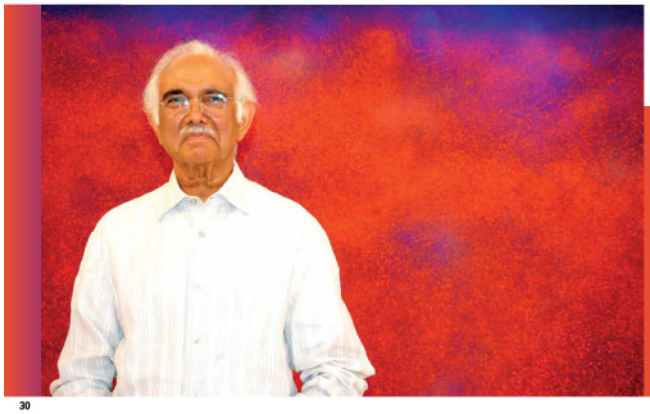
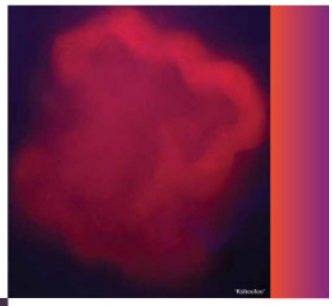
ALTERNATE WORLDS

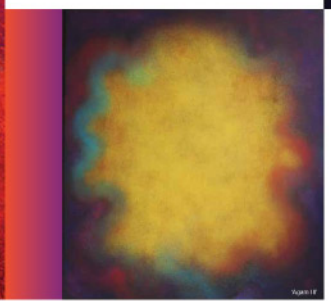
WORDS & PORTRAIT: Andre Cooray | IMAGES: Natvar Bhavsar

NATVAR BHAVSAR'S ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST ART OFFERS A SPIRITUAL PORTAL TO COLOURFUL AURAS AND PARALLEL UNIVERSES. THE PROLIFIC ARTIST'S EXPANSIVE MIND-ALTERING PIECES ARE THE IMPETUS FOR SELF-EXAMINATION, AND TO SEARCH FOR TRUTH IN LIEU OF MEANING. HIS FIRST EXHIBITION IN HONG KONG AT THE SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY ENTITLED 'RANG' IS SANSKRIT FOR BOTH A SURGE OF COLOUR AND ACHIEVING A STATE OF PURE ECSTASY.





'Kaleidus'



'Agam II'

NATVAR BHAVSAR'S images are floating hues, highly saturated and free to shift and spread within the canvas and beyond. His paintings resemble calm spiritual auras, luminous atmospheres and parallel universes. Audiences find solace and meaning in the beauty of his work, peering out into the world or deep within themselves. For the first time, the highly acclaimed Indian-born artist recently brought his work to Hong Kong, in an exhibition for the Sundaram Tagore Gallery entitled 'Rang'.

"Rang in Sanskrit refers to physical colour. It also means a very emotive engagement of your whole being," states the artist. "To be in Rang means to be in an ecstatic state of immersion into a powerful entity, which drives you, like if you're dancing, you're in Rang. If you're in a sexual sort of lovers' engagement, you're in Rang. So it has many, many meanings," says Bhavsar who comes across as part-guru and part-mad scientist. However, the prolific New York-based abstract artist is anything but crazy, he's just not afraid to express himself with a profound intensity personified through his expansive colour field paintings.

Bhavsar feels that interpreting the meaning of art is meaningless, and is only interested in representing the truth through his life's work, which impressively spans more than four decades. "The truth of everything that we are about to forget than the meaning that we share," he adds somewhat existentially. His spiritual connection with the truth is integral to his state of mind whilst painting. As if in a trance, when at work he sees that everything disappears, the entire world around him and even himself, and that his paintings are created by a force-allowed unknown to him. "I don't become the image, I'm just the vehicle of this power entrained in my soul, in my spirit, which really in some way throws these challenges at me and my works are constantly a rejuvenation of life," he reveals.

Bhavsar points out that we have two kinds of auras: the world outside aura and the inside aura. "I always try to connect with the aura within me. Not that I'm not part of the outside world. I'm quite aware of it, but when I need to do something, I take everything on my own shoulders, and to me, art is a sort of freedom - emanating from my being exposed to so much."

Similar to a Buddhist mandala painter, Bhavsar creates his art by releasing dry pigment granules over a canvas laced with clear acrylic binder. His subtle body movements control precisely where the sifted powder falls, forming intricate patterns and clouds of colour. His movement involves the skill, rhythm and devotion that he says is akin to a Bharatnatyam dancer. "My painting is like eternal dancing. The way I work requires the whole body to flow that," adds the sprightly 74 year-old.

"Colour is a blessing and the most primordial expressive tool," says Bhavsar whose art taps into its power and energy. He admits that his fixation with colour may have started from being exposed to his grandparents' fabric printing business in India at an early age. "I had seen traps, vast stretches of material with all this colourful printing," he recalls. The artist is also inspired by the Indian festival Holi, where people playfully throw coloured powder at each other, and the ancient Indian art of Rangoli which is used to create auspicious images from pigment powder, sand, spices, flour and chalk dust.

"I will go in the studio and perhaps paint with the colour red because red to me, to all Indians, is like a birthright, so in a way I call it a cultural affliction but it's more than that. The colour red has a power and spaciousness and the magic of it is beyond comprehension," says the artist. His devotion to the exploration of colour is unrelenting and infectious, therefore, it comes as no surprise that he is also an influential member of the New York School of Colorists.

Recognised for his unique voice and talent, Bhavsar received a prestigious John D. Rockefeller Grant in 1965, catapulting him into the New York art world. Needless to say, he was welcomed with open arms, and immediately accepted into the scene's inner circle which included artistic luminaries such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still. "I've always been lucky in the sense that I've done what I wanted to do and somebody has held my hand at the right time to make things happen," he remarks. Bhavsar feels fortunate to have arrived in New York in the 60s, a time he says when there was more expression, respect and camaraderie. He believes that the stars were aligned in his favour and the memories of his days as a younger artist bring him repeated joys.

"For an Indian young person to come to America and be given the chance to show seven paintings on the scale of 20 foot and larger, at the beginning [of his career] was unheard of in any other country," says Bhavsar. He says that he transformed from being Indian to being an artist in his own right without having to consciously define who he is as an artist. "I'm Indian but I don't really project myself or my art just simply because I'm Indian, and my art sort of comes from that new point and in a world voice," he explains. Bhavsar still lives and works in Soho, New York's artistic capital and was one of the earliest denizens of the area.

'Rang' is a collection of Bhavsar's past works and latest offerings to give Hong Kong a small taste of his extensive oeuvre. His pieces are in more than 100 public and private collections around the world including The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. "My work is much like taking a walk in the wilderness, where you are initiated by nature but then, nature talks to you and you talk to nature and that's what takes you further, deeper into it," says Bhavsar. And judging by his art, it's sure to be an insightful trip.

Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Road, Central, Hong Kong
+852 2581 0608 www.sundaramtagore.com