

The Metaphysics of Expression A Conversation with Natvar Bhavsar

"Change is the only constant. The soul is dyed the color of its thoughts."
Heraclitus



I first met Natvar Bhavsar in the middle of February at his sizable SoHo loft in Lower Manhattan. He is, in the words of art critic Jay Jacobs, “the best known and most successful Indian born contemporary artist on the planet”, an important figure in the New York Color Field movement credited with having substantively advanced the technical and conceptual possibilities of paint on canvas. Born in the Northwestern Indian state of Gujarat in 1934, he has lived and operated in the United States for over 50 years. At 77 he still evinces a lean, youthful physique. Save for the carefully shaped rectangle of white bristles resting above his upper lip, he could easily pass for a man fifteen to twenty years younger. On the day we met he’d just returned from a successful opening in Cleveland, Ohio at the Contessa Gallery.

“It’s a great space with handsome presentation” he says to me reassuringly, “They’ve shown lots of big name artists like Chuck Close and [James] Rosenquist.” Though our interview was spread out over several weeks, and was conducted in

person, on the phone, and over email, it is in this initial conversation where the connection between his beliefs, his personality, and his art became most apparent.

“I prefer conversation to email” he tells me “because there is more flow”. Flux is an important concept for him. Not in the sense of the Fluxist art movement, but of constant change, the *Heraclitan* kind.

Bhavsar’s loft overlooks Greene Street; a cobblestoned corridor studded with artist galleries and high-end international boutiques with bright white facades. He and his wife Janet have lived there since the early 1970’s, long before the neighborhood had been confirmed as one of the epicenters of the art world.

“They didn’t call it SoHo back then. They called it ‘Hell’s Hundred Acres.’ It was basically derelict and abandoned. The only people here were artists, reds, and the rats.” He says this with an understated chuckle, but you can tell he’s not embellishing.

The idea of the East Indian in the West manifesting as a mystic is something of a hoary cliché, and though Bhavsar doesn’t entirely fit it to type, his conversational style, like his art, has a hypnotic quality. Leading up to his loft in the service elevator in a slow calming ascent, I’m reminded by my friend Jyoti, who had arranged the meeting and is there with me, that Natvar can have an entrancing way with ideas and tangents, and is liable to take any and every topic towards its metaphysical limits. It’s a strange and intriguing caveat.

Janet Bhavsar, Natvar’s wife, sees us through the artist’s workspace into the loft’s sitting area. She tells me that one of Natvar’s best friends is named Abid Hussain, a former Indian ambassador. She doesn’t make too much of the coincidence.

“Oh Abid and Natvar can just talk forever about anything,” she says.

In Bhavsar’s art, the concept of flux and becoming are suggested on both macro and microcosmic scales. Many of his canvasses look like nebular phenomena, cosmic dust in the millennial drift of deep space. There is a transfixing effect of both motion and stasis existing as a part of one another in simultaneity. Bhavsar creates these images with dry granules of pigment, the materials that paints are made from. Christopher Andreae aptly wrote, while reviewing a Bhavsar exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York, that “It is expressionism which arises in a strange paradox somewhere between extremely felt sensuousness and extremely felt contemplation. A visual equivalent, perhaps, of eloquent silence.” More about inner space than outer space.

Here I’ve attempted to fade together our various exchanges into one, seemingly fluid interaction, beginning with our initial conversation (where Jyoti is also present). We discuss art, language, expression, commercialism, and change amongst other things.

- Abeed Hossain

ABEED

So how should we get started?

BHAVSAR

People converse about the experiences they've had: either they've gone to the theatre, a movie, gone to a concert, seen some great art exhibition, or they've walked through nature and seen some phenomenal events that also occupies their thoughts.

ABEED

Sure. Recently I was reading some Nietzsche and I came across this interesting quote where he said 'All artistic expression comes from a single physiological state, which is one of intoxication.'

BHAVSAR

I think he's really close to putting it in words. Although, the word 'intoxication' has a certain meaning. Your spirit needs to be aroused. If you want to call that 'intoxication' sure, but that's a more physical concept. But when you're speaking of an experience of spiritual enlightenment, it's not necessarily a physical experience. Of course, he's describing a state he experienced and generalized that experience, and that's how words are, they're limited.

ABEED

This is the first time I've seen your work up close, but my impression from representations of it was that it had a very primordial quality.

BHAVSAR

Yes.

ABEED

Are you trying to express this kind of pre linguistic place where art or creativity comes from?

BHAVSAR

Well it's not necessarily pre-linguistic. Language itself, poetry for example, is a rich form of expression that I think expresses this primordial realm we're talking about. Poetry, without saying it all, sometime says more by evoking a feeling. In painting there is similar phenomena: less of a verbal artifice

ABEED

Prose maybe has a danger of becoming too literal.

