



Ali Banisadr, detail of *The Scribe*, 2026. Oil on linen. 149.9 x 180.3 cm | 59 x 71 in. Photo: Jeremy Lawson. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

ART BASEL QATAR

Solo presentation by Ali Banisadr

Al-Kīmiyā: The Art of Transformation

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Booth M208

Perrotin is pleased to participate in the first edition of Art Basel Qatar with a solo presentation by Ali Banisadr. On this occasion, the artist presents *Al-Kīmiyā: The Art of Transformation*, an exhibition that unfolds across painting, sculpture, and works on paper to examine humanity's enduring drive toward becoming—toward change, mutation, and renewal. The title draws from *al-kīmiyā'*, the Arabic root of alchemy, understood not merely as material transmutation but as a philosophical and spiritual process: a reconfiguration of perception, knowledge, and being.

Most of the works in the exhibition are nocturnal where moons rise over winter landscapes; figures gather in forests; storms churn unseen. Night, for Banisadr, is not the absence of vision but a condition in which transformation becomes possible—where consciousness loosens, symbols migrate, and latent structures surface. At the center of the exhibition is *The Scribe* (2026), a large-scale painting depicting a Shakespearean, hybrid figure—half person, half paint—suspended

within a hallucinatory space. The work embodies a dual identity Banisadr recognizes in himself: thinker and painter, scholar and dreamer. Historically, the scribe is a preserver of information; here, the role expands. This figure does not merely record but revises, challenges, and extends knowledge. Banisadr's conception is informed by his long-standing engagement with medieval Islamic polymaths associated with the House of Wisdom in Baghdad—figures such as Averroes, Ibn Sina, and Al-Hazan—whose work translated, corrected, and transformed Greek philosophy through experimentation and inquiry. Algebra, optics, medicine, astronomy, and systems of hospitals emerged not through repetition, but through creative revision. It was this vast, evolving body of knowledge—circulated, contested, and enriched across cultures—that later reentered Europe and became a critical foundation for the Renaissance, a period Banisadr holds in deep regard as a moment when art, science, philosophy, and humanism were once again understood as inseparable pursuits. Transformation in *Al-Kīmiyā* is also grounded in the



Ali Banisadr, *Gilgamesh*, 2025. Bronze. 40.6 x 12.7 x 12.7 cm | 16 x 5 x 5 in. Photo: Genevieve Hanson. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

natural world. *When poets awake, it becomes night* (2026) depicts a gathering in a forest under a wolf moon, inspired by an experience hiking with Banisadr's children through a snowy, nocturnal landscape. The painting began outdoors, its initial marks made with branches directly on canvas. The forest appears as both primordial site and psychic threshold— inhabited by shamanic figures that echo the painter himself. For Banisadr, the forest exists just beyond the boundaries of consciousness: a place where instinct overtakes orientation, yet also the reservoir from which civilization itself is built. Poetry, like painting, becomes a vehicle for expressing what cannot be documented or photographed—phenomena accessible only through lived experience and symbolic form.

This migration of symbols continues in *The Moon Watchers* (2026), a work on paper combining pastel, charcoal, and ink. Here, gestural mark-making collides with X-ray-like imagery, evoking the tension between the organic and the machinic. Banisadr's subtle engagement with technology—present throughout his practice—points to the ways digital systems reshape perception and visual culture. The image operates as a threshold: "When the soul wants to experience something," Banisadr notes, "it throws out an image in front of it and then steps into it." Images are not data but living carriers of possibility—symbolic seeds that migrate across time and cultures, echoing the thinking of art historian Aby Warburg and Banisadr's own rhizomatic research practice.

The exhibition's sculptural works extend these concerns into

three dimensions. Cast in bronze from maquettes originally formed from clay, bark, branches, and plaster, figures such as *Gilgamesh*, *Cyclopes*, *Animus*, *Anima*, and *The Alchemist* appear at once ancient and futuristic—talismanic protectors for an unstable age. *Gilgamesh* draws from Banisadr's sustained engagement with the ancient epic poem, while *Cyclopes* collapses Homeric myth with science fiction, recalling both Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the unblinking eye of HAL, an emblem of artificial intelligence and technological omniscience. *Animus* and *Anima* reference Carl Jung's archetypal binaries, proposing psychic duality not as opposition but as coexistence.

In *The Alchemist*, vulnerability itself becomes transformative: a figure mid-metamorphosis, surrendering to elemental forces as parts of the body turn to gold. Across all media, Banisadr's works function as mnemonic devices—pricks to collective memory—reminding viewers of a shared humanity rooted in earth, ritual, and imagination, even as contemporary life drifts toward abstraction and simulation.

The exhibition ultimately proposes transformation not as rupture, but as continuity: an ongoing dialogue between myth and technology, nature and culture, darkness and illumination—where visual chaos may signal, paradoxically, a cosmic order yet to come.

Ali Banisadr lived with his family in Tehran, Iran until the age of 12. Growing up during the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, Banisadr experienced sounds and sights (such as a bomb crater in his schoolyard) that had a lasting impact on his sensory foundations—events that had particular resonance on his aesthetic formation, given his experience of synesthesia, in which he perceives visual forms as sounds, and vice-versa. Although Banisadr studied psychology in college as a means of better understanding his own sensory experience, he later became involved in the Bay Area graffiti scene before attending art school in New York, receiving his BFA from the School of Visual Arts in 2005, and his MFA from the New York Academy of Art in 2007.

In Banisadr's highly-detailed paintings, the artist coaxes characters and hybrid figures out of atmospheres of color and brushwork. Though his paintings appear from afar like intricate abstractions, closer inspection reveals that each painting is a world unto itself, rich with narrative suggestion and mysterious imagery. Mythic birds, menacing creatures, and costumed beings all float to the surface of the painting from within a vortex of marks, lines, shapes, and patterns. Appearing sometimes like sweeping landscapes and other times like stage sets, Banisadr's painted scenes imagine unique realms, while also drawing on references ranging from ancient to futuristic. For Banisadr, each of his paintings is a world unto itself that weaves together history, mythology, autobiographical narratives, sonic memories, and global events, while offering the artist's own reflections on the human condition.

A voracious reader and student of art history, Banisadr draws inspiration from artistic predecessors across multiple genres and time periods, stretching from Mesopotamian antiquities, to Persian miniatures, to alchemical, magical, and surreal imagery in 16th and 17th-century European painting, to the 20th-century movements of surrealism and abstract expressionism. Key touch points include the artists Hieronymus Bosch, Leonora Carrington, Francisco Goya, Utagawa Hiroshige, Lee Krasner, Tintoretto, and Diego Velázquez, whose varied influences can be seen in Banisadr's aerial perspectives, expressive strokes, rich tonal palettes, dream-like sequences, and dramatic atmospheric moods his paintings evoke. At the same time, Banisadr's paintings bear the traces of contemporary cultural references ranging from the Adventures of Tin Tin to the early-90s graffiti scene of the Bay Area. Having grown up in the tumultuous conditions of war and revolution, his paintings are above all solemn ruminations on current events and the disjunctive conditions—both hopeful and dystopian—that can punctuate modern life.



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