

Artist Natvar Bhavsar is known for paintings that swallow entire walls, yet despite their massive sizes, it's the smallness of his work that interests him most.

The BIG

Picture

By Anuja Madar

"Angataa V," 2005, 23" x 21"



Natvar Bhavsar isn't impressed that fellow artist Tyeb Mehta's painting, "Mahisasura," fetched \$1.58-million dollars at Christie's last fall. Bhavsar is a friend of Mehta's, but the Gujarat-born, New York-based artist shudders at the thought of putting a price on art and feels that it demotes it from what it is—"a biological ingredient of life"—to mere decoration. "We have created a very artificial aura around art," he says, "and put it on a pedestal so that you can't touch it."

Bhavsar himself is on a bit of a pedestal, put there by art critics who have given him favorable reviews, fellow artists who are fans (including M.F. Hussain and World Trade Center architect Minoru Yamasaki), others who share his world and even himself. He talks fondly of his days as head of the class at Chanasma High School, and how immediately after he was offered a job to teach art to students his own age. He was given funds by the high school to study art further at the CN School of Art in Ahmedabad, which he says was "the springboard for [his] professional career."

He's quick to reference the numerous articles and books published about him and his work, yet talks about his "untold story." Though his pride and self-confidence could be interpreted as arrogance, it's certainly not. It's merely a man who believes in what he does and believes he does it very well. "The way one progresses in life is to use yourself to the very best," he says, "and that's been the centerpiece for me. That's the kind of person I am, very committed. From the beginning I had no qualms about who I was."

Bhavsar came to the U.S. in 1962 with

the help of a family friend, and found himself celebrating two major accomplishments in 1965—graduating from the University of Pennsylvania's arts department and being awarded the John D. Rockefeller Grant. The grant propelled him into the art world and brought him to New York, where he now lives. "I was able to meet all the personalities of art," he says. "Anybody you can think of in the art world became friends with me. That was very lucky for me."

Luck has followed Bhavsar through his career as an artist, and he couldn't have asked for better timing, he says. His first major show at Philadelphia's Kenmore Gallery sold out, as well as his 1968 show in Boston's Obelisk Gallery. Two years later he was the opening artist at Max Hutchinson's gallery, the first to open in New York's Soho neighborhood. "The name Soho didn't even exist," Bhavsar remembers. Coincidentally, the same area that helped launch his career is the place he now calls home. He and his wife Janet reside on the top floor of a Greene Street apartment that has enough wall space to house his giant works and enough work space for him to create them.

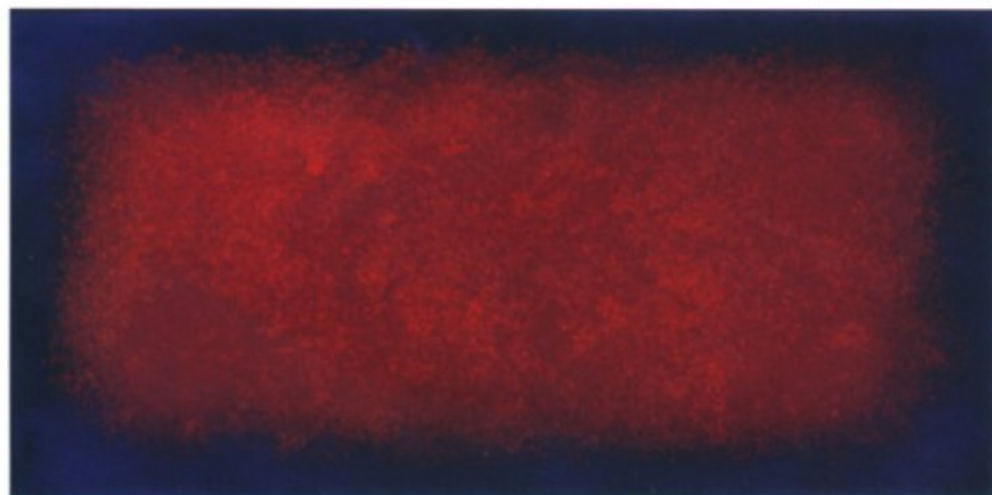
The two things that stand out about Bhavsar's works are the colors and the sizes, both bold and magnificent. While critics noticed similarities between the size of his works and those of Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, none of these art greats were able to capture the color he was exposed to as a youth in India. The dry pigments used in *rangoli* (colorful designs created on the ground during festivals) made a major impact on the way Bhavsar understood color, and served as inspiration for it being at the forefront of his work. "I decided that I am going to embark on how colors stand out," he says. "That's why I chose the whole process of...creating the power of rawness of color, and how do you