BHAVSAR

Sure, but any art can be didactic. Painting or sculpture can be didactic. Works that try to tell you something specific, to guide you. That's a lot like prose. There's something called realism, what others call realism, I don't accept the word, and it's a kind of mirage. Like the word "maya" which is invented in our culture is primarily in somewhat to state that in order to express experience is impossible, but the word "maya" reveals a kind of image, you know? A certain attachment. Attachment and detachment are two important words or concepts. This idea of being able to have experience without the burden of sentimentality is crucial to a clear experience. I think music does this quite efficiently. Trying to explain visual arts in terms of words, through pure description isn't necessary when the art is right there.

JYOTI

Would you say there is always an element of music, even in the most descriptive or realistic forms of art?

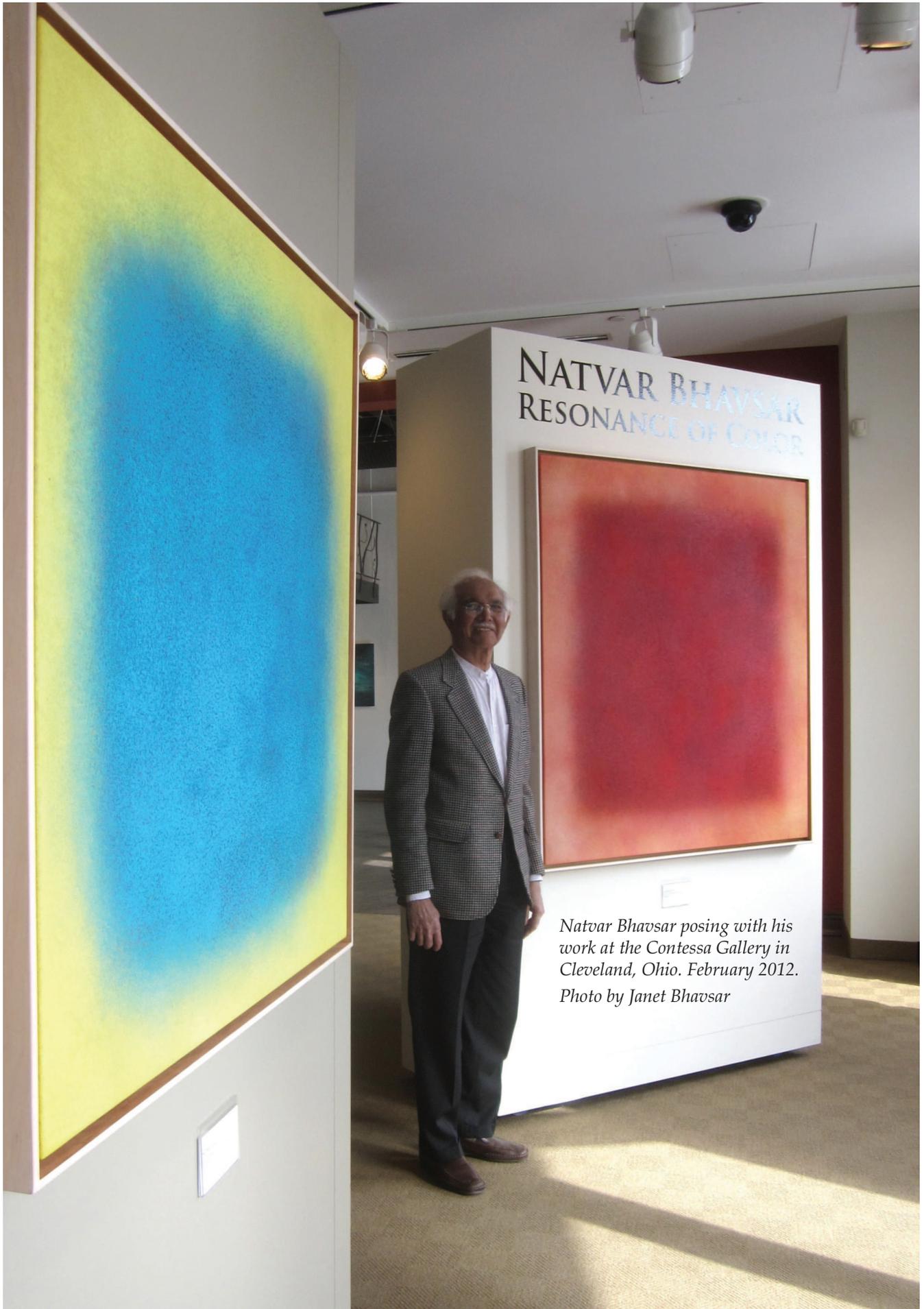
BHAVSAR

I'd use the word 'poetics' – which is a larger word. 'Aesthetics', 'poetics' – these are words invented by us in order to pacify our need to say something meaningful about art. And I indulge in those words more often when talking about visual pieces, because 'music' can take people off into different tangents. Music can lift you up into all kinds of elevated experiences and has very little to do with relying on one's own sentimentalities to buttress the experience.

