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## Twenty Years of Works on Paper

# NATVAR BHAVSAR

Essay and Catalogue  
by  
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### Natvar Bhavsar: Encounter With Color

Natvar Bhavsar is an active member of the New York school of colorists, and indeed one of the most innovative colorists in the world of American contemporary painting. All of his works executed during the past 20 years or so are entirely non-objective and he has frequently been classified by art critics as a lyrical abstractionist. Certainly in terms of the delicate poetic qualities so readily apparent in his paintings, that label is to some extent justified. On the other hand, however, the connotation of the term so often dilutes dignity and seriousness of purpose and when applied so broadly sometimes evokes metaphoric references which are totally beyond the conscious intention of Bhavsar himself. Yet there is no question that to the most casual observer a mood that is visually satisfying and tranquil is created by his works. Their commanding presence, both in terms of stylistic technique and color usage, bring delight to every viewer but also raise questions of interest about the artist, his development and his objectives.

Bhavsar's cultural background and training are especially interesting. He was born in 1934 in Gothava, Gujarat, India where he attended high school, and it was while he was a high school student that he turned to art as a career. When he graduated in 1953 at the age of 18 years he immediately became a full-time art teacher. However, at the same time, he undertook advanced study in art and in 1958 and 1959 received diplomas from Bombay State Higher Arts Schools and in 1960 was awarded the diploma in Liberal Arts and English Literature from Gujarat University.

In 1962, Bhavsar settled in the United States and for three years attended the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. And it was during those years that he established close contact with many American artists such as Robert Motherwell, Clifford Still, Ad Reinhardt, David Smith, Barnett Newman and others who through a free interchange of ideas with graduate students in classroom seminar discussions exerted much influence on his thinking. After receiving the MFA degree, he was awarded a John D. Rockefeller

Fund Fellowship and settled in New York City where he met Rothko, Noland, Olitski, and others, many of whose works he had come to know before leaving India.

Bhavsar was already 28 years of age when he arrived in the United States and although America furnished a stimulating milieu for much of his development, the roots of his unique style and technique, and certainly of his personal philosophy, clearly go back to his formative years in India. Several of these influences merit special attention. Most significant of all is the strong cultural stamp of his earliest experiences in India. There, both color and music are deeply embedded in everyday Indian life and in one way or another dominate every phase of the human scene from birth to death. Indeed he recalls how color filled visual space as music did auditory space and together constituted the earliest sensations he experienced. Closely related, but entirely independent of any cultural imprint, are certain very personal experiences in his childhood: the presence of open spaces that stretch across the flat Indian prairies in the region where he lived, the vast expanse and serenity of the open sky and the formation and joyously uplifting movement of drifting clouds. In a sense, some of the most characteristic qualities of his works are but translations into paint of such sensations which he consistently experienced at a personal level.

Fundamental to an understanding of Bhavsar's style is the fact that as a young child he learned a traditional folk painting technique known as Rangoli, a kind of festive holiday ritual by which Hindus throw pure powdered color onto the ground to create decorative forms. This is basically the background out of which derives the interesting technique he currently employs in creating his lyrically expressive abstractions.

Another influence which he experienced in India was his exposure to contemporary American art during the early 1950s. In particular, he recalls an American organized exhibition, held at a local museum in his home town, that included works by such artists as Rothko, Gorky and Tamayo. At that time he was 19 or 20 years old and reports having been virtually hypnotized



Figure 1. *Portrait of Karoons*, oil on canvas, 1959

by the pure color forms that he witnessed and for which he was already well prepared by virtue of his own color orientation. Nearly a decade later while studying at the University of Pennsylvania he welcomed the classroom discussions in which he could so ably participate with such artists as Motherwell, Newman and others, as mentioned above.

It is also of much significance that during his years in India, he was taught and worked in an essentially academic tradition. His themes included figurative groups, landscapes and portraits (figure 1), executed in oil, yet all of his paintings were ostensibly an amalgam of both figurative and conceptual colorism executed against a flattened spatial background. The large mural titled *Young Krishna's Triumph over Kalinaag* (figure 2), executed in 1957, illustrates how in his early works he had masterfully emphasized draftsmanship and re-



Figure 2. *Young Krishna's Triumph over Kalinaag*, mural, 1957

mained largely dependent on themes and types rooted in traditional Hindu painting such as the cave temple murals and the refined miniatures that stylistically go back at least to the 7th century A.D. However, within the ensuing few years, the influence of cubist space appeared in works such as *A Village Afternoon* (figure 3), painted in 1959. In both of these paintings, figurative imagery coupled with emphatic attention to color and color relationships are clearly present. Although oil was the medium in which these earlier works were painted, Bhavsar was too deeply caught up in Indian folk traditions to abandon use of dry powdered pigment, and as a result he seriously experimented with painting under the influence of the Rangoli manner.

