

Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist

Welcome to the Art of Ali Banisadr!

We are thrilled to introduce you and your students to the dynamic work of contemporary artist Ali Banisadr. This exhibition features over 50 paintings, prints, drawings, and sculptures. Banisadr's layered, energetic artwork reflects his childhood experiences during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) in Tehran and draws inspiration from a wide range of artistic and cultural traditions. His work explores themes of memory, identity, mythology, and global history.

The title of the exhibition, *The Alchemist*, alludes to Banisadr's ability to draw from the many ideas, memories, and experiences of his life and create something entirely new. Much like an artist, the alchemist seeks to change ordinary materials into something extraordinary.

Through open-ended questions and guided discussions, our tours encourage students to explore Banisadr's creative process:

- What influences and inspirations shape his work?
- What artistic techniques, tools, and strategies does he use?
- How can we interpret and connect with his vibrant imagery?

Students will examine his use of color, mark-making, scale, perspective, and composition while considering both abstraction and storytelling in his work.



This packet is designed for upper elementary students but can be adjusted for different grade levels. Look for the **light bulb** symbol for ideas suited to older students. Please feel free to share these materials with classroom and art teachers.

The following are included:

- Introduction to the exhibition and the artist, Ali Banisadr.
- Images from the exhibition with discussion questions
- Pre-visit activities: Creative Mark-Making and Exploring Abstraction
- Influences and Inspirations
- Glossary

The KMA Education Department welcomes collaborative planning for your visit. Please email madasko@katonahmuseum.org or call 914-232-9555, ext. 2969 to discuss the specifics of your tour. Thank you for choosing the KMA for your class visit.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Margaret Adasko".

Margaret Adasko
Curator of Education

Table of Contents

Introduction to the Exhibition	3
About the Artist: Ali Banisadr	4
Images for Discussion – <i>Creating Characters</i>	5-6
Images for Discussion – <i>Tell a Story</i>	7-8
Images for Discussion – <i>Step Inside</i>	9-10
Pre-Visit: Creative Mark-Making	11
Pre-Visit: Exploring Abstraction.....	12
Influences and Inspirations.....	13-14
Glossary	15-16



Katonah Museum of Art

Introduction to the Exhibition

Michelle Yun Mapplethorpe, Director and Chief Curator, Katonah Museum of Art

Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist is the first major U.S. museum survey of the contemporary artist Ali Banisadr. Organized by the Katonah Museum of Art (KMA), this exhibition encompasses nearly twenty years of the artist's singular practice, from 2006 to the present, across the mediums of painting, drawing, and printmaking. Sculpture, a new direction for the artist, will be presented for the first time.

Banisadr's densely populated paintings are influenced by his experience of synesthesia, linking color and form. Drawing on childhood experiences of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) in his native Tehran, where explosions and other aural disturbances were commonplace, Banisadr painstakingly and intuitively builds complex compositions that exude a vitality at once turbulent and celebratory.

The exhibition reveals Banisadr's artistic practice as a careful balancing act between chaos and composure, and abstraction and representation. His images display a dazzling mastery of art history, philosophy, and world events, offering a nuanced perspective of human nature. The works are rich with figurative illusions rooted in autobiographical narratives, sonic recollection, invented stories, world history, collective memory, and mythology. Banisadr creates complex, turbulent worlds with a multitude of references from across art history—including Abstract Expressionism, German Expressionism, Medieval Renaissance art, alchemical imagery, Mesopotamian antiquities, and Persian miniatures—as well as references to our own tempestuous times.

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About the Artist: Ali Banisadr

Ali Banisadr is an internationally renowned contemporary artist known for his dynamic, large-scale paintings that merge abstraction with figuration. Banisadr was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1976. In 1988, his family emigrated to the United States. What happened between this time – the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) – affected Banisadr deeply and served as artistic inspiration for years to come. Banisadr experiences synesthesia, a condition in which a person feels more than one of the five senses at the same time. For Banisadr, he hears sound when he paints. He explains: “When I begin a painting, it’s always based on an internal sound. As soon as I apply the brush, the sound begins, and I . . . compose the work based on the sounds I hear.”



After immigrating to the United States and settling in California, Banisadr used art as a means of untangling the new culture he was dropped into. He later moved to New York to study at the School of Visual Arts and the New York Academy of Art (MFA, 2007). It was during this time that Banisadr began to develop his individual artistic style and producing some of the works seen in *Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist* at the Katonah Museum of Art.

