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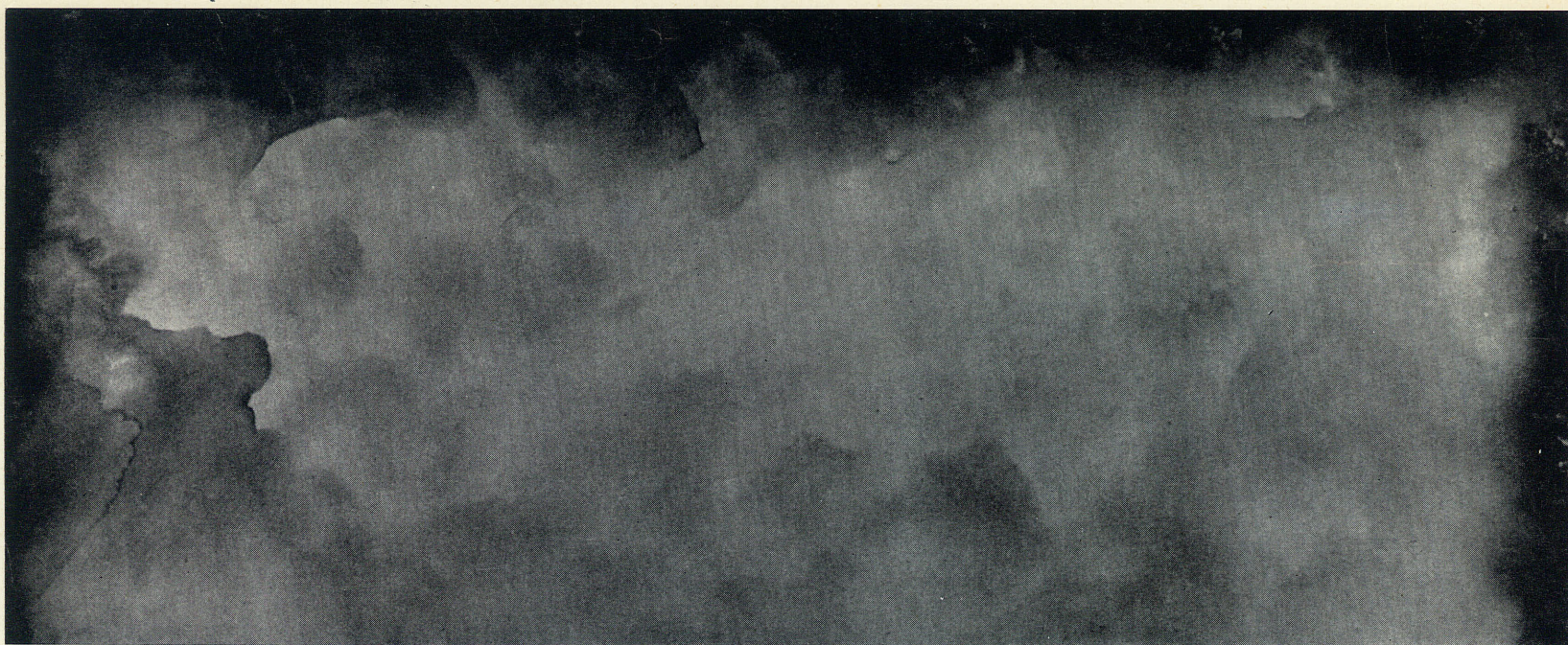
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*N-Jee*, 1972. 44" × 108" (All illustrations by courtesy of the Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York)

## NATVAR BHAVSAR: THE PURPOSE OF LOOKING

CARTER RATCLIFF

The cloudy shimmer, the glowing, flickering light in Natvar Bhavsar's recent paintings give them the look of sky over an unimaginably beautiful landscape. This allusion presents itself with powerful sensuousness, but it seems secondary to something else of more immediate and fundamental concern. To describe this prior concern requires one to start with the notion of sensuousness in painting. Pigment and canvas are material; sensuousness—or any other quality tinged, like it, with emotion—must be projected onto these material things by the viewer. To say that a painting is sensuous, alive, rich (or gloomy, foreboding, secretive) is to speak metaphorically; it is to step from one's first experience into the mode of secondary, derived experience. Bhavsar's work offers materiality itself as a primary experience. His art is in giving it value without relying on metaphorical overlays and allusions. He has said that he doesn't object to these inevitable literary readings—it's just that they are not, initially or finally, the point of his works.

