

In Conversation

ALI BANISADR AND JOHN VINCLER

OLNEY GLEASON

In Conversation: Ali Banisadr and John Vincler
Introduction by John Vincler

In the paintings of Ali Banisadr, time telescopes through history, with the distant past, present, and future made proximate. Sometimes a figure from history can be identified, as in *Leviathan*, where Rumi, the 13th century Sufi mystic, appears in green at the bottom-center of the painting, recovering his book from the river as water pours out. But other examples suggest repetition within history itself, as in the mythic figure of the cyclops seen in the painting *Omen*, with the ring for an eye resembling Meta's AI logo. In our wide-ranging conversation, excerpted and edited here, Banisadr connects the cyclops to Stanley Kubrick's HAL—an abbreviation of "Heuristically programmed Algorithmic computer"—the film director's prescient AI-as-character from his 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I will not go so far as to suggest that we can see the future in Banisadr's paintings, but they do illuminate the reoccurrences and returns across time, as they dramatize and stage the tension between the insight of human invention and achievement as it coincides and coexists with catastrophe and folly. In other words, how can a painting hold both beauty and horror or disaster? We spoke about painting in nature, his turn to sculpture, a deepening of his drawing practice, and about how his work reckons, urgently, with the present.



Ali Banisadr and John Vincler in conversation at Olney Gleason
November 20, 2025

John Vincler: Ali, this show is immediately recognizable as one of yours, but there are also several new things I see in your work. I think a good place to start is the title: *Noble/Savage*. That slash is important.

Ali Banisadr: Yes, the slash. I've said that the title is sort of a battleground of conversations and opposing thoughts. My titles are usually an umbrella for everything I'm grappling with at the time. This show took about one year, and all the research, current events, art historical references, memory, and personal history, it all runs in parallel with the work. The paintings are a remnant of me decoding, breaking things down. I start with the details and then I get a picture of the entire thing. I kept thinking about this title and its many interpretations.

John Vincler: The first time it appears in English is John Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards* from 1672. There's a little verse in it, I've modernized slightly: "As free as nature first made man, before the base laws of servitude began, when wild in woods the noble savage ran." So there's obviously these caricatures of the noble savage, of the wild man, that were very racialized throughout history. But again, you have that slash in your title, which I think distances it from that history and sets up a kind of dialectic. There are pairings in your work like the contemporary and historical, the animal and the human, or the human and the other-than-human. And the city and nature. That's one of the new things: this is the first time you're showing the paintings that you've made upstate.

Ali Banisadr: Yes, a lot of the green paintings in the show were made in the forest over the summer. They're a combination of imagination, nature, and the way the light captures everything. It all works its way into the paintings.

John Vincler: I brought a prop with me – from a book called *The Surviving Image* by this very interesting thinker, Georges Didi-Huberman. It's about Aby Warburg who died in the 1920s. He lived in Hamburg, and then after his death his library moved from Hamburg to London. One of the most amazing things that he did was an uncompleted project, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, where he collected and presented black and white images from art history, and even from contemporary advertising, and grouped them together by types. He was tracing trajectories of forms across centuries. It makes me think of this grisaille painting of yours [*The Witness*, 2025.]

Ali Banisadr: Yes, the migration of symbols... The reason I'm so interested in Warburg is because he was looking at symbols from ancient times to the Renaissance to Paganism to our time. But he also believed that images have their own life. They exist, they can reoccur and be recharged and so on. The power of images, really.



Ali Banisadr
The Witness, 2025
oil on linen
28 x 36 inches
71.1 x 91.4 cm
OG 33065



Drawings from Banisadr's notebooks, courtesy of the artist.

John Vincler: One of the other things that I think distinguishes your work is that you paint these group scenes. We can go back 500 years to Bosch – that's a real touchstone for you, right? Where does that come from, and how do you gather your crowds together?

Ali Banisadr: I create a space for them. The work begins very abstractly, so the figures come later in the process. It's very much a spontaneous kind of dialogue with the work. I have these notebooks, and I'm always making these visual diagrams. I'm interested in figures that are having an internal dialogue with each other. They're not looking at us. They're not posing. They're busy doing the things they're doing in their world. For example, in *Omen* you have a cyclops figure, and the cyclops figure has an AI symbol on his face... the similarities between ancient and futuristic forms are really interesting to me.

John Vincler: It's very Aby Warburg of you, that connection.

Ali Banisadr: That's why I like the guy. I've always loved Kubrick, but I got back into 2001: Space Odyssey and I was thinking about HAL who is, of course, a cyclops. And he's an AI. This movie was made, I don't know how long ago, so it's really interesting that HAL destroys everything and can't be contained.