I remember when I was at the Indian consulate, and these great singers, there were these brothers from Rajasthan, I can't remember their names, they weren't famous at all, but basically they were singing songs about Krishna, and the whole crowd in the consulate was having a very powerful experience. It was like Krishna was being invited to come and sit next to you. And the music had basically hypnotized the entire audience, including me. That's rare. I usually don't listen for the lyrics. I try to mostly get into the pure musicality of it. But in this instance the lyrics with the music both sort of wove together to create this single, conjoined effect that made you feel in the presence of something exalted. I felt elevated. And I think all arts can do that. But here words, lyrics, became something non-verbal. So there are these ways in which language is also capable of transcending literality.

ABEED

Is that transcendence, of literality, of everyday experience; is that the objective of your art?



NATVAR BHAVSAR
RESONANCE OF COLOR

*Natvar Bhavsar posing with his work at the Contessa Gallery in Cleveland, Ohio. February 2012.
Photo by Janet Bhavsar*

BHAVSAR

Well I think all arts seek to elevate experience, lift you up from where you are, and take you to another level. We all have a longing for something, since we're all here. All of human history I think is grappling with this, this eternal longing. My conjecture is that trying to express this in words, the contours of this longing, are difficult to put into footnotes. So we're all maybe searching to create our own language, which isn't possible, there's no such thing as a private language, so we work in the linguistic mediums that exist already, verbal, musical, visual, literal and we do our best to try and communicate this longing – but it inevitably falls short, there's a space, and art seeks to address that space or gulf with music, poetry, dance, painting, love. Don't you feel that way? (to Jyoti)

JYOTI

I'm trying to put what you said into the context of my own experience. This poetics or this musicality of experience that you allude to – there have been some moments when I have approached it, but you seem to live 90% of your time in this world, this other sphere of elevated experience, which we ordinary citizens, bourgeois intellectuals, only rarely visit.

BHAVSAR

I think it's kind of a proportion of intensity that we're talking about. How deeply you are submerged into allowing yourself to try and touch something that is untouchable. I spend a lot of my time trying to come to a state where I'm unencumbered by limitations, or unconcerned by them. I guess in life we're more often guided by an apprehension of limitations rather than our own exuberance. When you try to free yourself of inhibitions of any sort, you come closer to this experience that is very deep, to get to this place where you're not burdened by words or any other limiting factor, and then just create from there.

JYOTI

In Tagore's songs he often speaks of this. 'You have been waiting for me through eternity, and it's your joy to experience the world through me'. In a way that is what the artist aspires to.

BHAVSAR

I think this is what I mean by 'longing'. Tagore as a poet always felt that it was better not to try and tell about experience, but to go around and try and guide you towards it through a kind of symbolism. And he was alluding always to this spiritual entity; call it God or a guiding force. He was very aware of this force. He was able to evoke its energy so beautifully. I think he was one of the finest poets of all time in this regard. He was something of a poet's poet, his ability to convey and evoke feelings without

directly pointing to them was extraordinary. When I resort to words I try to use a similar kind of language in a way.

ABEED

You were speaking about this musical performance in the consulate, the brothers from Rajasthan, and how their song kind of induced a hypnotic, almost trance like state, and also Tagore's indirect way of making reference to the experience of the divine. Do you see that as an endeavor of your painting and artwork? Are you seeking to induce that same state with your painting, and is that an allusion to the divine?

BHAVSAR

Well in the music, they were speaking of Krishna, so they were trying to invent divine materials, and the song, the music, lyrics, rhythm, sort of took you there, the repetition of rhythm, the giddy invitation of the music with the group. Maybe more than the lyric that made it happen. So my art doesn't operate in that way per se. For me, I try to shed all sort of associations and attachments that I might have, and then just sort of depend on the colors. The colors are really my medium. And the focus on the colors, divested of other attachment, gives me the force or the energy to reveal something. That keeps me deeply engulfed most of the time when I'm working, the contemplation of the colors alone. Obviously there's a physicality, the canvas, the body, these are limitations, but the colors allow me to be free to march into a kind of unknown, so much so that my existence... in a way I don't exist in that space. There's the word "nirvana", we've invented this word, to try and abide this concept of having one's ego divested. How as a self you are at once uplifted and freed of being. When you're in that state, your concern for what you're going to arrive at just isn't there.

