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Solo exhibition of the early work of seasoned New York artist Natvar Bhavsar opens at Aicon Art

by Siba Kumar Das



Natvar Bhavsar, AMER, 1977. Dry pigments with oil and acrylic mediums on canvas, 57 x 66 in.

NEW YORK, NY.- Aicon Art New York brought us through Natvar Bhavsar: Beginnings (March 1-April 6, 2019) an astonishing show on this Indian-American artist's early color-field paintings. Now, by giving us Natvar Bhavsar: Sublime Light from September 26-October 31, 2020, the gallery is spotlighting his paintings from the late 1970s through the 1980s. They astonish us equally. Though each painting is a world unto itself, they have a common magical quality. They transport you to a realm beyond yourself and the world in which you have presence.

Surely, Bhavsar's effect is akin to the "breakthrough" (Durchbruch) that Theodor Adorno discussed in a course on aesthetics he gave in 1958/1959 and developed further in a book on Mahler, describing it as a moment when a "shiver ... passes for a second through the listener." Think of such experiences as goosebumps, awe, transcendence, union with a passage of music, a sudden happiness. Looking intently at Bhavsar's paintings, you'll grasp intuitively what it means to translate experiences like these into visual art.

Ideas similar to Adorno's were already current in India when Bharata's *Natyashastra* ("Science of Dance") was written sometime between the second century BCE and the fourth century of the Common Era. A comprehensive dissertation on the arts, its core addressing forms of performance, the book's aesthetic ideas were developed further during the tenth and eleventh centuries CE, especially by Abhinavagupta. To summarize his aesthetic philosophy concisely (at the expense of undermining its subtlety and complexity), he felt that the pleasure embodied in the aesthetic experience called *rasa* (taste, flavor, essence) elevated the individual human soul to see a glimpse of the goal of all spiritual aspiration---the experience of *moksha* or spiritual breakthrough. In a 2007 article, philosopher Kathleen Marie Higgins discusses Abhinavagupta's achievement, suggesting that "Indian investigations of breakthroughs both within and beyond aesthetics" provide an appropriate challenge to Western philosophy. Think of this when you look at Aicon's show and ponder Bhavsar's contribution to global modernist art.

Look especially at these two large paintings: *Amer*, 1977 and *Ambhi II*, 1983, both created by Bhavsar through his signature process of constructing surfaces with many, many layers of dry pigment applied to oil and acrylic substrates. As they transport you, you understand why Carter Ratliff sees Bhavsar as a contributor to "a specifically American Sublime, which deploys color and gesture to invoke a sense of unbounded space and light." From his Indian heritage Bhavsar brings to American painting the concept of *camatkara*, a critical *rasa* aesthetics idea that unites notions of surprise, wonder, and aesthetic delight---the very experiences that, together with awe, shape the Western idea of the sublime. Take in *Amer* and *Ambhi II* slowly. They will lift you into a transcendent bliss that will give you new eyes.

Bhavsar makes his paintings using a dance-like manual process that gives him a state of contemplative ecstasy. As you keep looking at the aforementioned paintings, as your eyes move up and down in harmony with their subtle color and texture variations, as you lose yourself in the depth and density of their colors, you might feel that you are in sync with the very dance that orchestrated Bhavsar's creative process. You are now yourself the dancer, unable to feel the difference between the dancer and the dance.

Bhavsar's colors evoke arrays of allusion and suggestion. The violet that structures *Ambhi II* may remind you of the violets that appeared widely in Indian miniature paintings. They may also make you think of European Impressionist and Symbolist painters deploying violet in transformative ways, presaging twentieth-century modernism. The yellows dominating *Amer* and vibrating into orange and ocher have for millennia been ubiquitous in Indian art and culture. In Western art, too, yellow has an ancient and long history. And in the global contemporary yellow is likewise widespread. Bhavsar's color intertextuality opens door after door, world upon world.

For more on this intertextuality, see these two smaller paintings from the Aicon show: *Kailas XIX*, 1986 and *Untitled I*, 1983, the latter belonging to a small group of pastels. Wondrously suggestive, both extend the universe that *Amer* creates. *Untitled I* is especially interesting. Pastel painting emerged as an artistic genre in the Europe of the late seventeenth century. Via the Rococo, it looked back to sixteenth-century Venetian colorism even as it presaged the colorism of Impressionists like Degas, Renoir, Morisot and Cassatt, who were drawn to pastel's purity of color and radiance. Look at *Untitled I*: a great deal of virtuosity is packed into it. Bhavsar has deployed pastel masterfully; his painting is at once sensuous and transcendental.

Art historian Irving Sandler, who chronicled the development of postwar American art, concluded his monograph on Natvar Bhavsar saying, "Looking both East and West, his vision is transnational, pointing to the universality of human experience." To enter Bhavsar's painterly universe, you do not necessarily have to believe in the Hindu concept of *moksha* that Abhinavagupta discussed centuries ago. Allow Sublime Light simply to lift you into freedom's kingdom.