Banisadr draws on a wide array of images, texts, and historical events when creating his compositions. In his studio in Brooklyn, Banisadr’s research table is crowded with resources from various geographic and historical perspectives. He often draws influence from Northern Renaissance painters Peter Bruegel (ca. 1530-1569) and Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450-1516), Surrealist artwork, and Abstract Expressionist paintings as well as from much earlier artworks, like Persian miniature paintings and depictions of Egyptian mythology. Banisadr’s paintings synthesize all these historical references, as well as elements of his personal history and current events, into one dynamic symphony. (See pages 13-14 for more information about Banisadr’s influences and inspirations.)

Like the incessant information that stimulates our minds every day from our phones, computers, and daily life, Banisadr shows us glimpses of the many references that cross his mind in one single image. Although his paintings look at first to be purely abstract, looking further will reveal the various characters, images, and actions that make up Banisadr’s compositions.

Learn More:

Ali Banisadr’s website: <http://www.alibanisadr.com/>

Ali Banisadr interview with Lilly Wei, Studio International, 02/06/2014:

<https://www.studiointernational.com/ali-banisadr-interview>

Video - Ali Banisadr interview with Louisiana Museum of Art, 2024: <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/ali-banisadr-worlds-within-worlds>



Images for Discussion – *Creating Characters*

Carefully look at the image on page 5. Describe what you see.

How would you describe the character in this artwork?

- What do you notice about its face, body, or clothing?
- Does it look human, animal, or something else?
- Does it remind you of anything?

What shapes or symbols or small images do you see?

- Do you notice any patterns or repeating shapes?
- What do the symbols remind you of? (e.g., arrows, circles, lines)
- Do you think these symbols have a meaning, or are they purely decorative?

What might it represent?

- Could this be a mythical or magical figure? Why or why not?
- What do the eye, arrows, and surrounding symbols make you think of?
- If this character could tell a story, what would it be?

Ali Banisadr often creates characters in his artwork that draw from many references – historical, mythological, imagination, cultures from around the world. In this way, he creates his own inventive worlds populated with unique creatures. They may have symbolic meaning to the artist, but we may come with our own interpretations. This artwork is titled *The Seer*.



Can you create your own version of a character that symbolizes “the seer?”

Additional information about this work:

Ali Banisadr, *The Seer*, 2022
Pastel on paper
15.25 x 11.25 in. (38.735 x 28.575 cm)
Collection of the artist

In this portrait, Banisadr depicts a character he often includes in his art. In *The Seer*, a one-eyed creature wears a crown made of arrows and stands near symbols that might be found in alchemy or scientific subjects or mythology. This picture reminds us of old storytellers who warned people about the future—but no one listened!



Images for Discussion – *Tell a Story*

Take a careful look at the artwork on page 7.

Describe what you see.

What do you notice first?

What is the overall feeling or mood of this artwork.

Describe some of the colors.

What shapes or forms do you notice?

As you look deeper, are there any forms or shapes that are recognizable to you? Do you see anything that looks like a figure, person, creature, or animal? Describe the details you notice.

A slithering snake

A robed figure with a long staff

Birds flying in the sky

A feathered head

Think about the artist's process

Describe how you think he used art tools when making this piece.

Notice where images are layered and overlapping.

Can you find areas of texture or pattern?



Putting it all together: If you could make up a story about what was happening in this artwork, what would you say?

Taking little moments from this image, write a short narrative. Use your imagination!

Additional information about this work:

Ali Banisadr, *Queen of the night*, 2022
Oil on linen
82 x 120 in.
(208.3 x 304.8 cm)
Private collection

The figures in the front of the painting look like actors standing on a stage. The main figure in the center has clawed feet, wears a crown with bull's horns, and holds a special rod and ring. This figure resembles an ancient artwork from Mesopotamia called the *Queen of the Night*, (1900–1700 BCE). To the left, there is a figure dressed in white with a bright blue feathered headdress. On her gown, you can see a symbol that stands for womanhood and life, along with another symbol that represents an alembic—a tool used in alchemy to change materials into something new. On the right, a smaller figure dressed in purple has a glowing golden sun symbol above them. This connects to the theme of alchemy, which is all about transformation and change.



Images for Discussion – *Step Inside*

Take a quiet moment to look closely at the artwork on Page 9.

What do you see?

Describe the **COLORS**. What is bright or dark? Where do colors repeat?

Describe the **SHAPES** or **FORMS**. What looks sharp or rounded? What is tiny or large?

Describe some **LINES** and **MARKS**. Can you find little squiggles and big wide swooshes?

Do you see repeated **PATTERNS** or **TEXTURES**?