In contrast to Bhavsar's painting is, for example, geometrical painting. The latter is of course material, but it offers linearity and uninflectedness, not materiality, to primary experience. Its derived, metaphorical qualities (its equivalents to sensuousness) are balance, clarity and so on—qualities leading to metaphorical stasis, and blocking the way back to primary qualities. A characteristic of the sensuousness in Bhavsar's work is its close connection to primary materiality: the derived leads constantly back to the underived.

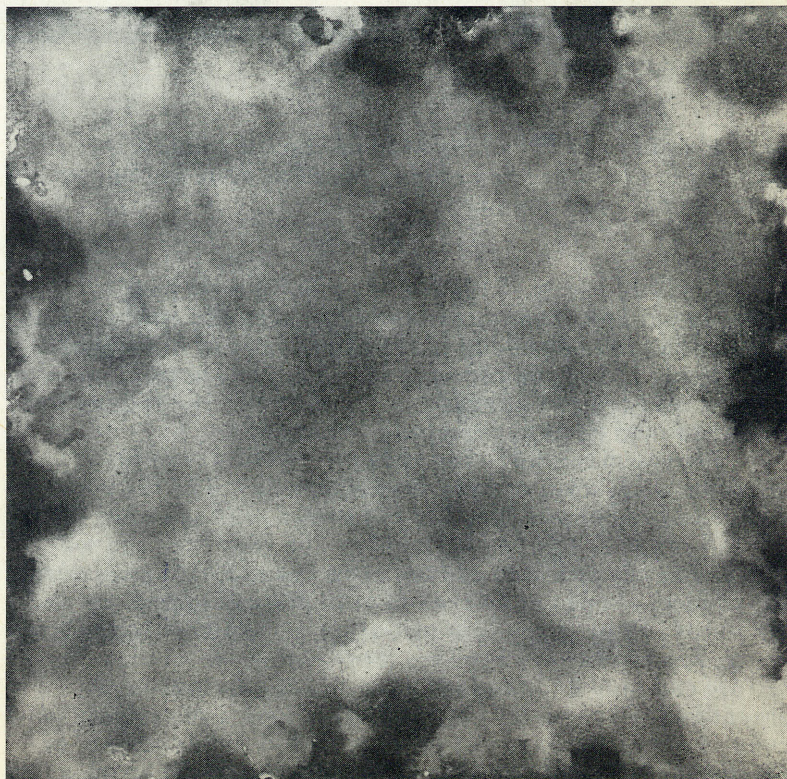
There are two traps for this critique of the materiality of Bhavsar's painting: the values of "object art" and of "process art". The attempt, as in minimalism, to present an unadorned, literal object occupying "real" space is not as closely connected to materiality as is often supposed; in fact, it is a rejection of the material in favor of certain metaphorical qualities. Literalness, for minimal object art, is highly charged with the projected emotions of esthetic and moral prescriptions. The same is true of "realness", a quality that can only be read into a work; it is a suppressed metaphor intended to block explicit metaphor (especially anthropomorphizing and the "balance" of traditional composition). The "pure" materiality of object art is likewise a derived quality; it is employed to obscure the specific materials of the works onto which it is projected. This puts it far from the direct, underived materiality of Bhavsar's paintings: the standard concerns of object art are of no value in looking at his work.

Bhavsar's disposition of materials—his scattering pigment over the surface—is a self-evident process, but this doesn't connect him to process art. As with object art, process art turns clarity, "realness" and literalness into metaphorical qualities. This allows the process to be on occasion obscure, if only the look of clarity—and the sense that one is receiving "direct