ABEED

When you're in that kind of the state, do you feel that you're still the locus of that creative energy, or are you a vessel for it?

BHAVSAR

Well, I think you sort of become, in a way, the force itself. It's being revealed through you, but that revelation makes you the entity in a strange way. You are creating it. The locus or the vessel, it doesn't really matter. Maybe perceiving a difference is just an illusion. You're both. In the *Bhagavad Gita* I think there are lots of expressions of God. There is some statement about how it's necessary for you to guide this emergent force, whether in short form or in a universal form one doesn't know. So this is the expression of a poet or a sage, who invented this particular language, but we don't really know whether God has decided this force or what it is really, but you can see this kind of approach to experiencing something, about marveling at it, and that some true experience is out there and to apprehend it charges you, and

you, we all, are meant to bring about that experience, to be charged by it. But when you're creating, the subject or the medium, as you said before, you need to have a primordial relationship to these expressive goods. I think we're required to reveal as human beings.

ABEED

Well there's a metaphor for the universe in which it is regarded as an inherently creative act. So to create is just to imitate the inertia of the universe, flow with it.

BHAVSAR

I think its nature's mechanism, sure. If you look at how nature functions in terms of its destruction and creation, the requirements of it and art are not very different. The nonverbal process continues.

JYOTI

Well going back to these two anonymous Rajasthani masters, they were using both words and music (if we can separate them) to create this effect. But in much of Western art, the great masters, though there is an attempt to describe external reality, there is also a musicality, a rhythm which is the universal force of whatever it is. The same music, or pattern, or energy, whatever you name it, as Natvar said, we try to pacify our requirement for some words or description to explain something that is basically beyond language.

BHAVSAR

Well it's beyond language, but language participates in the struggle to convey the indescribable in the way that art also does. This is nature's challenge to us in a way. We're constantly refining tools to convey, or reveal a truth within. That challenge is what all creative people struggle to master. And I guess millions of years have passed and we're still doing it, or trying (laughs)

JYOTI

May I refer to Michelangelo's universally known *Sistine Chapel*? The finger of God approaching Adam, and the spark between, the energy, the point where they don't connect...

BHAVSAR

Of course it's a symbol, a metaphor for it. And the reaching in the image communicates a certain longing, that point where they actually don't touch, the reaching but not connecting perfectly.

JYOTI

This word “longing” appears so many times, even in Tagore’s English, in *Gitanjali*, he speaks of longing and of desire, a sense of separation and of coming close—

BHAVSAR

I think it’s a wonderful word, “longing”, it really comes close to what this reaching or searching is for me as an artist. And as a word it doesn’t give away anything, it allows for eternal revelation. There is no time that can stop you from that. And the word “divinity” is a part of that longing, the idea of God. Physically through art and dance we can get there, to that euphoria, where you are almost close to what it is.

ABEED

I remember reading a couple of years ago that Michelangelo, that the depiction in *God Creating Adam* in the central panel on the ceiling was a perfect anatomical illustration of the human brain in cross section. He developed this intimate knowledge of human anatomy working with cadavers, and he used that knowledge and made some statement about the human brain and the experience of God, embedding a drawing of the brain in God’s beard.

BHAVSAR

Well, I think that anytime there’s some new technology, and for [Michelangelo] this knowledge of the brain was like a new technology, anytime you have this new knowledge or technique there’s a temptation to want to use it. It’s very seductive, and hard not to use it. So the idea that Michelangelo put this kind of thought into it was an essential use of his tool to help create this aura with his work. And he used this critical freedom to inject this into his work. I’m sure he was cognizant of posterity. Although, from a critical standpoint, there is sometimes this tendency to interpret, to... you know how people sometimes see the face of Jesus Christ in a cloud? I don’t think in this instance it’s that but-- (laughs)

ABEED

Is it a responsibility of the artist to implement new technologies and approaches when they can, to push the medium forward?

BHAVSAR

Of course. I’d say we all strive for that. It’s not much a responsibility as it is the reason. We all kind of inherit this drive as humans. So the idea that you invent a new approach or technique to more finely tune your expression, and to experience the source truth more clearly, that’s only natural. So that’s a vital force of the spiritual journey I think, changing techniques and inventing new ones.

ABEED

Well, people think of human evolution, and they see the motivating force in evolution as mutation—meaning there's DNA copying itself, and then it mutates and creates something new. I think of creativity the same way: it's imitative at first, and then it mutates and creates something new.

