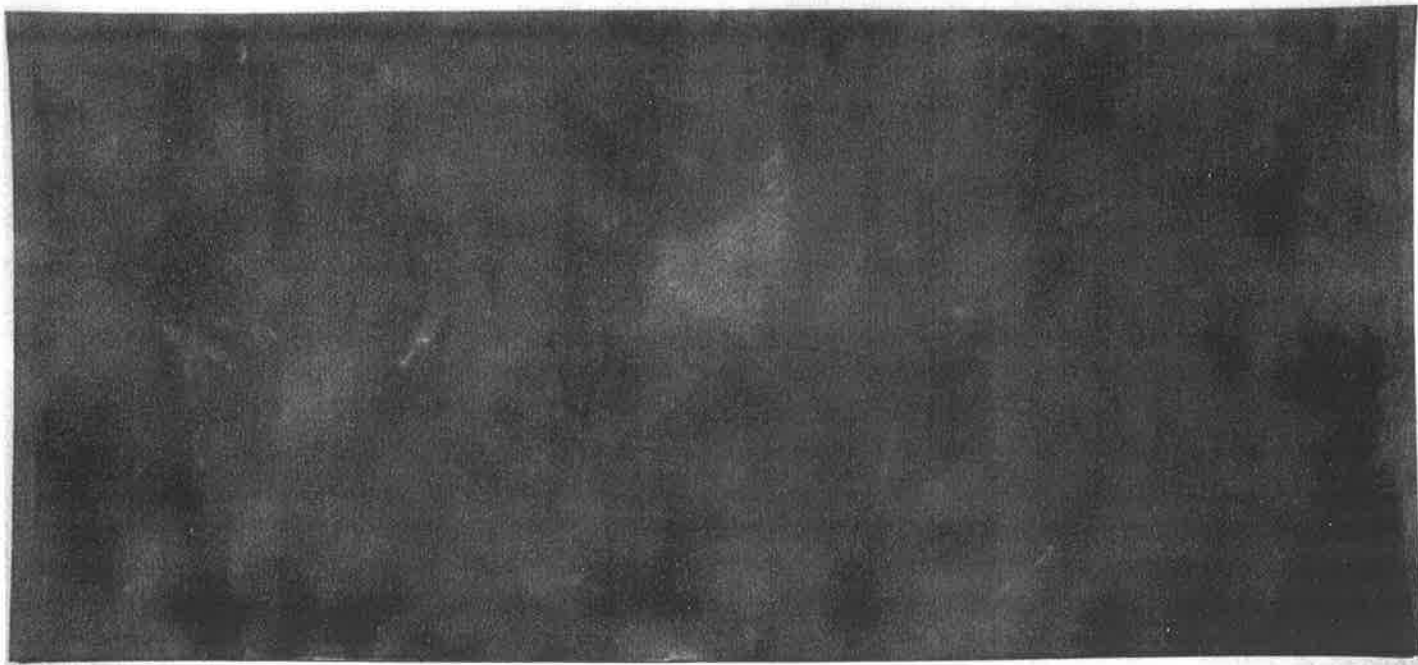




ART INTERNATIONAL



Natvar Bhavsar. *Falguna II*, 1975. Canvas, 11'6" x 21'7". Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York

BY ELWYN LINN

THE PALPABLY IMMATERIAL: NEW WORKS BY NATVAR BHAVSAR

Five large new paintings (they range from 13×23 feet to 12×7 feet), conjured from the void, as it were, by Natvar Bhavsar, with the magical material aid of a Guggenheim Fellowship, should, when publicly seen, remove all the associations that have been made with painters like Jules Olitski. Though Olitski has spoken of a dematerialized colour floating free of support, he has always concerned himself with linear counterpoints, even if his line is simply the contour of a faintly emerging area. Misty, vertical, palpitating lines did once appear in Bhavsar's work and he was thought to have affiliations with Barnett Newman, whose work he admires for the same reasons that he is entranced by Cézanne, Rothko and Monet: the overall inflection.

It is obviously no coincidence that Bhavsar shows with the Max Hutchinson Gallery (his exhibition in the new gallery is scheduled for January), which exhibits such subtle deployers of multiple emphases and strokes and indentations as Milton Resnick and Michelle Stuart. With such artists one can trace intentional and unintentional patterns, "hidden orders of art", even if they dissolve on contemplation. What is remarkable in the new paintings—as thickly layered as ever with strata of thin and thick acrylic—is the absence of (even opposition to) clues to the pattern-making. The colours drift, float, coalesce, merge fleetingly, identify and deny their hues simultaneously; the slightest shift in light brings new rifts and fog-clouds of hues into prominence; a darkening of light can change the atmosphere of paintings like *Vesakh* from a burning resonance to a dark thunderous-skied presence. That is, perhaps, to over-emphasize the drama of such paintings, because all of them are enclosed and quiet; any sense of turbulence precedes the moment when the stormy waters are miraculously stilled. Lest the vast expanses of drifting pale yellows, ephemeral pinks, misted mauves and fading oranges appear too atmospheric, Bhavsar has placed yellowed verticals, their soft edges joining the expansive clouds of colour, at each end of *Prakara*, an Indian term for a specific musical composition. Music, says Bhavsar, is, among other things, a shaping of time, and his paintings are, in a sense, analogous to musical compositions; he

does not present us with an enigmatic score, as do some esoteric calligraphers of the moment, but with a process of giving shape to colour without recourse to coloured shapes; his colours are chameleons of shape and change their shapes according to the company they keep. Just as music depends for its effects upon memory and the recurrence of themes, Bhavsar's paintings, like Monet's water lily paintings, cannot be read at once; the eye, alerted and supported by its memories of other areas (themes and intentions), explores not quite similar expanses.