During the past 25 years, the principal and most apparent development that has occurred in Bhavsar's technique and style amounts largely to an increasing de-emphasis on drawing and a corresponding emphasis on the use of autonomous color with the result that today it is color sensation and color affect which together are the sole subject matter of his work. But this shift goes well beyond the age old quarrel of design versus color, for in essence Bhavsar views painting entirely in holistic terms and emphasizes that although drawing has traditionally been the armature of painting, good painting itself is never simply drawn but rather "...is arrived at by constructing all of the elements together." Moreover, he points out that in assessing works by the masters from Duccio and Vermeer down to Turner and Monet, the actual drawing component itself can never be fully isolated from the totality of the painting, and he concludes that "Painting doesn't have to be figurative or non-figurative. Painting has essence, and essence which speaks to you — an abstract essence — and is felt by those who really are enjoying aesthetically." The fact that in his mature work he has shifted exclusively to the use of autonomous color as the dominant theme of his painting is fully understandable. And in this connection, he acknowledges that his work falls close to what is now termed abstract expressionism simply because of the expressive dimension so readily apparent and



Figure 3. *A Village Afternoon*, 1959

without the need of figures and narrative. And on that basis, he classifies a wide range of artists such as Monet, Turner and Chirico as abstract expressionists because for each, "essence speaks more than story telling."

The expressive qualities of Bhavsar's paintings are clearly related to his technique. He uses no fiber brushes, no palette knife and no air brush, and neither pours nor drips liquid pigment. Instead he simply sifts dry powdered pigment through a fine screen strainer held above a horizontally stretched ground of paper or canvas on which a wet acrylic binder has been applied. The process is, of course, not carried out haphazardly for as he moves the screen strainer about over the paper or canvas field, he must control the rhythm of his own body movements and is concerned at all times about speed and about the distance between the screen and the field in order to ensure both the desired distribution and the density of the color within any given area. As the minute particles of pigment fall upon the field, they adhere firmly to the clear binder. Repeated applications produce a grainy surface effect, and variations in color and color tone across the field are accomplished simply by varying the choices of pigments and density of application. Compositional integrity is achieved through the introduction of focal points where strong concentrations of color particles appear as well as by the marked though blurred edges which occur particularly in many of his more recent works. Obviously, the procedures require infinite care and involve refinements far beyond the scope of this brief discussion. However, the important point is that in executing each painting, what Bhavsar produces initially is an atmosphere of color dust with which he defines a segment of space. And his final painting is therefore a graphic registration of the aggregate of changes which that segment of space has undergone in the process.

By this technique, the fine color dust particles interspersed across the surface of the canvas intermix optically, and from this standpoint, to some extent the product superficially resembles pointillism, here on a near microscopic scale. But the net effect is actually quite different, for each painting is one of color forms often rendered slightly out-of-focus, and always soothing to the eye as they gently float across the surface of the canvas or paper ground.

While Bhavsar's subject matter is color *per se*, what make his work so distinctive and so compelling are the subtle nuances in color relationships and the sense of a tranquil but vital presence which characterize each of his compositions. And although at first glance, many of his paintings may seem to closely resemble one another, deep involvement readily discloses the uniqueness of each work. Indeed, in Bhavsar's painting there is none of the superficial and instant gratification so common to much contemporary art. Instead the observer must surrender himself momentarily and become intimately acquainted and in so doing discover the hidden magic which each work can pour forth over time as well as the

inexhaustible range of possibilities for this artist's continuing production. Throughout the past 20 years, Bhavsar's statement has been a superb aesthetic achievement which lifts him well beyond the range of many contemporary colorists. His works fully embody an unworldly quality, a quality of eternal duration and at the same time one of spiritual ascension, of stillness within the context of ongoing movement. In many of his recent works, streaks of energetic color rise vertically like jets of a fountain (figure 5). In others, glowing color tones emerge out of the darkness, giving definition to an otherwise amorphous unknown (figure 6). Many of the works executed over the past two decades or so trigger our imaginations, often carrying us into distant fir-



Figure 5. *Marwar III*, powdered pigment and acrylic, 1984

ments of outer space (figure 7), or to a mysterious paradise at some remote floor of the deep sea. But all such interpretations are but poetic metaphors and in no sense more than mere subjective impressions arising out of the viewer's personal search for pleasurable experience, understanding and perhaps hope. They are certainly in no sense the deliberate intention of the artist himself for what Bhavsar has done is to create an art which has a life of its own, entirely independent of any reference to any sentiment or any material reality other than the reality of the work of art itself. He has simply given form and psychic meaning to color and color relationships, for each of his compositions is purely a color



Figure 6. *Azgiya X*, pastel, 1981

reality alone, and the enormity of pure color that is present inevitably projects the image of boundless latent energy without any intended suggestion whatsoever of chaos, bursting conflict or explosiveness. Instead, a sense of silent growth is expressed, for the transitions are soft and gradual, the tensions gently resolved and each color mass appears to furnish a buoyancy to all others and to the total composition thus creating a characteristically timeless and uplifting quality.

But certainly, one of the most striking features of Bhavsar's paintings derives from the hazy quality of delicate color masses and their gracefully effortless movement. Psychologically, this furnishes the sensation for what seems like a vaguely familiar reality, whether intended or not, perceived here as though through a diaphanous veil. It is a reality blurred in its outlines and



Figure 7. *Untitled*, powdered pigment and acrylic, 1971

one not quite within our grasp, but one which perhaps corresponds best to what we sometimes experience in the subliminal state just below the threshold of consciousness, a state which may at once be tranquil and liberating and out of which we emerge refreshed and revitalized.

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