

HYPERALLERGIC

Expressions of the Fullness of Being

In Natvar Bhavsar's art, all is in flux; everything is both what it is and all that it might become.

Carter Ratcliff April 6, 2019



Natvar Bhavsar, "R-DHYA" (1972), dry pigments with oil and acrylic mediums on canvas, 96 x 96 inches (all images courtesy Aicon Gallery)

When such familiar things as light and darkness — sunlight and shadow — migrate from ordinary space to the realm of painting, transformations are inevitable. Some are obvious and others are subtle, as in an untitled painting by Natvar Bhavsar from 1967, which the artist divided into four rectilinear areas. The three largest areas are vertical and dark. The smallest one, in the upper right-hand corner of the canvas, is horizontal and filled with a bright, elegantly textured ochre. The effect is of light shimmering slowly over a surface of weathered gold. Or that is one of many possible readings. As we see throughout *Beginnings*, the Aicon Gallery's selection of Bhavsar's early paintings, the interpretive possibilities of his art are inexhaustible; and it may be this inexhaustibility that brings about a sense of transformation. I'm thinking of the power of the ochre rectangle in the 1967 painting to lend its warmth to the other zones, one of which is nearly black. It's as if Bhavsar wants us to see darkness in a new way, not as the opposite of light but as a variant on it. In his art, all is in flux; everything is both what it is and all that it might become.

Bhavsar's subject is the fullness of being, which mixes meanings at their most elusive with incontestable facts — one of which is that, literally speaking, his paintings are stable fields of dry pigment, layered and fixed firmly to the canvas. The stability of a finished painting is enlivened by two kinds of motion, one past and the other waiting in the perpetually renewed future. In the past are the gestures Bhavsar used to spread his colors over the horizontal surface of a canvas. These physical motions haunt each painting as it anticipates the viewer who will come alive to its flow of color, at once grand and granular, and awaken color itself to its protean life. Tracing Bhavsar's development from the late 1960s to the 1970s, *Beginnings* celebrates the artist's emergence at the Max Hutchinson Gallery in the early days of Soho, and at the Jewish Museum in uptown Manhattan. It was during those years that he began to endow somber magentas, grays, and blues with a smoldering complexity.

Drawn close to the surface of "Begin" (1968) or "Vishakaa" (1969), you see — or, rather, feel — the weight of their dark hues mitigated by flecks of bright pigment, though it makes just as much sense to say that brightness is given substance by darker colors. Many abstract paintings are like atmospheric incidents: bursts of color that establish a certain mood. A Bhavsar canvas is different. Rather than chart a fugitive moment in a shifting weather pattern, it immerses us in an entire climate: a meteorological environment with the potential for generating a full spectrum of moods. Or, to change the metaphor, his paintings transform colors into virtual topographies where we wander not to see specific things but to become aware of the way our emotions modulate as the chromatic terrain undergoes its subtle shifts. Of course, the New York art world of the 1970s did not encourage talk of metaphor or imponderables. In those days, certain critics labeled Bhavsar a color-field painter; before internal divisions disappeared from his canvases, others linked him to Minimalism and such painters as Agnes Martin. These readings were not so much wrong as inadequate to the complexity of his evolution.