BHAVSAR

Through imitation you move on to different tangents which provoke the realization of even newer paths. I've embarked from the very beginning to enlarge the language of how to express something that is in some sense unfathomable. You'll never fully convey what experience is, you just keep marching. I think I have tried to convey how to free oneself. Using color as a force to reach towards the beauty and generosity of the material that allows you unlimited expression. You know earlier people would use brushes, and then Jackson Pollock would start dripping color, throwing it all of that, and the way I've embarked on it was by using color as dust, and how dust moves around in nature throw winds and gusts, but also the lyricism, as water runs through a river it creates its own song. When it rains it creates its own song, when it snows. These are the images I kind of work through. I've tried to harness that kind of elemental flow, trying to find that way. I've spent nearly 50 years of my life to try and find that, and in some ways I've been successful with that.

ABEED

How did coming to New York affect the development of your style?

BHAVSAR

What was happening when I arrived here gave me a challenge to see how far I could stretch the limit. The works of Rothko, Clifford Still, Jackson Pollock, they were a new phenomenon at the time in the art world. Prior to that expressionism such as Monet and Turner dominated. The new crowd had in some ways succeeded in creating art that pointed toward a fresh horizon. American art moved away from depicting nature to trying to reveal the force of art material itself. If you look at American paintings from the earlier masters, Frederick Church and a number of artists from his generation had a romantic period where they tried to depict this tremendous grace and beauty of the American landscape, almost evoking the divineness of the experience of apprehending it. That idea continued in the 60's—this idea of expanse, open-endedness, and freedom; in a sense the great landscape painters of the prior generations set that stage. So, seeing those works here immediately I felt as a young person I had done 80 foot large color decoration with rangoli in student days for college functions and the charge of that was palpable for whoever came to see it. So I thought "why not on canvas?" because when you do rangoli it's on a rolled flat surface, but there's no sense that it needs to be protected. It's dispensable.

ABEED

Could you talk about rangoli more - it's a traditional Indian folk art, right?

BHAVSAR

Yes, it's traditional to India, almost all parts, but it differs by region: it's one way in Gujarat, another way in Bengal, another way in South India-- but essentially it's about using colors to reveal some sense of beauty on the floor during a holy or ceremonial event. Usually we'll draw it on a rolled out surface, or the ground itself, tile, floors. We use different decorative motifs, but when I did it I liked to indulge in the freedom of color. If you think in terms of clouds, clouds also create an aura. They don't have this confined image, they're constantly in flux. They're ambient. So when you look at color depending on the amount of color in each part, just like a cloud, there's room to create incredible visible articulation. It's almost like music really. In music the emphasis is on time and pitch and volume. You have the space between and densities. It's the same thing with color. You can have a dense point like a *teep* on a woman's forehead, or a diffuse nebular cloud that opens like a universe. A single color has this infinity of possibilities.

You know I was born and color was placed on my palm, it's traditional. So this tradition of being blessed with color in the palm might have helped me. I came to New York and I looked at Mark Rothko's work, which was a major inspiration, but I noticed there was a fairly limited palette. They were quite saturated with the density of color. But when I expressed the rangoli, there were thousands of varied densities. So I experienced a revelation of what color could do, and I thought, "How can I make this work for me? How I can project the musicality of this element in the most extreme way?" So that was my contribution from the very beginning here, and my paintings succeeded enormously. I think those who saw my work felt it was charged, that it was a draw. So I had some success immediately in New York.

ABEED

Did you feel that, exploring density and diffuse patterns of color, that you were hearkening at all to the landscape painters you talked about before and the way they depicted nearness and distance?

BHAVSAR

Sure. The earlier period landscape painters would try to create artificial, illusionistic ideas of distances. And, in terms of using color in a physical sense, calling attention to physical distances as opposed to illusory ones. There's a revelation of a similar beauty. In music, we have harmonies, melodies, which call attention in some way to the materiality of music. There's something hypnotic about the rippling of water in a river, of snowfall building up, dust blowing in the wind. These are all sort of inspirational materials for my expression, along with trying to make the traditional rangoli stand-up on a canvas.

ABEED

You've been referencing music and poetry, which depend greatly on flow, are really defined by sequence and motion through time. The same can be said of the natural phenomena of the river, snowfall, the wind, etc. But a painting is static. How do you reconcile that tension?

BHAVSAR

Well a painting being static as an object doesn't preclude it from revealing itself through a fluid sequence. The experience of apprehending it is not static at all. The visual experience is actually informed by fluctuations of light, angular shifts in the eye, the motion along the canvas, awareness of differences in hue in and shape. I remember we used to have a babysitter who said she didn't like abstract art by she like my paintings. I asked her why, and she said that every time she'd pass by she'd see something she hadn't noticed. Changing light sort of revealed these nuances. For her as a viewer the image was sort of in a constant flux, and it's what I go for in my work, so that assessment pleased me.