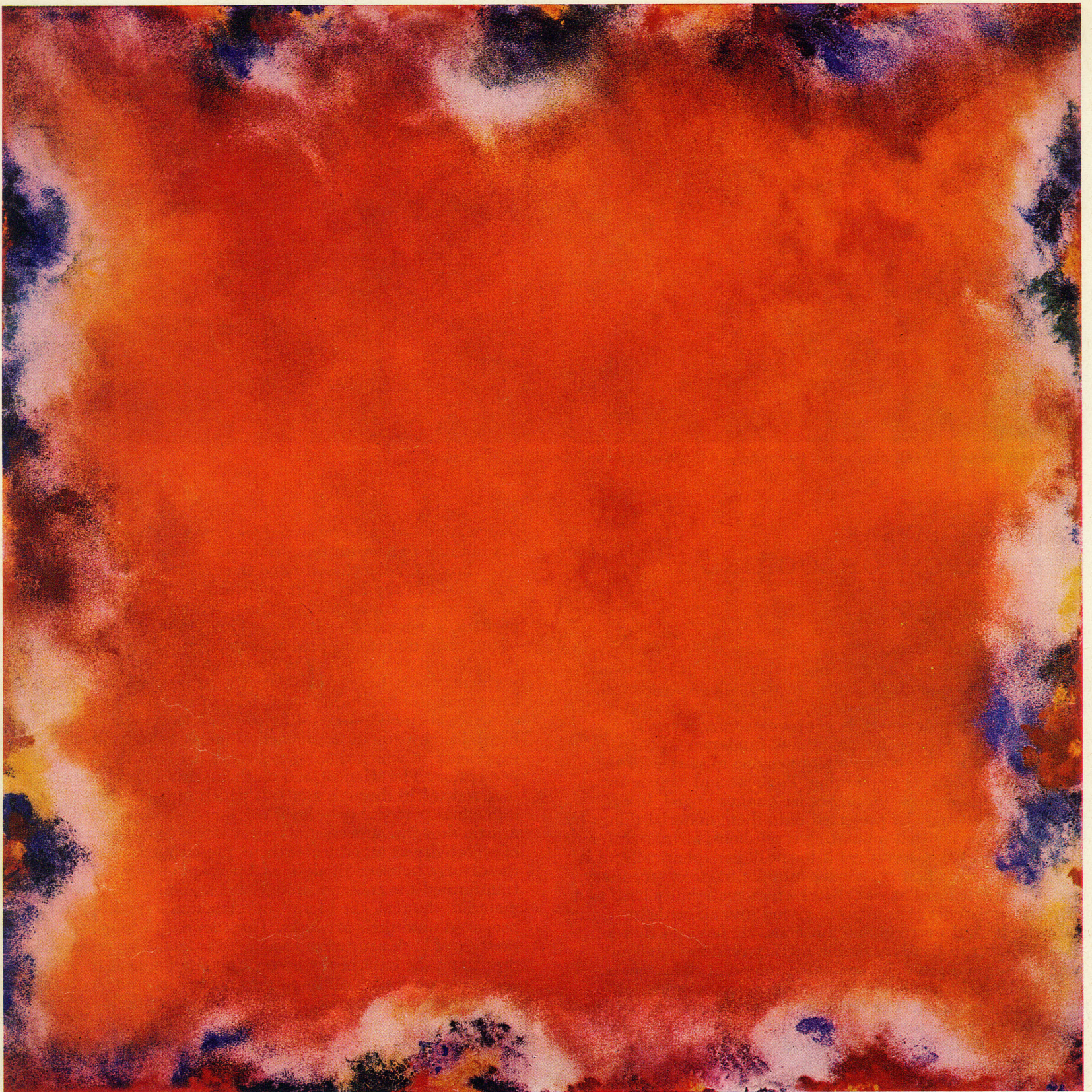
information"—can be projected onto the work. Bhavsar's process has nothing to do with these elaborate, involuted derivations.

Process, "objecthood" and materiality, as generally understood in the New York art world of the last decade or so, are metaphors whose workings lean heavily on the definitions of math, science and technology. One projects them onto works of minimal, object and process art with the help of styles of thought and feeling which originate outside art in mathematically based disciplines. In other words, materiality, literalness and "realness"—which seem so free from the tinge of personal emotion—could not become emotional qualities to be projected without the models of non-artistic styles of experience in which there is a divorce between thought and perception. The scientist and mathematician approach the material world through methods which suppress their individual perceptions—this is the source of objectivity in non-artistic thought. Process and object artists have taken this style of objectivity as an ethical-esthetic prescription: maintaining the divorce between thought and perception they have transformed the contents of objective scientific thought (the material, the real, the literal) into emotional qualities to be projected onto their artworks. They hope thus to gain the prestige of both artistic and scientific values. The point of describing the basis of these very dubious claims is to provide Bhavsar's work with an important part of its context: he avoids all separation of thought, emotion and perception; and he does

*S-Veta*, 1972. 96" × 96"







*R-Dhya*, 1972. 96" × 96"

so in a setting where such separations have a great, if superficial, prestige—even among painters, even among the most “lyrical” and painterly.

