



Jonathan Singer, *Starfish Flower*, 2007, digital photograph, 45" x 35".  
New Jersey State Museum.

## Jonathan Singer

New Jersey State Museum  
Trenton

Inspired by 17th-century Dutch painters such as Vermeer and Rembrandt, Jonathan Singer works with carefully controlled light sources to make his irresistibly seductive color photographs of plants from around the world, some common and others rare or endangered.

In the first of two consecutive shows curated by Dr. Karen Reeds, a historian of science and medicine, visitors were invited to view photographic specimens from Singer's sprawling project, "Botanica Magnifica," alongside historically relevant materials assembled by Reeds, including prints by John James Audubon and Mark Catesby. One could linger over Singer's framed Iris prints on handmade paper and examine a hand-bound solander-box version of one of the folios from his unique five-volume project portfolio, which is in the rare-book collection of the Smithsonian.

Long exposures with a Hasselblad digital camera produced brilliant, complex colors and a subtle chiaroscuro effect in images of natal gingers and wild bananas, starfish flowers and tulips. Whether working in the field or the studio, Singer

emphasizes contours, placing his subjects against deep black backgrounds. He remains faithful to the scientific, priding himself on color accuracy. Yet these images—filled with esthetic revelations of form—feel charged, even romantic.

In an underside view of the majestic *Victoria amazonica*, a giant water lily whose buoyant leaf can span more than six feet in diameter, an astonishing network of red and yellow ribs radiates out from the center of the circular pad. Also intriguing was Singer's Ghost Orchid, *Polyradicion lindenii*, an endangered species that inhabits Florida's cypress swamps, which appeared on one of the show's text panels. The flower was thrust into the popular imagination by Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* and the related

film *Adaptation*, but no background knowledge was needed to appreciate the specimen—or Singer's radiant vision of the delicate, and threatened, natural world.

—Robin Rice

## Natvar Bhavsar

Contessa  
Cleveland

The abstract paintings of Natvar Bhavsar seem poised between clarity and chaos, like evanescent clouds of in-

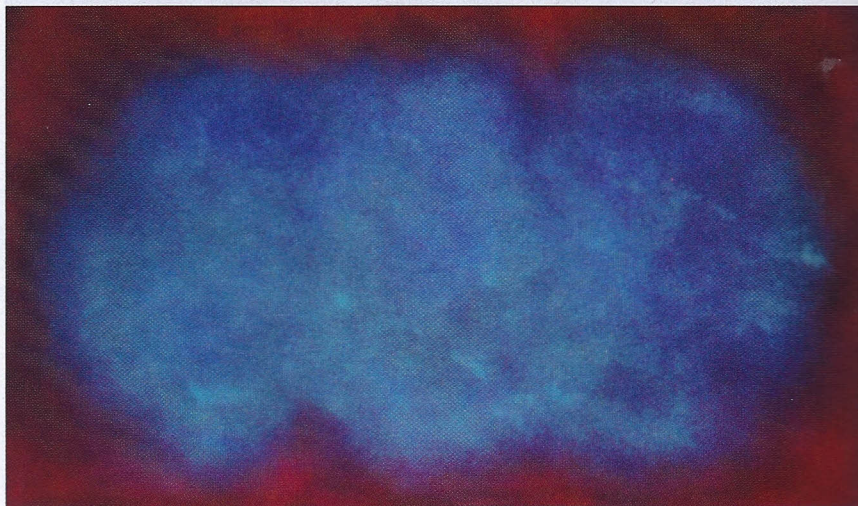
terstellar gas that have yet to form into stars.

Born in the Indian state of Gujarat in 1934, Bhavsar established himself in New York in the mid-1960s, drawing inspiration from contemporaries including Color Field painters Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, and Helen Frankenthaler. By sifting powdered pigment through screens and allowing the colored dust to settle on canvases or paper soaked in a clear acrylic or acryloid medium, Bhavsar created a fresh avenue of abstraction, one that he is still exploring. Through these works, he plumbs childhood memories of Hindu festivals such as Holi, during which revelers playfully douse each other with colored powder.

This show of 26 paintings from the past decade gave a sense of the artist's masterful ability to exploit color to evoke powerful moods and emotions, and to generate spatial tension through contrasts. Warm, bright hues appear to advance and cool, darker ones to recede. In *MUGDHAA II* (2009), squiggling arabesques in various colors create a carpet of free-flowing, gestural shapes that vibrate on a field of electric blue. In *SRAVANAA* (2008), a field of smoldering rust red seems to exhale a frosty, luminous cloud of turquoise and cobalt.

Bhavsar's surfaces often look dry, as if they are crusted with colored sand, which, in a way, they are. Sometimes he gives his paintings a high shine reminiscent of baked enamel or creates effects resembling the pebbly texture of leather. Taken as a whole, Bhavsar's work embodies an intersection of East and West, Color Field painting filtered through Indian culture.

—Steven Litt



Natvar Bhavsar, *SRAVANAA*, 2008, acrylic, dry pigments, and acryloids on canvas, 54" x 90". Contessa.