

■ Art

Show of new paintings by Bhavsar opened Nov. 25

By Jyotirmoy Datta

If Rembrandt or Velasquez was to visit us in 2008, we would have been in perplexity explaining to the great Spanish and Dutch masters our notions of art, — what with Damien Hirst's 'Shark' preserved in 'formaldehyde' selling for more than \$ 10 million, and Andy Warhol's identical soup cans for even more — had it not been for shows such as 'RANG: Natvar Bhavsar' opening at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Chelsea Noember. 25. It runs through December 27.

Bhavsar's paintings are in the tradition of great art through the ages. They are the opposite of the sensational. The roller-coaster of the art market might induce us to lose sight of the verities of art. 'RANG: Natvar Bhavsar' will restore the balance.

While the materials, techniques, subjects, styles, patrons, etc, of art have changed over the ages, it has remained unchanged in its essence — creativity. The purpose of art is not to reflect, reproduce, or insert objects from life into its field — but to rival nature and repeat on a human scale the infinite cre-

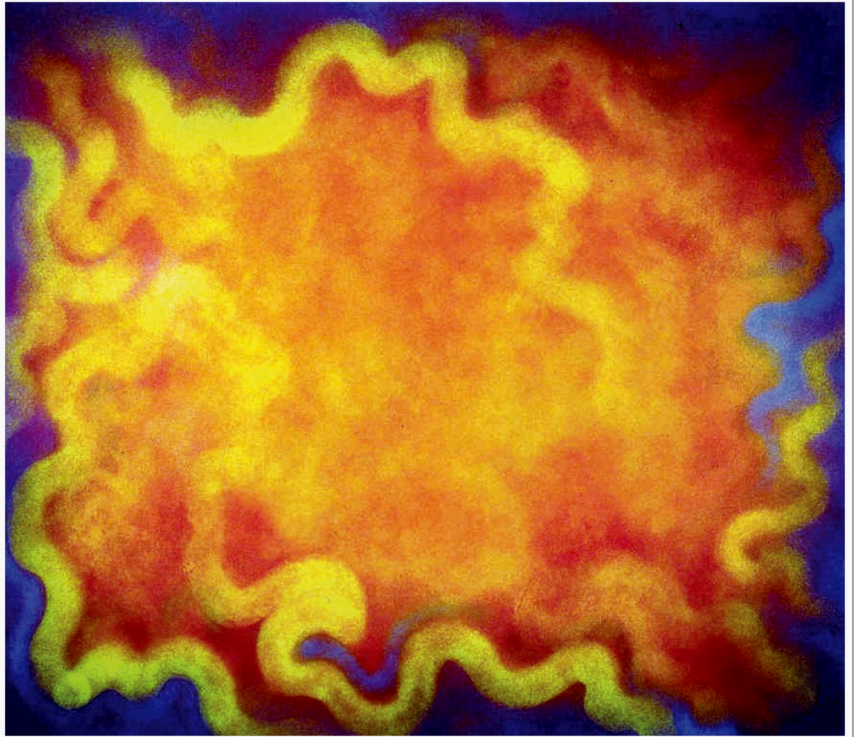
Natvar Bhavsar's paintings are in line with great art through the ages. The roller-coaster of the art market might induce us to lose sight of the Pole Star of art. 'RANG: Natvar Bhavsar' will restore the balance.

ativity of God.

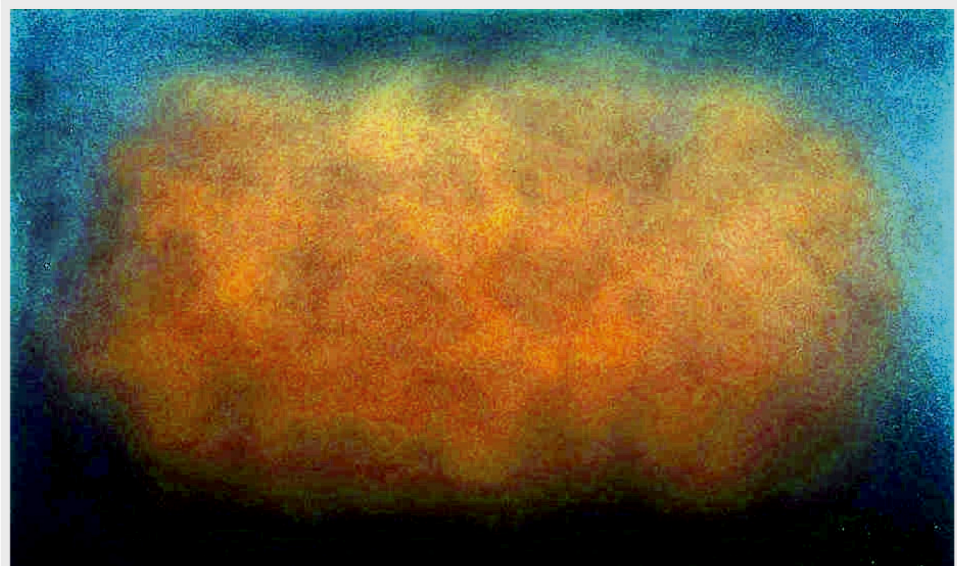
Boastful words?