John Vincler: How aware are you of managing the way time telescopes through your paintings? You mentioned the notebooks. What are your notebooks helping you do?

Ali Banisadr: I have two different notebooks. In one I try to break things down in language... like a spiral of thoughts, and then the other one I do visually. They both help in different ways. In the visual one, I'm trying to remember certain symbols in order for them to work their way into the paintings. I want to internalize them because I'm interested in how things happen from memory. How these things that I'm creating or consuming will manifest themselves and surprise me.

John Vincler: Your works are often grounded in a purple or blue palette, and I think of those as your urban works, even scholarly works, that are thinking through history. But then you have this green in the new paintings that is pretty different from what you've been doing.

Ali Banisadr: With a place in the middle of a forest, I have a new relationship with the color green. It's been a sublime, overpowering experience going into the forest, hiking in the forest, listening to the forest, seeing it at night... I wanted to paint that experience.



"I'm interested in figures that are having an internal dialogue with each other. They're not looking at us. They're not posing. They're busy doing the things they're doing in their world. For example, in *Omen* you have a cyclops figure, and the cyclops figure has an AI symbol on his face... the similarities between ancient and futuristic forms are really interesting to me."

Ali Banisadr



Ali Banisadr

Cyclopes, 2025

bronze

15 x 6 x 5 inches

38.1 x 15.2 x 12.7 cm

Edition of 8 + 2 APs

OG-33060--3-8

John Vincler: Your paintings are very immersive. You can look at them for a very long time. There's this Japanese concept of forest bathing, and it's documented that when we go into the woods we are more at ease. The eye can look at everything without specificity. When I saw this painting, *Paradise Lost*, I saw a subject emerging from vapor. I love good small paintings, especially when they're next to big paintings. The larger painting next to it is *Noble/Savage*. It has your sense of motion and elements that are familiar in your paintings, but there's also a completely different vocabulary.

Ali Banisadr: I typically work out of my head. I'm only looking at the canvas. I like to capture things when they're in the middle of this transformation, and with the forest paintings it was the first time that I've actually made work outside of my Brooklyn studio. I was looking out of my window, seeing the seasons changing, seeing things happen in the forest and being a witness to it. All of the energy to make the work was there.

John Vincler: The presence of sculptures is also new. You have five sculptures throughout the space. They're a slight nod to the forest – little creatures here scampering on their plinths. You've tackled this whole new medium. Did you feel like an amateur when you started making sculptures? How do you decide to take that leap?

Ali Banisadr: I still feel like an amateur because there are sculptor friends I have, like Huma Bhabha, who are amazing. But just like the paintings, I told myself, "Okay, I'm giving myself some clay, and I don't know what I'm going to make, but I'm just going to start somewhere and see what happens." I have two young kids who are 8 and 10. When you give them clay, it's an ancient thing. They just know what to do. The word I like is *gnosis*, which my 10-year-old uses a lot when I ask her, "How do you know that?" "Gnosis." "Okay..."

John Vincler: With *Noble/Savage*, there's wisdom and then the childlike. There are elements of play and discovery, which are really important for making artworks feel alive.

Ali Banisadr: I'm a huge fan of *Gilgamesh*. This sculpture here is called *Gilgamesh*. In the story, he's a noble king in search of immortality. He goes on a journey to the underworld and meets a character named Enkidu, who is a wild man, and he becomes one with him. They challenge each other in some ways, but they merge and become one in others. It's the meeting of two different minds. And I kept seeing this pattern in literature.



Ali Banisadr
Paradise Lost, 2025
oil on linen
17 x 14 inches
43.2 x 35.6 cm
OG 33067



Installation view of *Ali Banisadr: Noble/Savage*
Olney Gleason, 2025, New York

John Vincler: Like Rumi. Ali and I were at an event together recently where Haleh Liza Gafori read from her new translation of Rumi. She found it very interesting that you painted Rumi green [in *Leviathan*, 2025].

Ali Banisadr: In Persian miniatures he's usually wearing green. He's a learned, respected teacher, and he is challenged by the wild man Shams who comes out of nowhere. When the challenge takes place, Rumi suddenly becomes a mystic. He's illuminated. In *Leviathan*, some of the forms are from Tarot, like Justice. Then there is a large figure tampering with Justice, and the Hierophant, which stands for the academy, for institutions, but he's sort of crumbling. These geometric elements are also new. I've brought them into my work alongside the biomorphic shapes.

