

THE HINDU

Sunday, June 30, 1996

Fireworks in a dark sky

THE name Natvar Bhavsar, whose art works are on display once again in New York's art town Soho, may not ring a bell in India except, perhaps, in his homestate of Gujarat where he was a school drawing master but in the art circles of America he is known as an one of a kind colourist who creates abstract designs that shimmer and explode like fireworks on a dark sky.

Many museums across the United States including the prestigious Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and Whitney, all in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts at Philadelphia and Boston, the Wichita Art Museum, and outside the U.S., the Australian National Gallery are displaying his work permanently. The Guggenheim and the John D. Rockefeller Foundations gave him fellowships recognizing his work as trend setting.

Many of the industrial and financial houses in the U.S. including the American Express, A.T. & T., Exxon Company, the NBC television network, Estee Lauder, Mobil Corporation show Bhavsar's eye-catching works either in their board rooms or reception halls, or executive dining places.

Bhavsar's works and techniques have been closely scrutinised by art connoisseurs. While most artists use the brush and wet or oil-based colour, Natvar uses dry pigments. He wets the canvas, usually large in dimension, with a fixative and then sifts the finely granulated pigments to create the colour effect he desires. In the end, he once again uses a second coating of the fixative to firm up what he has created. In a sense, his technique is an improvisation of the *rangoli* art in which he had attained high proficiency in his early days in Gujarat.

While the *rangoli* drawings are usually blown away by wind or washed off by rain, his

self-evolved technique can last forever. His technique is the culmination of an effort which he began in 1962, the year he came to America. He engrossed himself in finding a method by which the *rangoli* or the dry pigment he worked with can be fixed permanently to the canvas. All that he wanted was available here: better quality dry pigment, large canvases and the fixing medium. Other technologies such as those needed by artists were available and New York became his home.

Additionally, he liked Soho where he found a congenial living place, a loft with a floor area of 4,000 square feet. It is both his studio and living quarters. Living in Soho, an industrial area, was prohibited but like all other artists he lived "illegally." But soon when the area became an unofficial artists' colony, the government lifted the ban.

In sharp contrast to crowded Manhattan and its highrise clusters, Soho, in the west side of the city, reminds a visitor more of one of those European towns. Its cobblestone narrow streets has close kinship with downtown Rome and Florence, both art centres known for its figurative paintings and the sculptures of Michaelangelo. It is full of unconventional people and shops and eating houses.

Bhavsar has since improved the loft, natural light filling the expansive space which is conducive to him to produce his usually large-sized works, some as high as 30 ft with requisite width.

He shies away from calling his work his "creations" or "paintings." "For me, it is a dialogue with the elements - meaning colours" he says. He also declines to interpret. Whenever he has to give a name, he chooses Sanskrit words. "Kajal and Kumkum" is an example.

Bhavsar's work however has been widely

reviewed and interpreted. "From birth to death, Indians are surrounded by colour," says Howard Wooden, Director of the Wichita Art Museum in Texas. "Colour is an aspect of everyday life, and it is the most important and obvious inspiration to Bhavsar's works." His museum has acquired several pieces of Bhavsar's works.

"He is a masterful draftsman and was trained in India in an academic tradition. But colour is his thing. Although he has done figurative work and also went through a cubist phase, there has been an increasing de-emphasis on drawing in his work and a corresponding emphasis on colour. If you have to classify him, he is an abstract expressionist but his work is unique. They always remind me of the state of mind just before you awaken from a dream."

In the art circles of the U.S. Natvar Bhavsar is known as a highly individual colourist who creates abstract designs. He shies away from calling his work "creations". To him, it is a "dialogue with colours." R.CHAKRAPANI in New York takes a look at Bhavsar's eye-catching works that are being displayed by several museums across the U.S.

The Soho area abounds in hundreds of art galleries run with private funds donated by rich and famous Americans and foundations. Bhavsar's works have been displayed previously at the Max Hutchinson Gallery sponsored by Australia. Interestingly, his current showing is being held for the first time at the BosePacia Modern, a newly created outfit financed by a group of resident Indians interested in art.

The Gallery Director of BosePacia Modern, Deepak Talwar said that in the U.S. Indian art is usually associated with miniatures and little was known about the progress achieved by Indians in the area of contemporary art. The exhibition of Natvar Bhavsar's paintings will be followed by a series of exhibitions of paintings of contemporary Indian art. ■