Can a puny human re-enact the dance of creation of the supernova and black holes? Is not our space and time too limited?

Look at Bhavsar's 'Agamya,' — or the 'impenetrable,' the 'unapproachable,' the 'un-understandable; — and you realize that the same *agamya* spirit that is at work in nebulas in distant universes and neutrinos at the



Two new works by Natvar Bhavsar featured in 'Rang,' opening at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York on November 25. PHOTO ABOVE: RASIKAA, 2006, Pure pigment on canvas, 100 x 112 1/2". PHOTO BELOW: AGAMYAA II, 2008, Pure pigment on canvas, 110 x 115 1/2". (Photos, as they appear at sundaramtagore.com)



heart of atoms were also at work in the silence of Bhavsar's studio on Greene Street.

To the academic art student, it is almost a sacrilege to talk about the emotional power of a painting, or speak of its philosophical meaning.

But to try to limit oneself to only Bhavsar's technique of dropping pigments on his canvases is like describing the phenomenon of the change of seasons and the advent of spring in purely entomological terms, describing pollination by butterflies.

Yes, it is important to locate Bhavsar's place in the micro world of New York schools in the late 20th century, but it is also an epiphany to find in him a major world artist, with a style as mature as that of Velasquez, and a content as pregnant with philosophy as that of Rembrandt.

There will be the ephemeral and the timeless. There will be the newspaper headlines about the 'Damien Hirsts of Delhi.' And there will be the classical history of Indian art and thought — which will record the journey of the Indian spirit from the Vedas through the Upanishads, from the Mathuran Buddhas to Ajanta and Ellora, through Kalidasa and Rabindranath Tagore, through the Basohli and Kangra masters to Natvar Bhavsar.

Bhavsar belongs to both India and New York — he straddles both, and transcends both.

Lillie Wei wrote in 'Art in America' about Bhavsar: "Indian-born, New York-based Natvar Bhavsar makes velvet-napped, sumptuously colored canvases and works on paper that suggest Color Field painting filtered through impressions of Indian life, its art and cosmic imagery. The rich, rainbow hues of Indian paintings and sculpture from such sites as Ajanta and Ellora; the resplendent tints and sheens of textiles such as women's saris; the luxuriant flowers and jewel-like pigments used in the rituals of his homeland — all have found their way into these color-saturated paintings."

Bhavsar's softly textured surfaces are the result of his particular working process: brushing fine, dry pigment through a screen over acrylic-soaked canvases which absorb and hold it in place, a practice that has been likened to Jackson Pollock's pours, the stain painting of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, and to Native American sand painting (although Bhavsar was unaware of the latter when he made comparable works).

Bhavsar is all this and more.

First, — I have come to appreciate this more and more, as I study Indian history, ancient and modern — he is a Gujarati.

We often forget how great has been Gujarat's contribution to civilization.

As the 'Periplus of the Erythraean Sea', a Greek guide to the Indian Ocean written in the 2nd century makes evident, the Gujaratis were great seafarers who were at home in distant ports even two thousand years ago.

People in India speak of the mathematical genius of the Tamils, the literary bent of the Bengalis, the bravery of the Punjabis, the martial prowess of the Marathas. Gujarat was civilized long before the Gangetic plain. In the modern age, the two men who shaped our politics were Gujaratis — Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

The arc of land in the north-west of the subcontinent — Sindh, Rajputana and Gujarat — cradle of Indian civilization -- is where history is still being made -- from the Bhuttos to Narendra Mody. Three of the world's six richest men have their roots in that desert-and-salt-marsh belt of India. Yet unrecognized by the media, many of the most innovative thrusts in the subcontinent are coming out of that most fertile desert crescent.

Although his works are not featured in sales of modern and contemporary Indian art, he is arguably the most Indian of all painters today — both in form and in content.

He is also perhaps the greatest. These paintings are not only large in size. They are also sublime in meaning.