John Vincler: Leviathan is ultimately this sea monster, historically. Or in the ancient near east, he's sort of a winged demon. There's often the element of the monstrous too in your work. A membrane between the human and the monstrous.

One of the other new features of your work here, are these amazing works on paper in the exhibition. I wonder how these also relate to your notebooks. I'm interested in your relationship to preliminary material. Sometimes works on paper are seen as secondary, but your work on paper here is very refined, very ambitious. Previously, you've brought your paintings into a few spaces alongside printed matter and works on paper. Like at the Katonah Museum [Ali Banisadr: *The Alchemist*, 2025], you showed notebooks and books, and you've done prints. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Ali Banisadr: I've always done charcoal on paper, and monochrome pastel on paper. I do a lot of different kinds of intaglio etchings. I'm really interested in that – we have looked at a lot of engravings and etchings together. But I wanted to find a way to bring the language of my paintings to charcoal or pastel. Just recently I started to get into pastel and try to understand it. What I've learned is that the pastels influence the paintings. Like in the upper part of this painting [*Leviathan*, 2025], I started to use the paint in the same way that I was using pastels to draw lines.

John Vincler: The last thing I want to talk about is this painting again, *The Witness*. There's a painting that Ali has in his studio that's very, very small. It's probably my favorite painting you've ever made (*The Painting*, Oil and Goldleaf on Linen which will be part of *Tarot! Renaissance Symbols, Modern Visions* at The Morgan Library & Museum, June 2026). It looks like it's scored, and where it's scratched away there's gold leaf showing through. This work is very different, but I think it has become similarly important to you. Do your paintings look like this in the beginning sometimes?



"In *Leviathan*, some of the forms are from Tarot, like Justice. Then there is a large figure tampering with Justice, and the Hierophant, which stands for the academy, for institutions, but he's sort of crumbling."

Ali Banisadr

Ali Banisadr: Sometimes. I'm a tonal painter. I start with grisaille and build it up. I build the lights, I build the darks. Color slowly starts to show up later, or not. I have a lot of paintings that are just monochrome, like this one. It's a combination of Goya and Ryder... I was looking at a lot of Albert Pinkham Ryder, those stormy landscapes. I started there, and then the figures just came right away. I just knew that they had to go there. I think I actually dreamed about it.

John Vincler: It seems to literally deepen the space of your paintings too, the way you've been putting in these lines and these structures.

Ali Banisadr: That breaking of the space has happened slowly. If you look at my paintings from fifteen years ago, they have more of a landscape feel to them and a foreground, background, middle ground, horizon. The figures were kind of at the bottom, and there was a sky and so on. But over time I kept wanting to have less of a spatial hierarchy. I like the idea of the viewer not knowing where they are in the painting. They function more like a dream or a hallucination.

John Vincler: We ask paintings to do so much now, because they exist in this landscape of all the other media, of the barrage of digital images. You're able to manage all of that. Before, if you were doing landscapes, it was kind of a unified landscape. Now all of these other spaces collapse, time collapses, and all of these meetings from figures across history, from the human to the monstrous, all come together. Maybe as a critic too, we're like, "Do something new, paintings!" Well, you're developing this very distinctive visual language that's opening up your work.

Ali Banisadr: The challenge is that the world is going at such a speed. How do you slow that down a little bit? How do you slow it down but still have some kind of a relationship to that world as well? It's like the *Leviathan*. We're not made for that. Somehow we are dealing with it, even as it accelerates. The forest helps.

Riddle

"What am I which
carries my head
hidden in water inside out
and one eye can't see the other?

Not sleep I think
not dust ..."

So saying, the mist
with woolen feet, white gloves and
hiding her body in her beard
appeared among the missing worlds and

Not

And then the woods were not
the wind was not

The knock on the door was not

The two who stood there
and the two who saw them said
not what they said

Because by now their mouths were not,
their words were not ...
"What is that which
weeps as it lifts ..."
Not mist said the mist

Weeping





act, the crowd cheered and applauded. No surprise, Paul thought, people were like animals now. All in all, his preferences in comedy aligned with his tastes in the other arts, except for the shows he watched on Netflix, though those could hardly be called art. He demanded a sophistication and subtlety that Steven Ratliff not only lacked but refused. Still, Paul laughed when Priscilla laughed.

It was only as Ratliff left the stage that Paul realized he knew him. His name was not Steven Ratliff at all but Steven Cohen. They'd both been Equity actors in Santa Fe and had worked together on a production of Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*—Paul played the Governor, and Steven a paramilitary thug—that had lost funding while in rehearsals. That was Paul's last role before leaving the theater. He'd moved to Pittsburgh in his early forties to focus on music, and finally, a year and a half ago, to Fort Myers, the place where his mother had been raised.