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The materiality of Bhavsar’s works owes nothing to definitions drawn from mathematical or scientific sources. It is a materiality of color—and it is revealed only to individual perception; it can’t be conceptualized. Its values are those of variety, subtlety and intensity; it has the capacity to draw out, to expand and deepen, perceptual experience.

Bhavsar has a full—and delicate—control over his pigments as he scatters them. Sometimes they dust the surface with color, sometimes they leave it strewn with granules. There is a full range of appearance between the two—one can see dust gathering itself into discrete points as a color moves over the surface; elsewhere a streak of granules will spread out and disappear. These gradations of texture are matched and played off against contrasts of hue. It’s more correct to say that texture can only be perceived as contrasts, mixtures and gradations of hue, so fully is materiality here a materiality of color. An area that appears mysterious and indeterminate at the distance of one’s first glance resolves, as one approaches,

into sharply focused textural complexities amazingly varied in color. Stepping back again, the ambiguities of hue and saturation—and value: it’s sometimes difficult to say whether an area is light or dark—seem unresolvable. Returning to the surface, one sees the specific qualities first perceived there gain in sharpness from one’s increased sense of the subtleties they present at a distance. And yet I don’t mean that one “solves” Bhavsar’s paintings by looking at them closely: perception remains inexplicable, a primary foundation upon which explanations of other things can be built; works, such as Bhavsar’s paintings, which engage perception at this primary level join it there, out of reach of definitions and explanations. The experience of these paintings can only be described, not accounted for—it can, in fact, only be hinted at.

Just as the flow of textured color over the surface is unified in its variety, so are one’s close and distant viewings. There are no gaps in experience, and no “optimum viewing point” with these works; perception is fully engaged from every distance. It’s important to remember that perception is limited, made superficial or even suppressed when it cannot “negate” itself by changing intentionally from moment to moment. Perception takes place in time; it is meaningful insofar as it can draw meaning from the variations presented