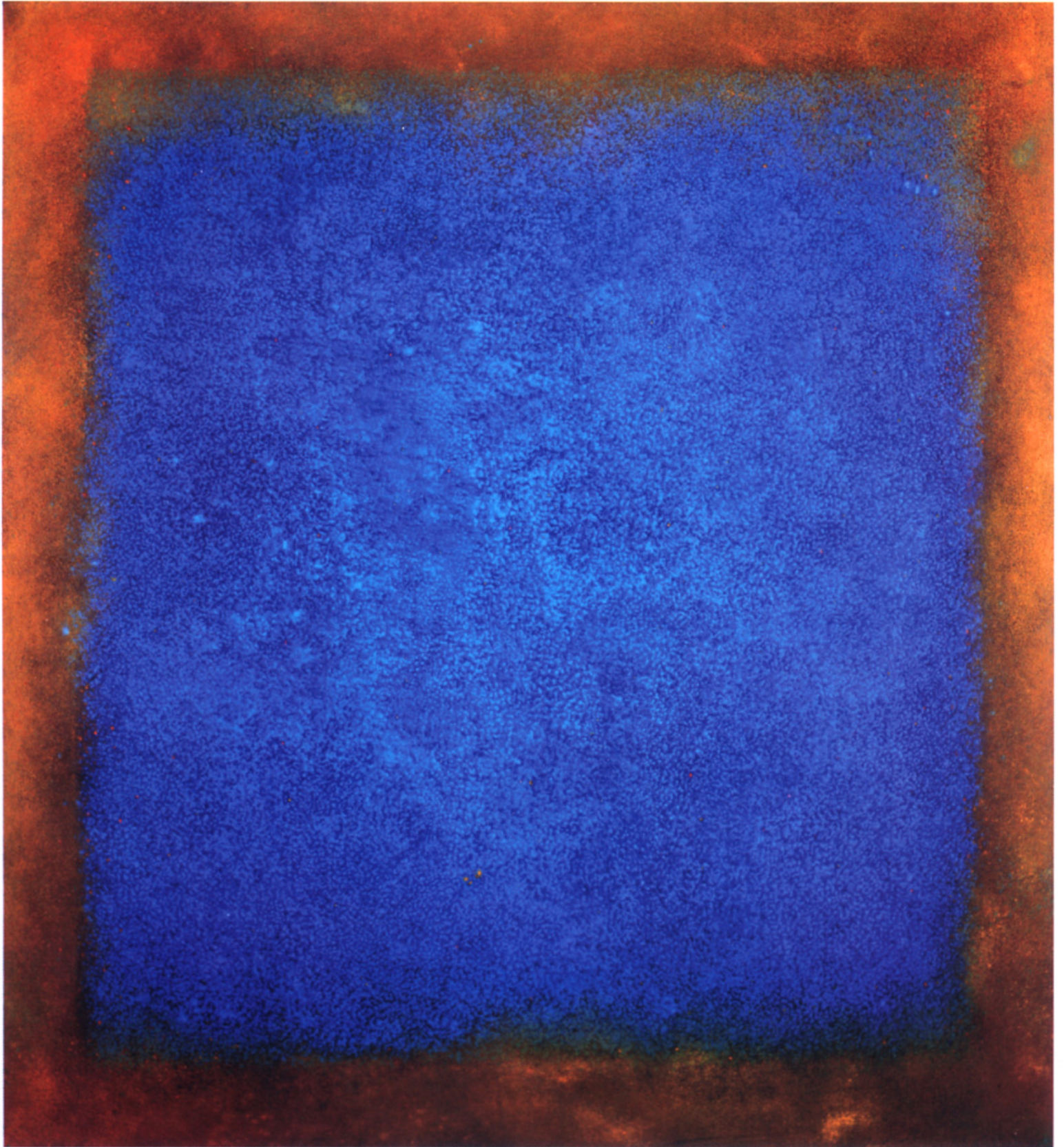
make it stand up on a vertical wall... You can't identify a thought, and that's what color is. You can't describe it in terms of its shape. I've noticed that I do not require people to understand my art. They need to intuitively grasp it."

Numerous public and private collectors have "grasped" the concept of Bhavsar's work (he has more than 800 pieces in various collections around the globe), including The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; The Boston Museum of Fine Art; and The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia. And while he's been in front of the canvas for more than 50 years, a tall, wiry, white-haired, 72-year-old Bhavsar shows no indication of slowing down any time soon. "When I enter the studio it's a strange [feeling] that I have tried to compare with words like nirvana," he says. "There are similarities in that you are entering a phase where it is an endless journey. When I paint I would want to paint for a thousand years, and the idea of making such a statement is simple. When I engage myself, what comes out of me would take a thousand years to draw out. That is the core of inspiration...it is between me and the medium, and it goes on and on." ■

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"Aalaap," 2005, 54" x 108"





"Shamannaa," 2005, 52" x 48"