ABEED

Do you get that feeling looking at your own work?

BHAVSAR

Absolutely. That is actually why I do it, to have that experience. My work is actually created with mountains of layered pointillism. There are sometimes over 200 layers where the colors are piggybacking on each other, so a change in light actually does change how it looks. If you put microscope to the paintings, they'd seem alive at a molecular level. This is the peculiarity of what I'm trying to say. I think I've revealed a new method on how to create images of color on canvas, and without seeming too grandiose I think this comprises a major contribution to the language of abstract art.

ABEED

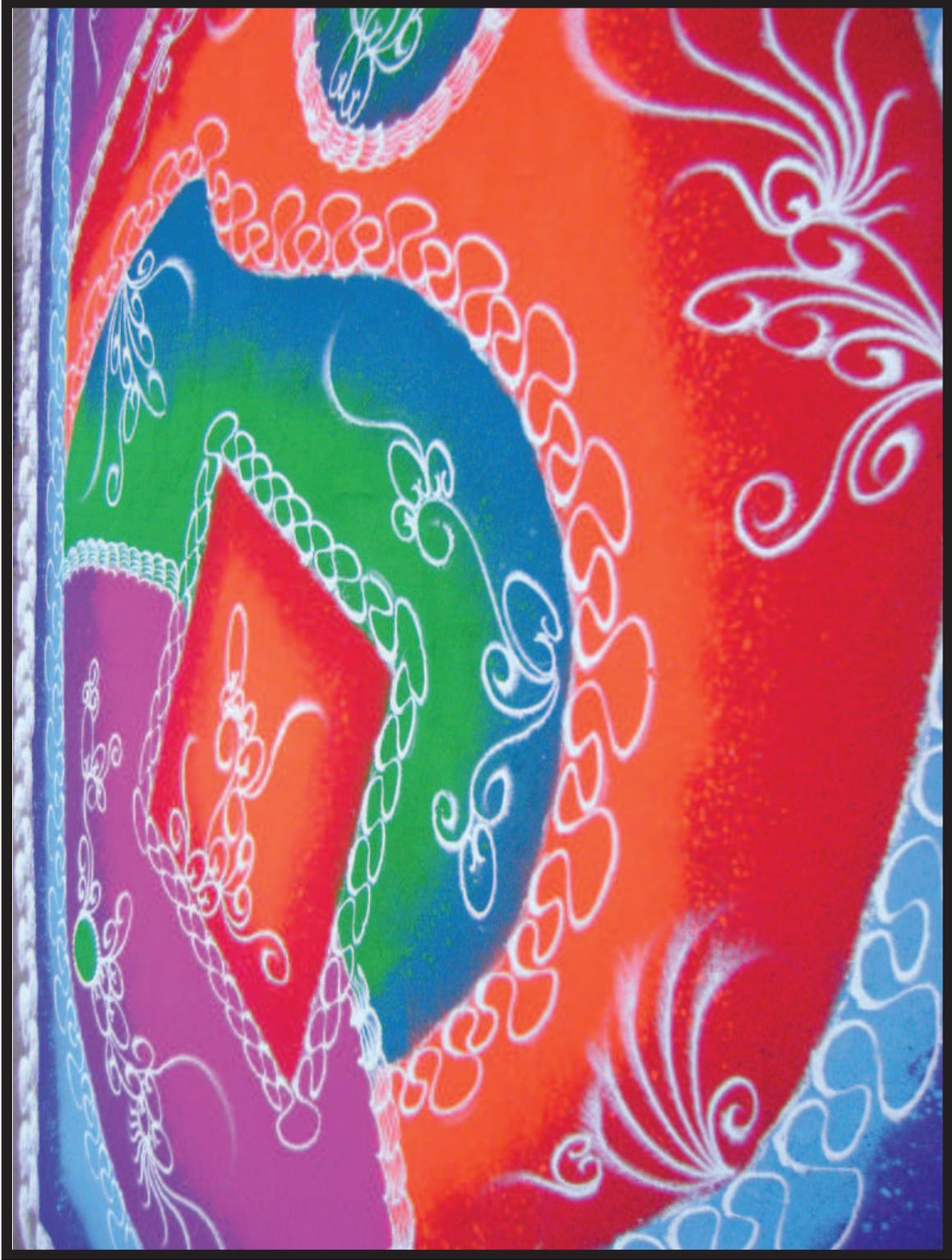
Not to shift away from talk like this, we'll get back to it I'm sure, but I want to know a little more about your personal history. For instance, how did you meet your wife?

BHAVSAR

We were taking art classes together. Print making and history.

ABEED

In New York?