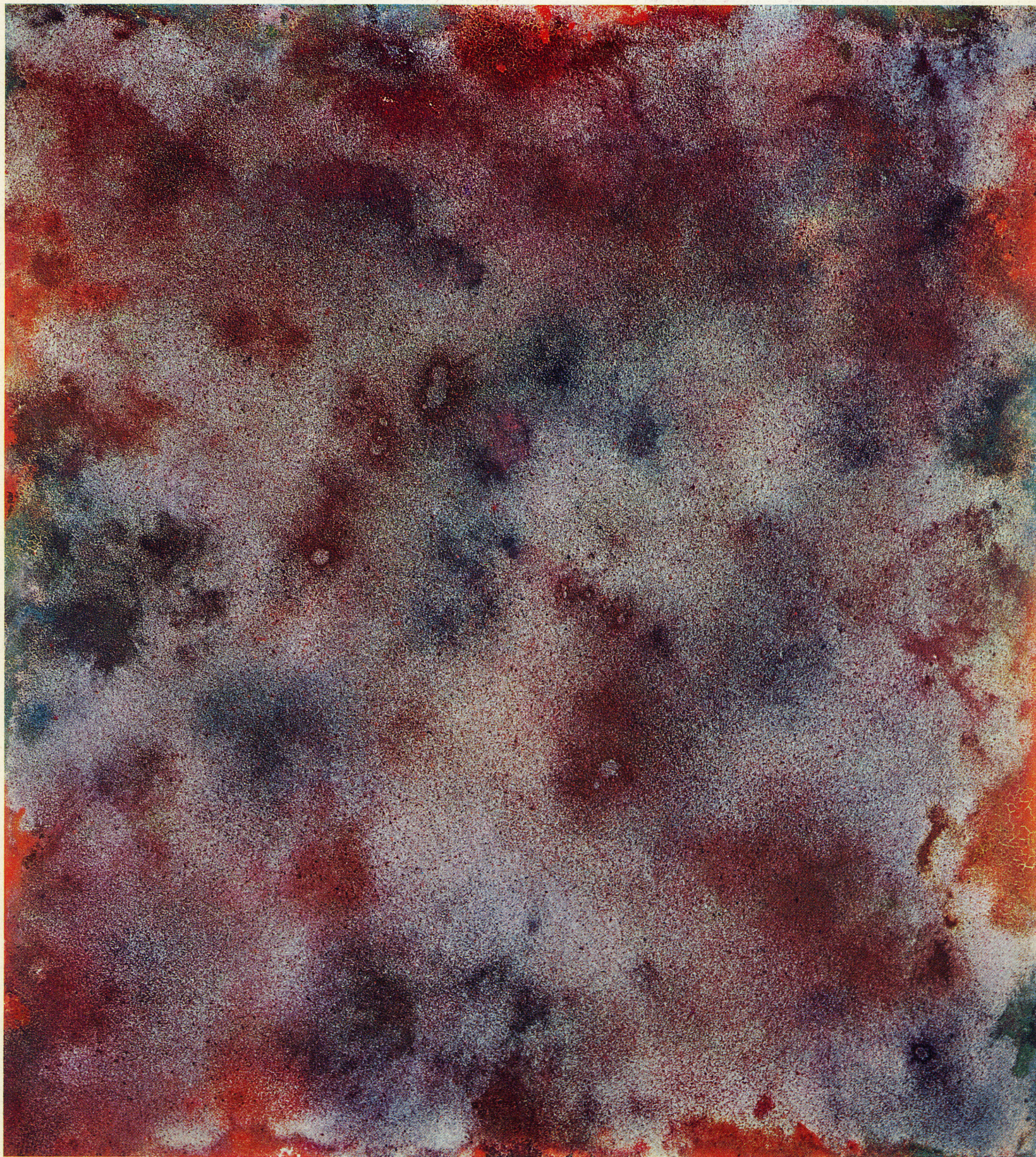


by the flow of time. If time is "suspended" (as in the viewing of artworks which require one to assume a single distance or point of view, physical or otherwise) then meaning disappears (save hypostasized, idealist meaning) because perception is deprived of its continuity; it is broken into discrete, artificial bits. (It becomes perception as it is defined by scientific investigators, communication theorists and rationalist philosophy. These disciplines all share an idealizing view of perception; it's not surprising, therefore, that object and process art, with its heavy reliance on scientific definition, is thoroughly idealist at base.)

In Bhavsar's recent paintings, streaks of bright color at the edge of the canvas enclose a large central area usually darker and less varied. These configurations offer endless subtleties. The edges can be seen to fill the center by a sudden halt to their variations, which somehow precipitates a darkening able to flood the center and fill it: colors at the edge

present themselves intensely, so it "follows" that they darken and spread as they flow towards the center. Or one can begin with the central darkness, and grant a logic to the sudden burst of coloristic activity as the edge is neared. But these are metaphorical, even anthropomorphic, readings; they draw on prepared images of a dark interior void and a peripheral reaching for the light. As I said earlier, Bhavsar doesn't object to these projections but they are not the point of his work. They provide it with emotional as well as perceptual meaning, but since perception is primary and projected emotion secondary (that is, derived), a gap in the experience of his painting is created as soon as one accepts them. One would like to close this gap; one would like to find an emotional meaning to share the primary level occupied by perception. There is no vocabulary for discussing emotion of this kind—all our theories of sympathy, empathy, and expression limit themselves to projected emotion, but I think that some hints of

*V-Nra*, 1972. 80" × 72"





the nature of primary, unprojected emotion can be found in the discussion of the perception engaged by Bhavsar's painting.

If perception is not an activity to be defined as a succession of discrete bits, then what is it?—more specifically, what is it for? Its uses in ordinary experience can be listed, but such a list wouldn't answer the question, especially since perception continues even when it isn't being employed for some purpose beyond itself—to perform a task or gather information. Though it can't be proven, I think it is intuitively obvious that at its primary level perception is its own purpose. I don't mean to advance a theory of perception for perception's sake. That would require perception to be suspended from time in an idealized circularity which would exclude most of experience—especially its affective, emotional aspects. But this exclusion (performed by so much modernist art) contains a clue. If we are to distinguish between perception as its own purpose and perception for perception's sake, it will have to be on the grounds of emotional value. The latter is an idealism, impersonal and thus emptied of lived emotion; the former is an aspect of personal, lived, felt experience. Perception as its own purpose can thus be said to be motivated by the primary emotions which sustain the individual in his own existence; purpose here is to enter the durational world and engage it. At this level, neither perception nor emotion can be defined in terms of a discrete purpose: they belong to the "purpose" of individual being. These hints get closer to the point if they are recast: perception as its own purpose is not motivated by primary emotion so much as it is *an emotion of its own*; "purpose" must be understood as the willingness of perception (so described) to engage the world, especially such complex, endlessly subtle portions of it as Bhavsar's paintings. The emotion one feels in looking at them is not a derived, disassociated, discrete projection of a metaphorical nature: it is primary; it is an aspect of one's looking—or it is the looking itself.

