

ARTFORUM



Natvar Bhavsar, *BEGIN*, 1968, powdered pigment and acrylic medium on linen, 8' 1 1/2" × 12'.

Natvar Bhavsar

AICON GALLERY

Natvar Bhavsar's exhibition at Aicon Gallery, "Beginnings," focused on seventeen numinous abstractions—paintings and works on paper—made between 1968 and 1978. The artist, born in 1934 in Gujarat, India, has been a New Yorker for more than fifty years. But the use of dry pigment in his work, often combined with acrylic and oil mediums, can be partially traced back to the ancient Indian spring festival known as Holi, where revelers douse themselves in a vivid spectrum of powdered colors to celebrate love and solidarity.

The front half of the gallery's ground floor included eight of Bhavsar's paper works. *UNTITLED XXI*, 1973, perhaps the most extraordinary of the lot, is a riot of scintillating oranges, blues, and yellows. At one point it felt like a rendering of the universe just moments after the big bang; at another, it looked like a pulsating amoeba. To achieve such effects, Bhavsar uses sieves and funnels to "brush" the pigments onto a binder-soaked ground. He then layers the colorants to give his surfaces a particular kind of depth, allowing the work to shift between a chromatic spectacle and a more tactile, sensual, and meditative mode.

Eight large-scale canvases—all of which were marvels of modernist facture—represented a number of dramatic shifts in Bhavsar’s style. For instance, *BEGIN*, 1968, which took up an entire wall on the back half of the first floor, is delineated into four vertical, rectangular sections, each painted a different shade of vermilion. Colored pigments were dusted across its central vertical axis—but only sparingly. By the following year, in works such as *MEGHA* and *VISHAKAA*, both 1969, the artist had moved toward something more holistic, which entailed a liberal and confident use of pigment. In an interview I conducted with Bhavsar in 2016, he mentioned that he enjoys the sound and rhythm of the Sanskrit words he uses for his titles, but that they often bear no explicit connection to the content. Nonetheless, they are suggestive: There’s something about the sonorousness of the language and the richness of his color fields that connects somehow. Overall, Bhavsar’s works bring out color’s metaphysical aspects and, via his use of raw pigment, its profound physicality.

Without question, Bhavsar is in conversation with Mark Rothko, along with several other Abstract Expressionists, all of whom he mingled with at Manhattan’s legendary Cedar Tavern. Yet a broader understanding of how he fits into the New York School remains elusive. If we go back to the New York art world of the 1960s, the reasons for his exclusion from the canon might be explained thusly: Clement Greenberg knew of Bhavsar’s work, but of course spent his life making a case for the nationalist and implicitly racist supremacy of American painting—“American” meaning, effectively, white and male. The critic would likely not have found Bhavsar’s engagement with the haptic to be in line with his own emphasis on flatness and a disembodied opticality. In 1984, Lowery Stokes Sims bemoaned Bhavsar’s erasure in a review of the artist’s work: “For the last twenty years his lushly wrought compositions have been recognized for their power and beauty, and yet he is still relatively unknown in the art world.” It is 2019 now, and little has changed. I hope that historians will finally pick up the gauntlet on behalf of Bhavsar’s rich legacy. After all, decades of work need to be recognized, discussed, and embraced for posterity.

— *Alpesh Kantilal Patel*