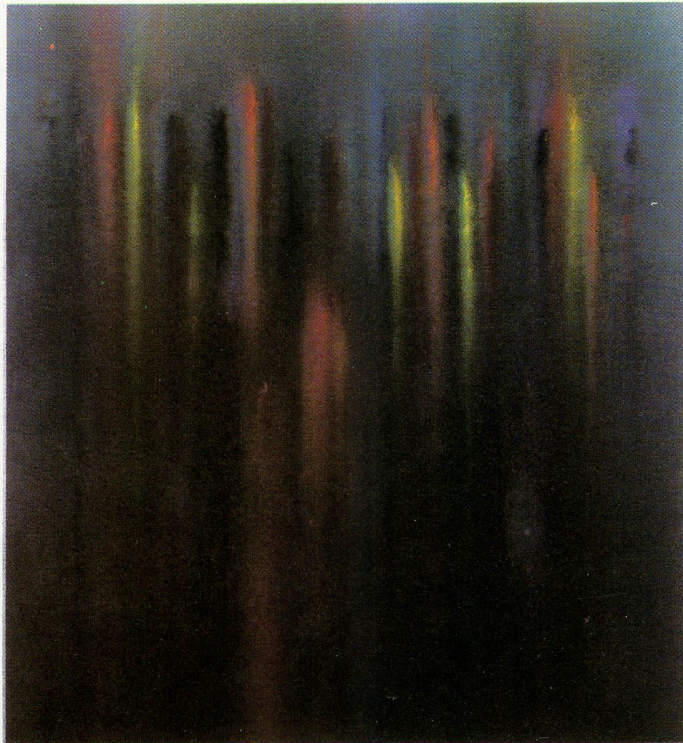


## THE PAINTINGS OF NATVAR BHAVSAR

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Natvar Bhavsar, Marwar III,  
1984. Dry pigment and acrylic on  
paper, 46 x 42". Courtesy Getler/Pall/Saper Gallery.

*No matter what is the nationality of the artist, the spirit of the place is imprinted on his work; on the other hand no matter where the artist paints, his nationality is reflected in his work. Thus it is a fusion with both elements present and apparent.*

— John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*

Such is the fate of Natvar Bhavsar that for the last twenty years his lushly wrought compositions have been recognized for their power and beauty and yet he is still relatively unknown in the art world. When reviewing a roster of rationales for this state of affairs, one cannot explain it simply in terms that he was not the first, or that his work is a manifestation of the work of his contemporaries who have received more critical and economic approbation. While mimicry would seem to be the refuge of those seeking to establish themselves within the context of the mainstream, this attitude ignores the fact that an individual's native traditions may modify the syntax of the dominant vocabulary, and that their work may thus energize that context within which it is created.

It seems anomalous for the cultural establishment to admit that one originating outside the context could produce a significant statement in an idiom considered to be peculiar to this time and place. The supreme irony of this stance is highlighted when considering the second-class citizenship borne by the American art establishment up to the Second World War. It is therefore understandable that when the American art establishment was assembled in the mid-1940s and this country was financially and spiritually able to assume the status of being an art center, a well-entrenched chauvinism began to manifest itself. But that very chauvinism contradicted the basic American self-image as a melting pot by reserving the prerogative of a major artistic statement for individuals anointed by the art establishment.

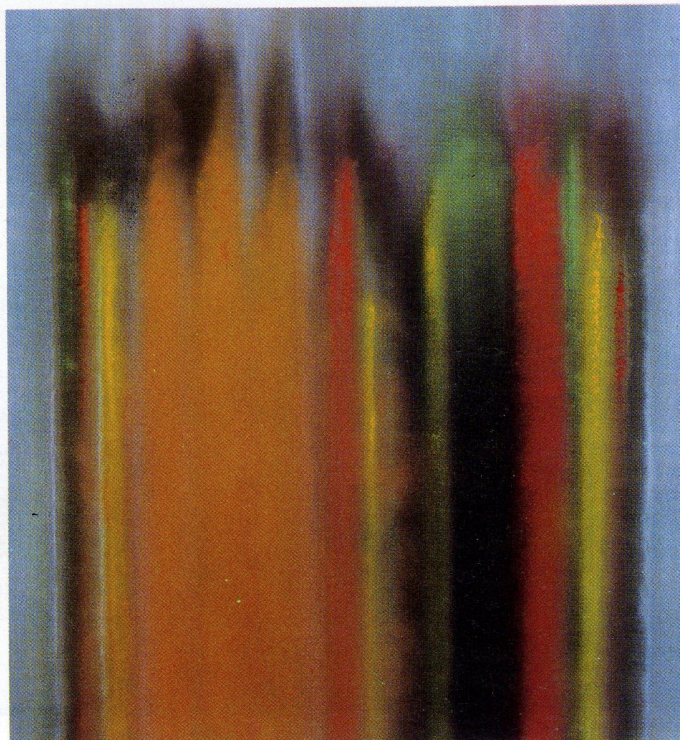
Until recently, art historical and critical analysis simply denied or disparaged any autobiographical elements. The formalistic focus on

the selfhood of the art works rendered issues of gender and ethnicity, time and place, age and state of mind irrelevant. This situation handicapped women and "minority" artists in particular who were considered incapable of significant "mainstream" artistic statements. A pervasive penchant to generalize about formal characteristics had two pitfalls: (1) it overlooked a more individualistic analysis of works of art, which would make evident the syntactical nuances of individual interpretations of a more generalized style such as color-field painting; (2) it participated, however deliberately or inadvertently, in setting the priorities within an increasingly competitive art market.

