures; front and center is a pair of disembodied legs straight out of Hieronymus Bosch. The eyes find



Ali Banisadr, *Rhizome*,
2019, oil on linen,
48 × 60".

no rest in vertiginous fields of jumbled planes that convey the essence of the present as a raucous polyphony of disembodied events. The scene brings to mind the moral of Pieter Bruegel the Younger's painting *The Alchemist*, ca. 1600, after an engraving by his father, illustrating the folly of greed. Nothing has been learned since the loss of paradise: Oil is the new gold, the motive for so much spilling of blood and destroying of homes.

Despite all the glimpses of art history, Banisadr's work is decidedly rooted in the here and now. In *The Rise of the Blond*, 2016, a motley mob of brash beasts marches stridently off to the right in a celebratory pageant. The apparent leader sports a distinctive yellow mane, a robe of royal purple, and the beaked visage of a Venetian plague-*cum*-carnival mask. Painted just before Donald Trump's election, it was a prescient allegory for things to come. After a year of protests and riots amid a mismanaged pandemic, *SOS*, 2020, seems to be the aftermath—as much an uncanny premonition as a depiction of a hell of the sort envisioned by artists for centuries. Its denizens are rendered as animals confined in a corral while an angelic figure holding a scroll, presumably Saint Peter, looks down on the fiery carnage.

Mimicking the murky mechanics by which memories become blurred, buried, or distorted in the depths of the unconscious to emerge transfigured, these paintings offer singular visions of collective calamity. The restless experience of looking at them mirrors the intuitive way Banisadr improvises them over time, employing erasure and returning repeatedly to nurture the spontaneous emergence of elements. As Attar sums up the lesson of his poem "The Language of the Birds," also the title of a 2018 painting by the artist: "Do you see? / The shadow and its maker are one and the same." Next to these vivid paintings reality seems like the shadow state.

—Cathryn Drake