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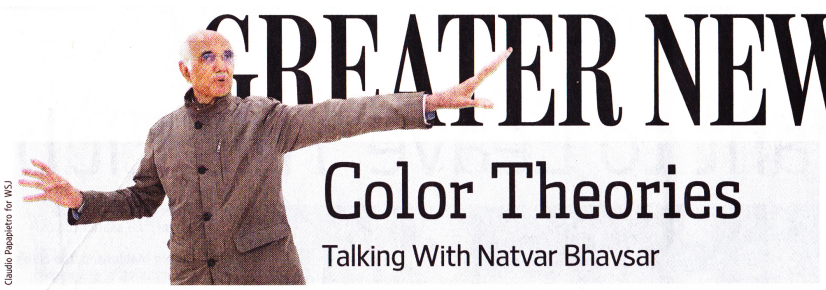


GREATER NEW YORK

Color Theories

Talking With Natvar Bhavsar



# New Explorations in a Universe of Color

## *Natvar Bhavsar Talks About a New Show of His Dry-Pigment Canvases*

By VIBHUTI PATEL

*Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal*
Natvar Bhavsar with his paintings at FreedmanArt gallery, on the Upper East Side.

Natvar Bhavsar uses dry pigment to create large, brilliantly colored, mural-like paintings. Critics often place the Indian-born artist in the context of the genesis of abstract art in America, comparing him with Abstract Expressionists and "color-field" painters like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. But Mr. Bhavsar's method of building up surfaces through layers of dry pigment is his own. Though he harks back to India's classical music and ancient aesthetics,

Sanskrit literature and subcontinental seasons as sources of inspiration or fodder for his titles, his approach is modern American, not ethnic Indian.

That approach is currently on display at the Upper East Side gallery FreedmanArt, where an exhibition of new, smaller works by Mr. Bhavsar, "Energy of Color," runs through Sept. 28. At the gallery's entrance, the nine-foot tall "Sangraha" stands like a wide-shouldered welcoming doorman as it harks back, with its crimson-edged abstract indigo color field, to Mr. Bhavsar's trademark large canvases. Moving along, the walls are hung with 16 smaller, equally abstract works in glorious crimsons, oranges and golds, with circular central medallions or big outward-spreading splotches, all on contrasting color grounds, with glossy finishes.

The 79-year-old painter, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1962 and has lived for decades in a SoHo loft with his wife, the photographer Janet Brosious Bhavsar, spoke with The Wall Street Journal about his fascination with color, his work with dry pigment, and his cultural identifications.

*Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal*
The artist with FreedmanArt's William O'Reilly

**What is distinctive about these new works?**
They invite focused viewing, a deep engagement with the work, which should replicate for the viewer the original transcendent experience of creativity.

**Describe your earliest experience of art.**
I learned art from life. In India, we absorb aesthetics from Holi, the spring festival of colors; Diwali, the fall festival of lights; rangoli [colorful traditional dry-pigment floor "painting"]. We don't put art in museums. I was born into a family of printers, surrounded by vats of color. Daily, I saw miles of fabric drying in the sun. Motes of light coming through our tiled roof seemed like a universe.

**How did that affect your work?**
Those early subliminal memories became my material. My work is about formlessness, about movement—of motes, leaves, ripples in water, form in clouds. Those were a charge for me, so static art—still-life and portraiture, which I'd learned in art school—left my vocabulary. I had seen a Rothko painting in a Museum of Modern Art show that came to my hometown, Ahmedabad, in 1957. That stuck with me. I painted "Trees" then, which is all red and black—you can't see the trees. I saw master works for the first time in Philadelphia and realized I was interested not in storytelling or painting from objects of nature, but in color.

**Why this obsession with color?**
Color is my birthright, part of my heritage, what I brought here with me along with my interest in languages. I take pride in my ancient roots. Color is more Indian than anything else; no other culture has so enjoyed its blessing. Of all our millions of gods, it is the Indian god. Our word for color, "rang," evokes physical, emotional and sexual connotations. Color fills the universe, it has no periphery, it's like looking into space. Prior to Abstract Expressionism, all art was colored.

Color was a tool then. In my work, color became the art. Color as predominant subject—the palpable excitement of rangoli—was not seen in Western artists, except in Rothko. Ironically, because my art has no "subject," it's an enigma to my Indian contemporaries.

**And yet, your "Delwara"—named after intricately carved Jain marble temples—is all-white, as are two paintings in this show.**
"Delwara" evokes silence: complete silence of the cave, of speechlessness, of meditation. Looking at nature, you're entranced. Your physicality melts into the largeness of the experience, you become part of the work. When I enter my studio, everything disappears—including myself. Engagement with the material becomes overpowering. That power which draws me is what compels me to paint. Besides, white is a vibrant color, too; it's not lack of color.

**Describe your innovative dry-pigment process.**
Dry pigment has fluidity, it can expand and coalesce, it's a dust you have to control. It falls gravitationally, from ground upward. I lay out multitudes of colors with dry pigment, through a mesh screen, onto the canvas on the floor. Then strokes are brushed over it with huge brushes that move the pigment upward or downward. The whole is sprayed with oil and a plastic medium which makes the colors stick to the canvas in up to 200 layers; craters build up. Laying down color with such freedom is a unique process, like rangoli—which you can't hang on a wall—but more complex, more sophisticated. Dry pigment has visual power, paint loses lustre. Just as Jackson Pollock freed himself of brushes with his innovative drip method, mine is a new, freer process.

**You hail from a rich culture. Why do you consider yourself an American artist?**
The psychological and expressive freedom I found when I came to America made a great impact on me. Arriving when Abstract Expressionism had become a major thrust in global art, I became part of a movement which allowed me to explore my own vocabulary. If Abstract Expressionism had not come to America in the 1960s, I doubt I'd have become the artist that I am. India had limitations when I was growing up there. But I've freed myself from such labels—"Indian," "American"—because they diminish one. I try to absorb all gifts. America was the place where that was possible then; India is only now becoming that.

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