Bhavsar's paintings involve recollections of perceptions. They are not exercises in how one perceives but are an identification of the perceived and the process of perceiving—and, of course, that could be said, too, of Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* in Venice, or of Picasso's *Guernica* in New York. What is different in Bhavsar is that he gives no signals as to how his works are to be read; it is a directionless reading, like a detail from a Turner sky, and any attempt at relational analysis—that is, any attempt to discover rhyming and echoing areas; shapes that beckon and strive to replace other shapes and forms—which might indicate focal points is quickly and positively frustrated. This does not mean that one is about to be enclosed by a mist masquerading as a vast painting or palpitating wall, because Bhavsar has retained his granular, cracked, blistered and palpable surfaces. Hitherto, in smaller works, his surfaces were secondary pleasures; they have now become tertiary pleasures and, as Bhavsar asserts, inessential. That is true enough; with Hans Hofmann (whose retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington Bhavsar had just seen before I visited his studio), Dubuffet and Tàpies, the material and the colour constantly announce their happy union; the surfaces are demonstrations of how the vehicle carries the colour and the colour lubricates the vehicle. Bhavsar does not want to induce such an appreciation of matter's joining with and enhancing colour; his new paintings are universes in themselves, and on close inspection the surfaces, where the fissures and craters are mainly accidental, are microcosms of the whole.



Bhavsar. *Prakara*, 1976. Dry pigment and acrylic on canvas, 13'×21'

To see the universe in a grain of sand is in accord with the experience that the new paintings afford; if Barnett Newman, despite his asseverations that his paintings were symbols of the emotions, was made to fit into the minimal sixties, Bhavsar can no longer be connected with the minimal expanses nor with derivations from gestural abstract expressionism. The largest painting, *Maalhar* (156"×272"), which is much less diaphonous than the

others though by no means announcing that it is pure surface, identifies another distinctive feature of Bhavsar's work: the intangibility and unanchored shapes deceive one, for the paintings are (for want of a better word amid such indefinables) monolithic in their feeling. "Maalhar" is a term for a musical composition derived from a stormy event; the world is dissolved in dark blue-
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Maalhar II, 1976. Dry pigment and acrylic on canvas, 13'×22'8". All photographs by L. Lessin, by courtesy of the Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York



Indeed, I would much rather have the frank artifice of this passage on the Villa Pia:

The ground floor consists of an open loggia of three arches on columns, forming a kind of atrium curiously faced with an elaborate mosaic-work of tiny round pebbles, stained in various colours and set in arabesques . . .

Mrs. Wharton is at her best when she sets out not only with information but conviction, as in her determination to place the post-Palladian villas of the Veneto clearly within her perspective of Italian garden art. There she has leant heavily upon Jacob Burckhardt, Gustav Ebe and Cornelius Gurlitt, for: "It is only in Germany that Italian architecture from Palladio to Juvara has received careful and sympathetic study". She wrote with real feeling that:

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green clouds and rain, and the painting is like a Monet seen at dusk, with a sharp flicker of pink and orange here and there, but it is Monet become metaphysical. Impossible and even blasphemous as that may sound, Bhavsar has achieved it with an almost nonchalant authority. As he said in an interview with Christopher Andreae (*The Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 24, 1970): "People who believe in metaphysics and all that, they have the same kind of concern—that they are not pleased with whatever is around. That's why I object to this object-orientated kind of philosophy. There's something beyond objects." Hence, Bhavsar has taken advantage of the huge formats, to lessen and render almost

atmosphere of the book is assisted by a curious amalgam of photographs and watercolours, some of the photographs hovering between the two arts; and both, especially in the longer vistas, develop a sense of secular mystery. This quality becomes, in the colour reproductions of the paintings, a sensuous and almost erotic one, which is pointed up by the nude boy lounging by the pool of the Villa d'Este. In fact, Mr. Maxfield Parrish's illustrations seem to be a perfect complement to Mrs. Wharton's narrative.

The reissuing of this early recording is welcome not least because it shows how Mrs. Wharton's view of the fusion between Italian architecture and landscape has influenced more recent guides. The *Zwischenraum* between architecture and landscape, whether that be an open landscape or an urban one, holds so many important clues for the perceptive designer. One cannot ask where the magic has gone without confessing ignorance of the pointers given by Mrs. Wharton.

negative that painterly surface that has come to preoccupy painters like Poons, Olitski, Christensen and Wofford; Bhavsar has a kinship (albeit faint) with Jake Berthot and Paul Rotterdam: the message is not encapsulated in the covering surface.

My general message is that Natvar Bhavsar, without bombast and illusions of grandeur, has resurrected the Sublime. Currently at the Museum of Modern Art, "The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, 1800–1950", Pollock's *The Deep*, and cleft cliffs of paint by Still, restate the Sublime as turmoil and Gothic peril, respectively; but Bhavsar recasts it as something akin to Freud's "oceanic feeling", solacing but only momentarily so.

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