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Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

AYK: How has your work evolved here in New York?

AB: My earlier work was more fragmented. The figures were much smaller, but as time has gone by they've become more whole and more sure of themselves.

AYK: How do you begin a painting. What is your process?

AB: It's very abstract, a form of synaesthesia. There's usually a sound I hear from the painting that guides me through it, showing me where to go and then, when to stop.

AYK: Do your works have political content?

AB: I don't impose politics into anything, it's just my personal response to what's going on. Like I can look at Picasso and see his reaction to Guernica, for example.

AYK: Will things worsen in the US?

AB: With the new president, it's impossible to know what will happen tomorrow.

AYK: Should people appraise your art in terms of your background?

AB: I'm Iranian, but I've lived in the US almost 30 years. I like the term 'global citizen' and would like my work to be viewed in a global way rather than just narrowed down to either American or Iranian.



Photography by Ali Y. Khadra. © Canvas

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ali banisadr
#aboutamerica





ali banisadr

Born in 1976 in Tehran, Iran. Lives and works in New York

I see your book collection on painters from different eras, styles and techniques, Mughal miniatures etc. Are these sources of inspiration?

Maybe subconsciously, but when I'm painting I'm not thinking about them. When I begin a work it's very abstract. There's usually a sound that I hear from the painting that guides me through it. It's more about the composition and the flow of energy. Slowly, everything comes together and, as I'm working on it, this includes of course, art historical knowledge, current events and my own personal history. I never try to force anything into the painting or use any direct references, I want it to be organic. It's really about where the painting wants to go. If it wants to take a particular direction, then I communicate with it in that way. The painting dictates where it wants to go, I have to be open to that flow of energy from the painting. Also, I want to create things that never existed before.

How has your work evolved here in New York?

I've been here since 2000 and my earlier work was more fragmented. The figures were much smaller, but as time has gone by they've become ever larger, more whole and more sure of themselves. This has been going on since about 2008. Meanwhile, there are so many different worlds within worlds that you have to deal with at the same time. You need to make sure all the elements are in harmony. Line, composition, brushstroke, direction of energy, they're all really important. You have to think about the overall energy of the painting so it's harmonious. If you lose that, then it all falls apart.

Do your works have a political content?

I'm not sure I can say that, because it all depends on what I'm thinking at the time but of course, my response to certain things and current events is bound to come through. So yes, my works can be political. But I don't try and impose politics onto anything, it's just my personal reaction to what's going on. Like I can look at Picasso and see his reaction to Guernica, for example. It's more about how a particular person feels at a particular moment.

Has the Muslim ban affected you or your family?

I'm an American citizen so it has not had an impact on me personally, but some of my family were directly affected, yes. I have a cousin who's graduating from medical school here and my aunt and uncle were coming from Iran for her graduation but now we're not sure if they can. It's a crazy world.