There are significant distinctions in Natvar Bhavsar's approach to space and in the meaning that color has for him and his work that are predicated by his cultural heritage; to discern those nuances, one must delve deeper than a literal surface impression. A beginning point would be a recognition of the differences in linguistic comprehension of the word "color." If for many of his contemporaries, "color" is a physical entity, more or less wedded to ingrained empirical associations and to the dilemma of how a three-dimensional world occurs on a two-dimensional surface, then for Bhavsar, color is emotional and a metaphysical force on its own. This is demonstrated by the fact that in India color is utilized in its substantial forms; for example *sinud*, a lead oxide, *kumkum*, a plant-derived red (not unlike a cadmium red), and *gluak*, a pink-red, also derived directly from nature, are colors ritually applied to statues during festivals. Not merely meant as decoration, these colors have a catalytic presence in this context.

The exuberant and joyous nature of Hindu ritual appeals more to an aesthetic and visual experience rather than being orchestrated to effect a common theological orthodoxy. This interpretation would necessarily make the essence of colors in Bhavsar's work distinct from that of Rothko, who would write that he searched for the "timeless" and the "tragic" in his work. If Rothko's colors were predicated to evoke or describe such exultant qualities, then Bhavsar's also





Natvar Bhavsar, Marwar VII,  
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evoked the particular qualities he wishes to express. Bhavsar notes the profound effect that the first look at a Rothko and a Gorky had on him when he saw them on exhibition in India in the late 1950s. He can still vividly describe the color of the works: the lemon yellows and purity of color of the Gorky, and the brooding maroon color of the Rothko. He observes that as an academically trained artist, his encounter with these works effectively served as a catalyst, allowing him to express himself from his own psyche which is always mired in his early life in India. These works revealed a way in which he could connect with his own emotional experiences, and translate them pictorially in a manner that went beyond tepid modernism derived from Cubism and the overwhelming traditional visual heritage of India.

Bhavsar recognizes that the response to his colors will be as individual and ethnocentric as the individual viewer, and that the observer will inevitably impose a set of criteria from his own experience. If Bhavsar himself provided an illumination about the associative meanings attached to his work, he might use the analogy of music (which makes sense within the context of Hindu cosmology and festivity).

When I first became aware of Bhavsar's work some eight years ago, I was particularly struck by the huge canvases that commanded the space of the gallery. They were a marvel of color-field expression; their richly overlaid aspects called to mind that peculiar conjunction of "stained" painting—e.g., the "veils" of Morris Louis, the chromatic fields of Barnett Newman, and the mottled surfaces of Larry Poons' work of the 1970s. The techniques that Bhavsar utilizes to achieve his coloristic surfaces have a basis in Indian tradition: drawings in dry pigment that are executed for special Hindu festivals. He applies dry powdered pigment into a moist gel medium which adheres the layers of colors to the surface of the canvas. The method is remarkably reminiscent of the Southwest Native American sand painting that is often used to contextualize Pollock's habit of painting on the floor. On the other hand, it is yet another solution to the desire of abstract painters to get away from the brush. Pol-

lock's drip method, a parallel to surrealist automatism, provided the paradigm. As Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler thinned their paint and poured it onto the surface of the canvas, so Clyfford Still troweled, Dan Christensen sprayed, and so forth. These are all techniques designed to allow the painter a greater opportunity to incorporate elements of chance accident and otherwise uncontrolled events into the act of painting.

As Bhavsar notes, his style has had a consistent development and a consistent stylistic imperative. But, as in dance, he is constantly refining and changing the choreography of his art. The vertical orientation of the paint application evokes attendant imagery. It may be as sentimentally clichéd as a field of grass waving in the wind, or the strong directional pulls, capped with bursts of color, call to mind fireworks or distant lights on a shore. The verticality also relates to Bhavsar's preoccupation with mountains, trees, and temples—tall, upright forms that contrast with the flatness of his native horizon. This impetus upward, if you will, is obviously a metaphor for growth, as well as a reaching for man's higher component, his head. In a loftier sense, it is the impulse, the aspiration toward the godhead.

There have been subtle changes in the choreography. Recent work shows a greater tendency to a more limited palette within each work, with a predominance of color one may dub Bhavsar red. The compositions also recede from the edge of the canvas so that there seems to be a framing element within the paintings. Bhavsar has said that he is consistently involved with his own formal concerns because he has found a pictorial challenge, and he is still evolving a completeness of expression within that framework. The feeling of timelessness makes the more immediate concerns of fad and stylistic change immaterial; in the studio he searches for the infinite nuances of his painting. Like the guises of Krishna, these reveal themselves in various scales and material which he alternates into order, drawing on the variety of feelings that each provides so that his approach to every situation—be it pastel, acrylic, canvas, or paper—remains as fresh and energized as the last work.