Compare the front/lower section to the top area. What is different or the same?

Describe some details you notice.

Step inside this painting

What might you hear?

What might the atmosphere feel like? Warm – cold – windy – calm....

What feelings come to mind as you imagine being there?



Create a short poem using some of the descriptive words you've thought of.

Additional information about this work:

Ali Banisadr, *Contact*, 2013

Oil on linen

82 x 120 in. (208.3 x 304.8 cm)

Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum

By exchange: Gift of Mrs. Georgia M.G. Forman, Bequest of Arthur B.

Michael, Elisabeth H. Gates Fund, Charles W. Goodyear and Mrs.

Seymour H. Knox, Sr., Gift of Miss Amelia E. White, 2014 2014:8


Contact seems to depict a world in motion. Flickering figures hover above a visceral landscape painted in hues of red and burnt umber. We see water in the mid ground, green grass in the foreground, and birds fluttering in a blue sky. The energy is stylized, almost like a dance, or as if caught up in a tornado or whirlwind.

Pre-Visit: Creative Mark-Making

In art, **mark-making** is when artists create different kinds of lines, shapes, patterns, and textures on paper or other surfaces. Artists may use different tools such as pencils, paintbrushes, sticks, sponges, or even their fingers! Some marks may look soft and smooth, rough and scratchy, or scribbly and wild. Artists use mark-making to show feelings, movement, and ideas in their artwork. Ali Banisadr's artworks are filled with an amazing variety of marks — dashes, swirls, scratches, scribbles, swooshes, and more!

Make your own marks below

Using pencils, markers, crayon or paint, try: swirls that feel like wind • pointy, bouncy zigzags • sharp scratches
tiny dots and dashes like rain drops or quiet sounds • fast scribbles • blurry smudges



Bonus Challenge: Try making marks while listening to music! Did you know that Ali Banisadr has synesthesia? Synesthesia is when you experience more than one of the five senses at the same time. Ali Banisadr experiences sound when he paints.

Pre-Visit: Exploring Abstraction

Did you know that some artists paint pictures that don't look exactly like real things? This is called **abstraction**! Instead of drawing things like houses, trees, or people the way they really look, abstract artists use **colors, shapes, and lines** to show feelings and ideas.

Think about one favorite memory - playing outside, a trip, or a favorite place you like to go

Step 1: On the left, draw what you remember: Who was there? What happened? Where were you? What did you see around you?

Step 2: On the right, let's make an abstract picture. Instead of drawing what you saw, think about how that memory made you feel. Was it warm and happy? Cool and calm? Busy and exciting? What sounds did you hear? Use different colors, shapes, and lines to show those feelings. Maybe swirls for excitement or soft colors for a peaceful moment.

How are these drawings similar or different?

Draw what you remember?	ABSTRACT DRAWING: How did it feel?

Influences and Inspirations



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Dutch, ca. 1530-1569)
Children's Games, 1560
Oil on panel
46 x 63 in. (118 x 161 cm)
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria

Northern Renaissance

The Northern Renaissance (ca. 1450-1600) took place in the Low Countries, today's Netherlands and Belgium, and celebrated realism and the everyday, no matter how chaotic or gruesome. Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Children's Games* (1560) shows ordinary children playing in the town center. This Bruegel painting demonstrates a technique popularized in the Northern Renaissance that Banisadr employs: a bird's-eye point-of-view. Whereas some painters choose to compose their paintings from a frontal angle, as if the paintings' subjects are standing right before us, Bruegel and Banisadr sometimes paint from a wider, more distant vantage point. Hieronymus Bosch, another Northern Renaissance artist from whom Banisadr draws inspiration, similarly presented highly populated landscapes, all-over compositions, fantastical subject matter, and a bird's-eye-view perspective.



Max Ernst (French (born Germany) 1891-1976)
The Barbarians, 1937
Oil on cardboard
9.5 x 13 in (24.1 x 33 cm)
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Surrealism

The Surrealist movement emerged in Europe in response to the trauma and chaos of World War I and World War II. It conveyed a joining of conscious and unconscious realms of experience, the dream and fantasy world intermixed with the everyday rational world. Like the Surrealists, Banisadr allows his imagination, unconscious, and synesthetic associations to be on display among recognizable elements. Some Surrealists, like Max Ernst (French, 1891-1976), utilized a similar blend of metaphor, mythology, and everyday life as Banisadr does. In his painting *The Barbarians*, Ernst features two creatures with bird-like heads and bipedal bodies with mile-long strides. Ernst's creatures, like the figures in Banisadr's works, disorient the viewer as they try to navigate what is happening in a landscape blended of known and unknown elements.