Rangoli (Photo Credit: Swapnali Parab)

BHAVSAR

No, in Philadelphia. To get a visa to come to the US I had to study some kind of technical field, those are the types they wanted to award visas too, so I studied industrial design at Museum College (which is now Philadelphia University). I studied it pretty briefly and let it go, and I wound up studying art at the Tyler School in Temple, and that's where I met (my wife) Janet.

ABEED

When did you move to New York then?

BHAVSAR

Well I came to America in June of 1960, and ended up getting my degree from the University of Pennsylvania. I got the John D. Rockefeller grant in 1965 and was given the opportunity to work in New York. This grant is usually given to mature artists, and was given to several other Indian artists like Avinash Chandra and maybe M.F. Hussain as well, but I was very young at the time and hadn't applied for the grant at all. I received it because an Italian artist named Piero Dorazio, a friend of mine, knew the director of the grant and advocated for it on my behalf. That was a very auspicious beginning for me. As soon as I arrived in New York I was introduced and embraced by a very vibrant and active artistic community. The 60's in New York was, I'm reluctant to use the word, but it was a kind of a renaissance of sort. The art and expressive period of that time was really extraordinary. I met quite a few of the luminaries of the period : Mark Rothko, Ken Olden, Jules Olitsky, Adolph Gottlieb, Margaret Newman, a number of names that have become either historical figures or footnotes. I was sort of placed into the center of the art world at the time.

ABEED

And did you start exhibiting in New York immediately?

BHAVSAR

More or less. I had been exhibiting works in Philadelphia before, from 1963 on, but through Piero Dorazio I was able to start showing in the Marlboro gallery pretty soon upon my arrival in New York. In 1969, near the end of it, my dealer Max Hutchinson decided he would open up a gallery here. At that time it was called SoHo, it was called "Hell's Hundred Acres". Since my works were huge works, you needed large spaces. So instead of opening a gallery uptown on 57th street he decided to open up here in what we call SoHo.

ABEED

So you were here before the beginning.

BHAVSAR

Maybe not before, but *at* the beginning or close to it. I had a studio behind Judson Church between 1965 and 1968. I moved it to Howard street which isn't far from here (Greene Street), near Chinatown. I was there for three years. During that time my first shows started happening. My work was shown in Boston very successfully. Then Max Hutchinson, who came from Australia, offered to host an opening with my art. He actually opened his gallery with my art in 1969 into 1970, and I moved my studio from Howard Street to this place. And we've been here since then. This whole place was considered pretty hazardous back then. It wasn't totally empty, but there wasn't any commercial activity really. There was maybe a rag clothing store, where they re-packaged surplus industrial clothing down the street, but nothing else.

ABEED

And when you first saw this place specifically, this loft, how did you first start living here?

BHAVSAR

When we first moved in here, I mean it had tall windows, lots of light and space to work, and I thought "I want this place." And the rent was initially \$200 a month. I think the landlord raised it to \$400. Now we own it of course, Janet and I.

ABEED

Do you remember seeing some of the classic poets, artists, writers, dancers who were working in and around this area at the time?

BHAVSAR

Oh sure. Behind Judson Church I shared a studio with a dancer named Elaine Summers. In the front part of the studio people like Merce Cunningham would show up, and I would invite people like Rothko and Gottlieb for events or viewings. We'd have all sorts of dealings there too, dance performances, happenings, political debates. And of course I met a lot of people during that period and formed a really solid community, almost like a family. The art market wasn't formed to the level that it is now, and people weren't businessmen yet. I think that facilitated camaraderie between artists.

ABEED

Was there a spot you remember that was especially happening?

BHAVSAR

Well there was a bar, *Max's Kansas City*, which was around Union Square where a

lot of younger and mid-level artists would convene and hang out. It was close to the University, so there was this youthful, restless energy. And there was the *Cedar Bar* in the village which was already pretty established when I started going there, and well known artist like De Kooning, Robert Rauchenberg, Andy Warhol. When I first arrived here I could see Andy Warhol hanging around a block from my studio, checking out street acrobats. That was before he was *Andy Warhol*. Everyone was just emerging back then, even Rothko and Newman.

ABEED

Did you find yourself being influenced by all of these creative individuals?

BHAVSAR

Well, influenced isn't a word I like to use. I'd say rather that I was inspired, and yes certainly some of my colleagues and the already established figures were inspiring, not just with their art but with their personal energies. Margaret Newman was a personality, along with Rothko, who both had this ascetic quality, which showed in their work. I definitely felt uplifted experiencing personalities like that. And then I'd come back to my studio and feel challenged to create something worthy of having met and interacted with these people. To rise to those challenges helped me feel like I wasn't a novice, but a peer.

