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CREATE

Two new exhibitions debut today at St. Pete's MFA



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At the Museum of Fine Arts St. Petersburg, artist Ali Banisadr discusses his 180x86-inch painting "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." Photo by Bill DeYoung.

An exhibition of works by New York-based artist Ali Banisadr opens today at the Museum of Fine Arts St. Petersburg. *Ali Banisadr: The Alchemist* includes painting, drawing, printmaking and sculpture spanning a nearly 20-year period (2006-2025) in the Iranian-born creative's life.

The large-scale exhibition is paired with the installation *The Last Library IV: Written in Water* from artists Ward Shelley and Douglas Paulson.

"These are two exhibitions which really push the envelope in many ways," MFA Chief Curator Stanton Thomas said. "They're very different animals, but they have so much in common. And we're really hoping that after people see these, once they know more about them, that they will yield transformation. People will look, and they will think, and they will experience things in a new way."

Banisadr and Thomas will hold a public talk today, at 11 a.m.; they led a media tour of the exhibition Thursday morning.

First, the title. "Making art itself is alchemy," the artist said. "Alchemy's about turning stone into gold, right? In painting or sculpture or etching, basically you're starting with material, which at the beginning is nothing. It's just a white canvas, and some colors, and some brushes.

"You charge the material, and with the material, at the end of the journey of making the work, you have something to show for where you went. And what you came back with."



Ali Banisadr, Queen of the Night, 2022, oil on linen, 82 x 120 in.

The most powerful canvases in the MFA show are oversized paintings that combine abstraction with a sense of immediacy and movement that only becomes apparent when the viewer looks at them long enough. What first seems chaotic is revealed as organized and purposeful.

Banisadr explained that he begins the large-scale works by dividing the canvas, in his mind, into geometric shapes and sections. Eventually, he populates them. “The larger canvases function as these stages where your spaces, events and cast of characters can function,” he said.

“I start very abstract. It’s sort of a fragmented space that I create, and then from that all these figures start to emerge. Nothing is planned, and the figures sort of merge out of this dialogue with the work. The fragmentations that I create.

“It’s like a combination of intuition to respond to these fragmentations, but also it’s about my research and what I’m consuming as well that merge with the fragmentation – sort of a Rorschach situation where you create something that’s leading to into an image, but then you have to project what’s in your mind into it.”

There’s image overload in these busy worlds; there’s a lot going on. The characters, Banisadr explained, “are not looking at us. They’re not aware of us. They have their own internal world. And in order to have that internal world, you need to build the space, the stage, and then they come in and start to have a conversation with each other.”



An allegory for the written word's decline in value in a world of alternative facts, censored documents and language shaped by artificial intelligence, *The Last Library IV: Written in Water* is a life-sized "library" with tilted shelves filled with banned books, controversial publications, phony files, state documents, secret plans and lost records.

It was created, very much on purpose, from ordinary corrugated cardboard.



Installation "The Last Library IV: Written in Water" by Ward Shelley and Douglas Paulson. Photo by Bill DeYoung.