Willem de Kooning (American (born The Netherlands), 1904-1997)
Woman I, 1950-1952
Oil and metallic paint on canvas
75.875 x 58 in. (192.7 x 147.3 cm)
Museum of Modern Art, New York

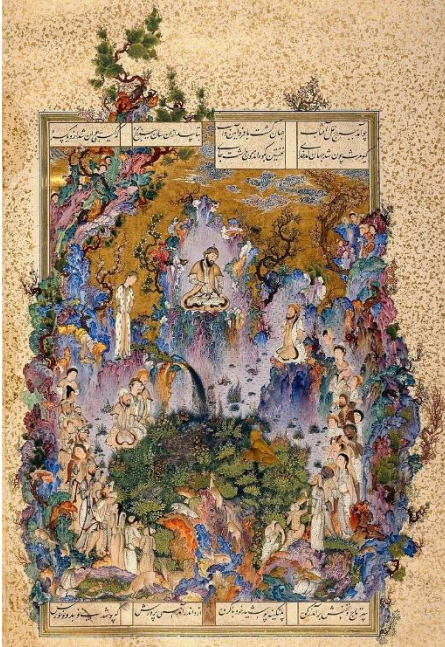
Abstract Expressionism

The Abstract Expressionist movement predominantly took place in the late 1940s through the 1950s. In reaction to political and existential uncertainty following World War II, Abstract Expressionists experimented with the nature of paint and disorienting, abstract compositions. For example, Willem de Kooning's (American, 1904-1997) *Woman I* plays with the expressive qualities of paint and the emotion that can be evoked by exaggerating the dynamism in the act of painting. Banisadr uses paint in a very similar way to create a sense of movement. Action Painters, who were part of the Abstract Expressionist movement, took this idea even further. Jackson Pollock's (American, 1912-1956) *Pasiphae* 1943 captures the panic of war, struggle, and loss by moving frantically while painting, creating broken forms and sharp angular lines. When looking at Pollock, de Kooning, and Banisadr's paintings, viewers can imagine the movements that must have been made to create such dramatic and theatrical brushstrokes.



Jackson Pollock (American 1912-1952)
Pasiphae, 1943
Oil on canvas
56.125 x 96 in. (142.6 x 243.8 cm)
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Persian Miniatures



Persian miniatures were most common in Iran in the 13th-16th Century and were used as book illustrations or kept in an album or folio called a *muraqqa*. Like some Northern Renaissance painters, Persian miniature illustrations were often depicted in a bird's-eye-view that did not employ a single point perspective, but rather multiple vantage points. They are characterized by finely detailed lines, lush colors, and precisely rendered human and animal figures. Persian miniatures are also known for their whimsical, lyrical, and mystical scenes. While Banisadr emigrated from Iran at a young age, the techniques and characteristics of these early Iranian painters continue to serve as inspiration for his compositions.

Sultan Mohammed
Kayumars' Court. Miniature, detail.
"Shahnameh" by Ferdowsi. 1525-1535.
Geneva, Collection of Sadruddin Aga Khan.

Alchemy

☾ moon Luna	⊖ saltpetre	⚱ vinegar	♁ ferrum
☼ sun Sol	△ fire	⚱ mortar	♁ iron vitriol
⊕ earth Terra	▽ water	♁ salt	♁ lead
♁ mercury Mercurius	△ air	♁ antimony	♁ white lead
♀ venus Venus	▽ earth	♁ alkali	♁ olive oil
♁ mars Mars	♁ copper	♁ alumen	♁ ammonia
♁ jupiter Jupiter	♁ lead	♁ arsenic	⊖ salt
♁ saturn Saturnus	♀ brass	♁ lapis lazuli	⊕ sulphuric acid
♁ uranus Uranus	♁ arsenic	♁ copper / saffron	♁ sulphur
♁ neptune Neptunus	♁ phosphorus	⊕ copper / acetate	♁ potash
			♁ transmutation

Alchemy is an ancient practice aimed at transforming “base” matter, such as lead, into noble, precious materials like gold. It also symbolized the inner journey of personal transformation and enlightenment. Alchemists believed that if they used the right combination of ingredients and methods, they could produce miraculous results. They even pursued the secret to eternal life. The natural philosophy of alchemy originated in Ancient Greece, where it was believed that everything was made up of four elements: fire, water, air, and earth. Alchemical symbols were developed to denote chemical elements and compounds. Banisadr has incorporated alchemical symbols – or symbols that look like alchemical symbols – into his paintings. Much like artists, the alchemist seeks to change ordinary materials into something extraordinary.