ABEED

Was there a sense of competition between all of you?

BHAVSAR

We didn't need competition to provide motivation. The camaraderie itself was a kind of electricity that powered us. It sounds idealistic, but it really was that way. Like I said, the art market wasn't quite what it is now. For example, I remember Adolph Gottlieb coming into a room with a few friends, we were having dinner, and he said "I'm so excited, I just sold four paintings." We asked "How much?" He said "\$5,000 apiece." Now each of those would have probably fetched around a million dollars.

ABEED

That was forty years ago. What was it exactly that contributed to this huge explosion in the market?

BHAVSAR

I think the price structure changed after the late 70s. What happened was Europeans were almost giddy about America being their protector now in the post-World

War/Cold War Era. Europeans started paying very high prices for American art. A gentleman named Leo Castelli, who was an American but he was born in Trieste, Italy and came from a very affluent family, he was a very smart businessman. He managed to take American art to Europe and cultivated huge audiences there in the late 70s. And then of course the pop art movement became very big with certain businessmen. Guys like Philip Johnson, the architect, patronized all of the major pop art figures: Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Rosenquist, all those guys. When I came here the most their works would fetch were maybe \$5,000. In the 70s they went up to the \$10,000 range. In the 80s it exploded even further, with the Japanese entering the market in earnest, and some of those works now became several hundred thousand dollars.

ABEED

In the prior generation Americans had gone to Europe to buy art, right? It was the American art collectors who were buying Picasso and Matisse.

BHAVSAR

That's correct. Europeans weren't paying top dollar for those works. And I think since the European market was built up, it had to sort of balance out with American art's commercial ascendancy.

ABEED

And here you are, the Indian in America. Do you ever imagine what it would have been like staying in India?

BHAVSAR

Sometimes. I don't think it would have been possible to have had the career that I've had if I stayed there. Most of my development has been in this country. In India I would have had to teach to survive. That doesn't rule out certain possibilities, but it makes a difference. Had I stayed in India I wouldn't have had the access to the material conveniences needed to do what I do now. In America I had a \$10,000 Rockefeller grant and I was able to buy all sorts of supplies, large canvasses that I couldn't have got in India. I've always believed that the development of art depends on the availability of materials to make it.

ABEED

Do you think that accounts for maybe the relative fewness of Indians who are creating with the level of notoriety and attention you've gotten?

BHAVSAR

Well in the late 1960s and 70s that certainly was the case. Back then most Indians didn't have access to the tools to make contemporary art on the level that people in the West were accustomed seeing or were interested in. They would have had to pay ten times for something like Windsor-Newton colors on 1/10 the income. Now of course, things have changed. There's plenty of money in India, and things that I thought were impossible just a couple of decades ago seem very possible now. So we might see some kind of explosion in contemporary art coming from there soon.

ABEED

What's going on with the scene in India right now?

BHAVSAR

It's moving into a different stratosphere without experiencing a certain hardship. If you take out that first generation of Indian contemporary artists, Hussain, Reza, Akbar Pademsee, they were doing quite all right. They persevered. But then bringing art to auction houses here jumped the prices to such a level that reality totally changed. It wasn't healthy. Then young artists, who didn't really understand what they were doing started charging lakhs and lakhs for their work. That might work in the US, but in India, so few people can actually afford to pay for the art. The number of people who actually enjoy and appreciate the art *and* who can afford it is very small. And so the people buying in India are businessmen, speculators, and not really people who appreciate art. There's a sense in which it's good because people are paying for art and respecting it, but-

ABEED

Well it seems like a delicate balance.

BHAVSAR

It is. You need a market to promote art, to make the practice of making it sustainable, but the speculative market can have a harsh effect. People start to buy art like diamonds, an investment. You see that here with Andy Warhol's work. Personally I don't think his work says much, but they sell for really astronomical figures. What is expensive and what is truly valuable are not always the same thing.

ABEED

In India, art has traditionally been artisan, folk art, hand crafts, or community ventures like rangoli or song and dance. What do you think of art in the public square versus just commercial art?

BHAVSAR

Well I think it's of vital importance. Art of course is an extrusion of our elemental feelings, its elemental expression, and it can bind us together in tremendous ways. I'm very keen on seeing art in the public square. It's essential.

ABEED

What advice would you give to aspiring South Asian artists?

BHAVSAR

Artists with strong character usually follow their own inner spirits, but having some formative experiences in a metropolitan center is a necessity to get the proper exposure for one's creative pursuits, and to enlarge one's horizons of understanding for the creative process and its challenges. If I had not arrived in NYC at the most expressive period in the art world in America, I would have missed the major inspirational thrust of my creative life. ■