Had anyone else believed in his talent like she had? Paul recalled a show he'd done at a bar-and-grill in the Keys for his short tour of the East Coast. He'd felt like little more than dinner music, but afterward she'd come up to the stage, a plywood platform, with her pageboy cut and swaying purse, and said, "Paul, my love, you're too talented for words." This was the moment he'd realized how physically fragile she was, how unsteady she'd become. He'd jumped off to

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hug her thin arthritic body to his chest, which had caused his guitar to swing on its strap, thumping his mother on the shoulder.

"If I knew how obscene it all was, I wouldn't have let you go," Priscilla joked as the show's attendees streamed out into purring ranks of glistening sedans and luxury-lite SUVs, which would carry them away to the numerous subdivisions that acted as parasites to downtown Fort Myers, feeding off its minimal cultural contributions, Paul thought, while offering nothing in return but money. But wasn't he after all the audience now—another parasite in a sedan? Maybe when he moved on from the fifty-fifty splits of a junior agent, he'd trade in his midtier vehicle, the sort of car that looked like it was designed to be stuck in coastal Florida gridlock, for a vintage cloth-top two-seater.

"So, how'd we like the set?" Priscilla asked as they entered the parking garage.

"I enjoyed it for what it was," he said. It hurt to see someone from his *Chalk Circle* days obtain a Netflix special; yet Steven had sold out, hadn't he—cashed in?—and for better or worse, Paul thought, he'd been too true to his art for that. "I enjoyed it for what it was," he repeated, "as something catering to the absolute lowest common denominator."

"Well, I heard you laughing," Priscilla said, striding ahead of him.

Time passed, weeks and then months. Paul began to exhibit a gift for driving sales volume, especially compared with the other junior agent on his team, Denise, and so Jim Wesson Jr. started encouraging him to jockey for clients in the market for the more exclusive properties on the water, far from the noisy freight railway with its ridiculous click-clacking. This esteem from Jim Wesson Jr., by and large the most powerful among the three generations of Wessons at Wesson & Sons Global Realty Group, led Paul to command even more respect from his colleagues, many of whom already viewed him with what, to him, was obvious and discomfiting awe. His manner tended to have this effect in southwestern Florida, especially when he wore his tooled leather boots; the other agents spoke to him with a kind of desirous fear, as if they wanted his attention but were scared of getting it.

Ali Banisadr (b. 1976, Tehran, Iran; lives and works between Brooklyn and Hudson Valley, NY) creates expansive, intricately layered paintings, drawings, etchings, and sculptures that balance chaos and composure. Drawing from autobiography, sonic memory, mythology, and world history, his work unfolds in turbulent, dreamlike realms that reflect on the human condition.

For over two decades, Banisadr has developed a distinctive style of abstract painting that alchemizes an encyclopedic span of art historical, cultural, and literary references into a single, remarkable vision. Characterized by layers of confident gestural marks finished with emergent details—symbols, figures, beasts—that recur across his work as motifs, Banisadr’s paintings are worlds unto themselves. Allegorical and mythological, they powerfully transmit an experience of simultaneous action and reaction, alluding to narrative while grappling with the ambiguous nature of memory, imagination, and dream. More recently, Banisadr has extended the vocabulary of his paintings into three dimensions with bronze sculpture, and realized pastel and charcoal works on paper that reflect his ritual daily practice of spontaneous drawing.

Informed by a transhistorical, cross-cultural sensibility, Banisadr draws parallels between primordial biomorphic forms, early cave painting, ancient histories, Old Master drawings, Persian miniatures, the multifigured history paintings of the Renaissance, Surrealism’s alternate realities, and the emotive, highly physical process of action painting. As if from a bird’s-eye view, Banisadr’s perspective exposes the many arcs of human civilization and image-making.

Banisadr earned a BFA at the School of Visual Arts (2005) and an MFA at the New York Academy of Art (2007). His first major monograph was published by Rizzoli Electa in 2021, with an introduction by Negar Azimi and contributions by Robert Hobbs, Joe Lin-Hill, and John Yau.

John Vincler is the Co-Chief Art Critic of *CULTURED* magazine, where he launched The Critics’ Table with Johanna Fateman in 2024 as new space for serious art criticism. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *Frieze* and elsewhere. He also serves as Library Director of Poets House, a literary nonprofit and free library that is open to the public and holds 80,000 volumes of poetry. He lives in Brooklyn.