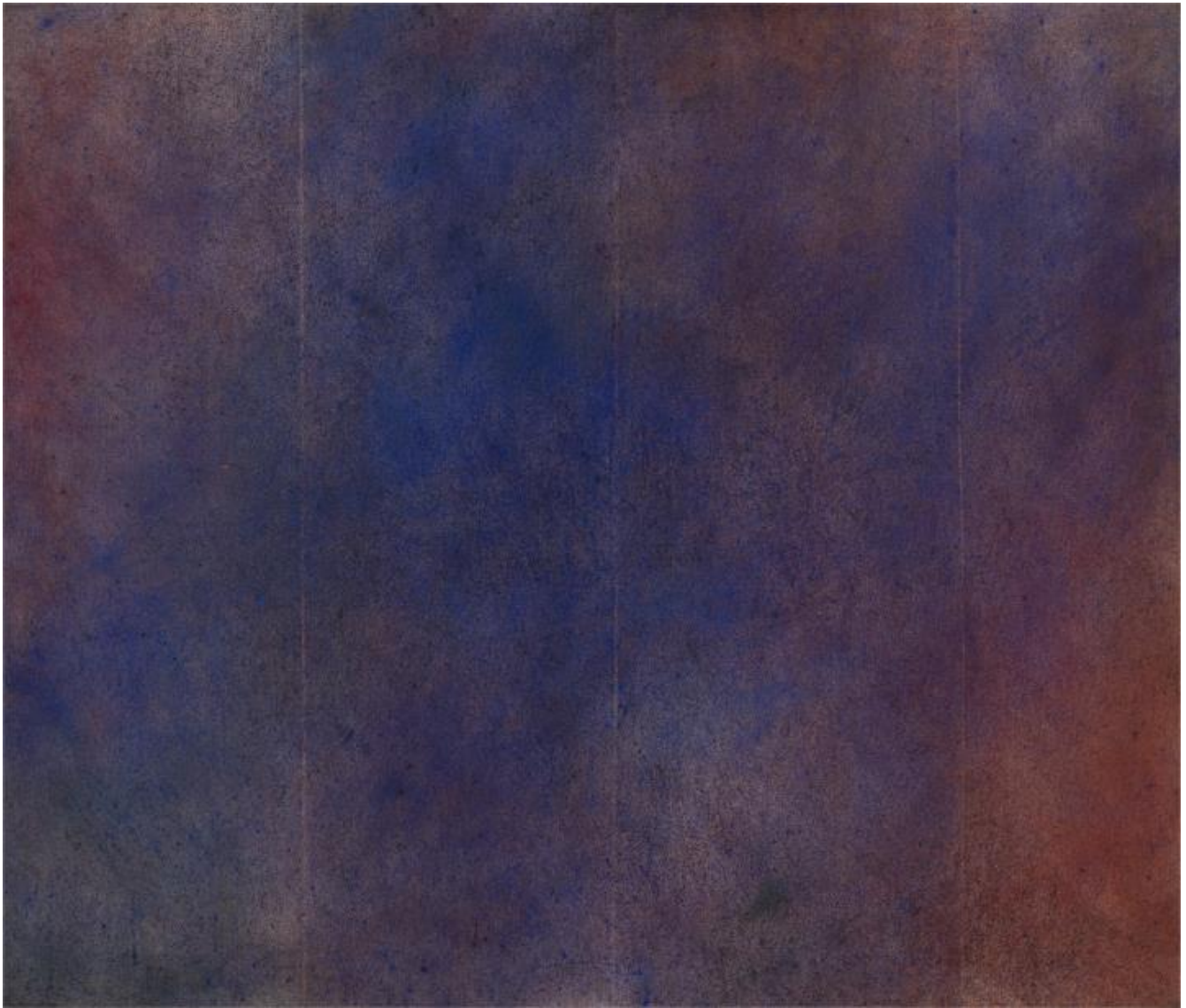


Natvar Bhavsar, "UNTITLED" (1967), dry pigments with oil and acrylic mediums on canvas, 100 x 74 inches

Born in Gohaya, a city in Gujarat, India, in 1934, Bhavsar was from an early age interested in literature as well as art. While studying at the Seth CN College of Fine Arts, he earned a degree in English Literature at Gujarat University, in Ahmedabad. A Rockefeller Grant brought him to Philadelphia in 1962, where it took him nearly a year to find a congenial setting. Enrolled, finally, in the Master of Fine Arts program of the University of Pennsylvania, Bhavsar met the painter Piero Dorazio, director of the program, and his American education began in earnest. He benefitted most from his encounters with the artists Dorazio invited to meet with MFA candidates, among them Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Frank Stella, and the sculptor David Smith. On visits to New York, he renewed his acquaintance with the work of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, which he saw for the first time in a 1957 exhibition in Ahmedabad. By then, Bhavsar had developed a style that mixed the quasi-abstraction of Cubism with the representational precision of Indian miniatures. Exposure to the energy and heroic scale of Abstract Expressionism not only changed the course of his evolution but sped it up. By the time he arrived in the United States, he was on the verge of his mature work.

Among the first of Bhavsar's undivided fields is "Megha" (1969). One of the darkest canvases in the Aicon exhibition, it is a field of shadowy, velvety hues with faint inflections of magenta. Hovering sometimes on the verge of invisibility, his colors can take on subliminal power, much as a single word stirs up associations that charge a line of poetry with a significance not found in its explicit meaning. Currents of chromatic energy that are barely perceptible in "Megha" or "Vishakka" become spectacular in "R-Dhya" (1972), as clouds of color surge inward from the edges of the canvas, like solar flares. Bordered in white, these bursts of blue and deep red contrast sharply with the yellow-orange of the field they invade. We could see this contrast as violent, a clash of differences in the process of generating a new play of hues. It is no less plausible to conclude that "R-Dhya" is serene, an image of difference resolved without depriving any color, no matter how subtle, of its distinctive quality. Far from conflicting, these responses complement one another in the boundless plenitude of Bhavsar's art.

It is tempting to say that every painter, alone in the studio, runs the risk of seeing the promise of a blank canvas sink into a recalcitrant emptiness. This never happens to Bhavsar. Though he is not religious, strictly speaking, he once told the critic and historian Irving Sandler that he creates in collaboration with a joyous spirit "that flows on and on" and "puts you very close to the experience of God." This comment is a reminder that his dry pigments have a more than incidental resemblance to the brightly colored powder that Indian celebrants throw at one another, along with buckets of tinted water, during the Hindu festival of Holi. Bhavsar is at once a thoroughly American painter and product of Indian culture, the deeper meanings and values of which have not left him. Never, as he approaches the divine, does he lose touch with the richly cross-cultural experience that has formed him. A Bhavsar painting is immediately recognizable as his.



Natvar Bhavsar, "VISHAKAA" (1969), dry pigments with oil and acrylic mediums on canvas, 82 x 96.5 inches

His style is at once thoroughly personal and deeply rooted in its historical moment. Nonetheless, he embraces themes that have persisted throughout history and across cultural differences. Western cosmology originates in the ancient Greek belief that there are four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The flow and texture of Bhavsar's colors suggest all four. Hindu cosmology posits the same elements — plus a fifth, the void. Bhavsar implies it may well be full, or, if that is too paradoxical, charged with infinite potential. Thus, it is not enough to say that that he evokes being in its manifold richness. Ultimately, his paintings are about the endless process of becoming.

Natvar Bhavsar: Beginnings continues at Aicon Gallery (35 Great Jones Street, East Village, Manhattan) through April 6.