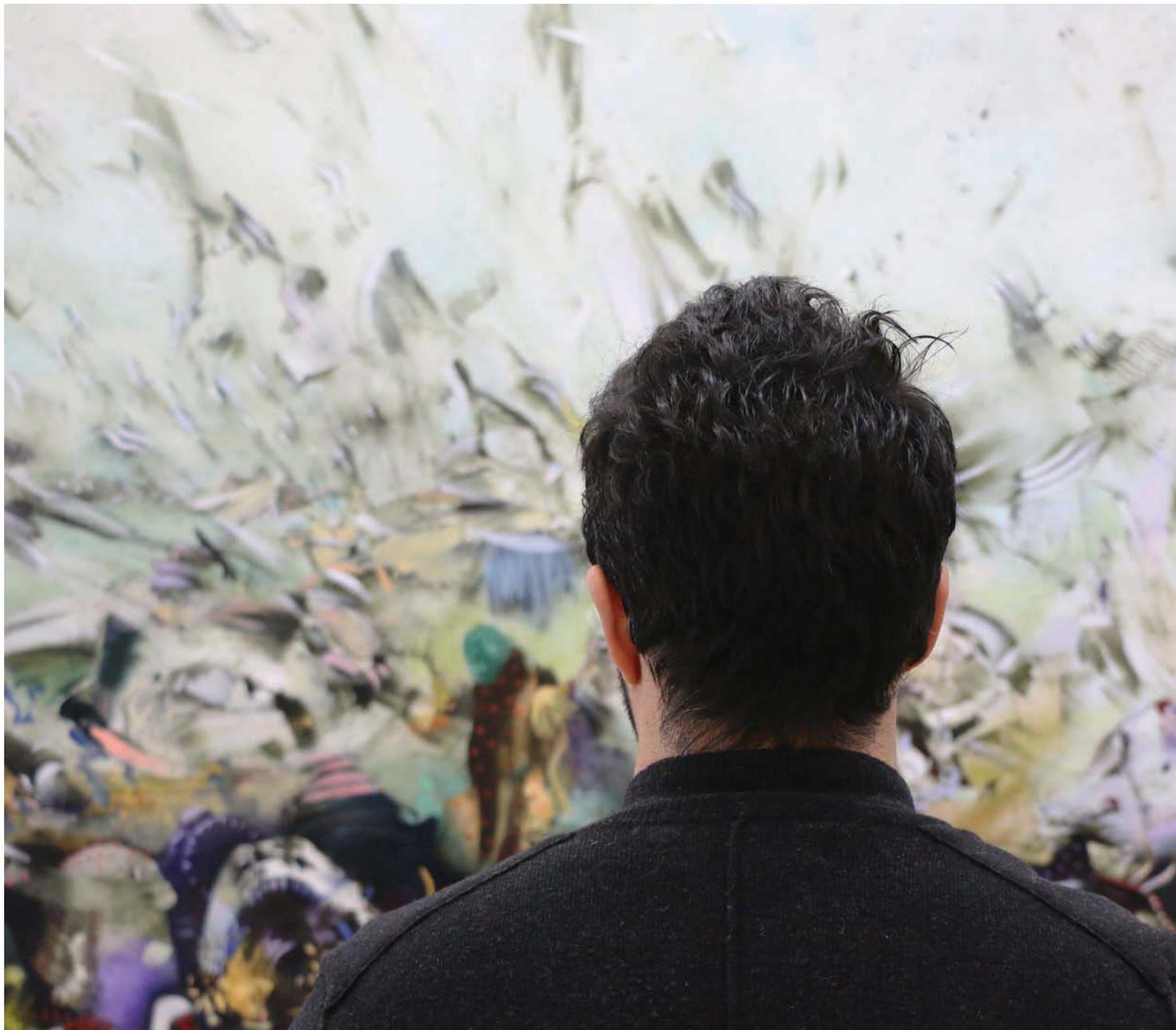
Do you think things will worsen?

With the new president it's impossible to know what will happen tomorrow. Every day you're wondering what's next. It's very un-presidential and un-American. It goes against everything that America is about – somewhere that's supposed to be free and open, a land of immigrants. Everyone here is an immigrant, to ban them just doesn't make sense.

How close are your connections with Iran?

I left in 1998, when I was 12, and haven't been back since. It's definitely a place of vivid memory for me. I'd love to go back and visit all those cities I've never seen. But, it seems like there's never been the right time to go back. I always tell myself, I'll go next year.

I would like my work to be seen in a global way rather than just narrowed down to either American or Iranian.



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Would you ever consider leaving the US?

I'm going to stay here, I'm not going to let somebody get me to move my life, my home and family elsewhere. I'll fight it as much as I can.

Is it important that people understand your work in the context of your background?

That's a tricky question because, like I said, I don't try to force anything into my work, it just subconsciously comes out. My paintings are about everything I'm about. I'm Iranian, my DNA is Iranian, so that's bound to come through. But at the same time, I've lived in the US almost 30 years. I like the term 'global citizen', so I think that I would like my work to be seen in a global way rather than just narrowed down to either American or Iranian. But there are of course certain things you can't really control and people can tell – people see their own backgrounds in the work.

The ink drawings here, they seem very different from your other works.

It was an experiment. Mysterious headshots of seven people, wanted men, seven nations, we don't know who they are. They could be many things. Sometimes I create things that are like seeds. I have to wait a while until I understand what's happening. Once I do, I know it's ready to be shown.

Is there a project in your mind's eye that you haven't embarked on yet?

I guess I've always thought about maybe doing a production with the Metropolitan Opera House. My painting has a lot to do with sound and I'd love to collaborate with a musical theatre. When I start making works, I hear sounds coming from the painting itself, like a form of synaesthesia – it's what allows me to know where to go next. When I put the brush down, there's a sound. When I hear it, I know when to stop, and where to continue. Things can fall or rise, become heavy or light – the top part of a painting might have a rising note for instance, the bottom part, a heavier one. All these different sounds... it's more like notes, different musical notes. It's neither music, nor a song, but every part of a painting that I look at has a certain sound to it. It's kind of hard to explain. I also hear them when I go and look at other paintings, in museums, say. The details give a chiming sound, and that's the way I'm able to create. If there's a chime, I don't have to think about where to put the next brushstroke, because that's the sound that guides me to know where to go.