Example of alchemical symbols.

Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist

Glossary

Your Museum Visit:

Museum: An institution or building where works of art, scientific specimens, or other objects of value are cared for, studied, and displayed.

Docent: A person who is a knowledgeable guide, especially one who leads visitors through a museum and facilitates discussion about the exhibitions.

Art Terms and ideas:

Abstraction: Abstraction in art refers to the style or approach in which artists move away from representing objects and scenes realistically. Instead, they focus on elements like color, shape, form, and texture to create an artwork that expresses ideas, emotions, or concepts without directly depicting recognizable objects.

Alchemist: A scientist from long ago who tried to turn ordinary things, like lead, into gold. Much like an artist, the alchemist seeks to change ordinary materials into something extraordinary.

Alchemy: Once considered a branch of natural science, alchemy is rooted in the Medieval belief of transforming metals, such as lead, into gold. More broadly, alchemy refers to transforming ordinary materials into something extraordinary.

Background: The part of a picture or scene that appears to be farthest away from the viewer, usually nearest the horizon.

Composition: The plan, placement or arrangement of individual elements in a work of art.

Contemporary Art: The art of today, produced by artists who are living in the 21st century. Contemporary art provides an opportunity to reflect on present-day society and the issues relevant to us and the world around us.

Elements of Art: The basic components used by the artist when producing works of art

- **Color:** The hue produced when light reflects off a surface. Color is an important element of art that can affect mood, feeling, balance, energy, and memory.
- **Line:** A continuous mark between points. Lines can be straight, jagged, curvy, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, thick, thin, etc.
- **Shape:** A flat, two-dimensional area. Shapes are spaces that are created when a line reconnects with itself.
- **Space:** The term defining the area between and around objects. The space around objects is often called negative space; negative space has shape. Space can also refer to the feeling of depth. Real space is three-dimensional; in visual arts, when we can create the feeling or illusion of depth, we call it space.
- **Texture:** The characteristic surface of a material; how it feels to the touch, or the visual appearance of texture on a 2D surface.
- **Value:** The relative lightness or darkness.

Figurative art: Any art form that retains strong references to the real world and particularly to human figures.

Foreground: The area of a picture that appears to be closest to the viewer, often at the bottom

Gesture: The movement used to apply paint to canvas. Describing a painting as more or less gestural refers to the extent to which the artist's hand is apparent.

Mark: A visible trace or impression on a surface, such as a line, dot, spot, stain, scratch, blemish, mar, bruise, crack, dent, or pleat.

Monochromatic: A color scheme based on only one, single color tint. It uses only variations (shades) of a single hue, made by altering the saturation and brightness of the base color.

Mood: A feeling or state of mind.

Movement: The path the viewer's eye takes through the artwork, often to focal areas. Such movement can be directed along lines, shape, and color within the artwork.

Narrative Art: Art that tells a story.

Perspective: Point of view or sense of proportion.

Point of view (vantage point): This refers to the position or angle from which the viewer observes the subject of an artwork. The point of view can be from above, below, or at eye level and influences how we interpret the space and relationships within the artwork.

- **Bird's-Eye View:** A perspective from high above the subject, looking down as though the viewer were a bird flying overhead.
- **Stage View (or eye level perspective):** When the viewer's line of sight is at the same height as the subject, as if watching the subject perform on a stage directly in front.

Principals of Design: The ways that artists use and organize the elements of art in a work of art.

- **Balance:** The distribution of the visual weight of objects, colors, texture, and space.
- **Contrast:** The arrangement of opposite elements to create visual interest.
- **Emphasis:** The part of the design that catches the viewer's attention.
- **Movement:** The path the viewer's eye takes through the work of art, often to focal areas.
- **Pattern/Repetition:** The repeating of an object or symbol all over the work of art.
- **Proportion/scale:** Refers to the size relationship between part and the whole of the image. It is the feeling of unity created when all parts (sizes, amounts, or number) relate well with each other.
- **Rhythm:** Is created when one or more elements of design are used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement.
- **Unity:** The feeling of harmony between all parts of the work of art, which creates a sense of completeness.

Representational Art: Refers to a painting, sculpture or other image that is clearly recognizable for what it claims to be.

Sculpture: A three-dimensional work of art; can be seen from multiple sides.

Symbol: A design or an object that represents something else.

Synesthesia: A perceptual condition in which information between the senses is blended and a person experiences more than one of the five senses at the same time. Ali Banisadr experiences sound when he paints.