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Bhavsar was born in Gothava (Gujarat, India) in 1934. He holds Indian diplomas in art and literature; he painted and taught painting in India until 1962, when he came to the United States. Taking a degree at the School of Fine Arts, the University of Pennsylvania, he came to New York in 1965. It's interesting to know that in India decorations are made by drawing with colored powder on the ground, and that Bhavsar has made some of these decorations—after all, he continues to work in a similar way, spreading dry pigment on a horizontal canvas (treating it afterward with fixative). This is interesting but not very revealing. For one thing, the Indian decorations employ traditional imagery which has no counterpart in Bhavsar's work; furthermore, in the New York setting, he shares his method as much with Pollock as with the practitioners of Indian decoration—or the sand painters of the Southwest, for that matter. But the comparison to Pollock or his present day followers among painterly abstractionists is likewise unrevealing: the value of Bhavsar's work is in what it offers to individual perception, not in the connections it does or doesn't make with the impersonal histories of technique.

In getting at the special materiality of his painting, I contrasted it to the idealized materiality—in effect, the

"immateriality"—of most object and process art. The same point can be made in contrasting Bhavsar to some of the abstract painters with whom he is sometimes grouped; for "lyrical abstraction" is often little more than a translation of sculptural or theatrical process onto the surface of the canvas. This can't be said of all the younger abstractionists, but among the exceptions are many who employ the categories and traditions of modernist painting to much the same end as object and process artists employ their scientifically-based definitions of material, "realness" and the literal: to abstract their works from the flow of primary perception. Painting which bases itself on an idealized history must deny value to all but a limited succession of historically "valid" works. Bhavsar is a New York painter—his work makes sense as New York painting—but how is that sense to be understood if he relies no more on Pollock and the traditions derived from him than on Indian tradition?

New York painting has been obsessed with the surface for the past two decades. The terms of the obsession are opticality, tactility, illusionary depth, literalness and so on. Bhavsar's paintings can be discussed in those terms, but the results are not very satisfactory. Sharp contrasts of light and dark don't initiate the spatial illusions in his paintings that must occur if formalist theories of color painting are to be applied with any coherence; and close-valued balance, where it appears, doesn't produce the formalist illusion of "optical space". The materiality of Bhavsar's colors needn't rely on illusion—or the blocking of it—in order to appear flat; the surface is obviously flat. But this isn't very important, and flatness gives way in a close look to minute variations in texture. The "lyrical" rejection of formalist color painting allows a full range of spatial illusion; the surface becomes a record of a wide-open technique or a toned-down version of the abstract expressionist personality. All this is beside the point of Bhavsar's art. His technique is not a focus of idealized concerns. He does not imprint the surface with lyrical configurations, nor does he give much importance to illusions of depth—both require meanings to be projected onto the work, and we've seen that the value of Bhavsar's paintings is prior to such projections.

He makes the surface the locale for the complex materiality of his color, and it partakes of that materiality. It reveals itself fully, without drawing on any of modernism's prepared notion of the surface. Bhavsar's freedom from the idealist (even occult) values of formalism, of anti- and post-formalism makes it impossible to align him with any of these segments of the New York art world. And yet his important development has taken place there; the meaning of his art originates there. This suggests his independence, and also an important shift in the conditions for art in New York and the United States. With the idealist foundations of all the varieties of modernism growing weaker and weaker with each new season, art of value must find its footing outside impersonally defined movements. Bhavsar's position is solid and entirely his own. From it he creates works that—uniquely and extraordinarily—join color to materiality, distance to closeness, the metaphorical to the immediate; they invite an uninterrupted flow of perception, inflecting it so subtly and focusing it so intensely that looking finally becomes its own purpose. His paintings are beautiful and beyond the ordinary definitions of beauty as well.

*P-Ryaa*, 1972. 36" × 97½"

