

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

FEBRUARY 2004

artseen

Natvar Bhavsar Sundaram Tagore Gallery

I first met Natvar Bhavsar in 1980 at his exhibition at the Wichita Art Museum in Kansas. I was familiar with Bhavsar's paintings in New York during my graduate student days at New York University, but to see a major exhibition in Wichita by this Indian painter whose work I had admired at Max Hutchinson Gallery in SoHo was an undeniable thrill. I still remember how the paintings felt—the immense scale, the vibrant color, the bursting sensation of cosmic joy—all embedded with these magical surfaces. It was like a visualization of the *Bhagavad-Gita*—like the struggle and synthesis between Brahma and Atman. The exhibition in Wichita was a true sensation—true, in the sense, that it transmitted something real, something beyond the fray of art school painting, something I could feel and embody and remember. To know is to remember—and this was precisely the nature of the experience in relation to Natvar Bhavsar's paintings at that moment in time.

More recently, Bhavsar showed some of his recent smaller paintings at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery on Greene Street. Normally, Bhavsar shows paintings of an immense scale—a scale that perpetrates a feeling of Hindu cosmology where the viewer enters into the universe of a sensibility that merges thought with sensation, dream with reality, nuance with literalness. Memory is important in spite of the assumptions about cynicism that have become *de rigueur* since the days of postmodernism. At the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in SoHo, I experienced an exhibition of canvases by Bhavsar where the density of color literally burst from the center of the painting outward with sinuous tendrils that wove through space at the edges of an ovoid. Yet Bhavsar is not about color field painting. He was never really associated with artists like Noland, Frankenthaler, Olitski, and Louis, even in the late sixties when his immigrant career in New York began.

The titles of Bhavsar's paintings are all in Sanskrit—"Aarakh," "Mangalaa," "Alokaa," and "Satvaa." All the words express subtle variations of emotion. What I respond to in these paintings is precisely that—the subtle variations of feeling. As I entered the back room of the Tagore Gallery, I was confronted with a predominantly gold-ochre painting, entitled "Mangalaa." The common meaning of the word in Hindi refers to a social ritual in which acknowledgement of success or good-tidings is offered to the hon-



Natvar Bhavsar, "SATVAA I" (2003), Pure color pigment on canvas.
Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

ored guest. "Alokaa" refers to a world that is beyond comprehension, a transcendent world not given to immanence alone, nor related to the mundane world of materialism. As for the paintings where these titles are given, the sense of being in the presence of another cosmos where pigment is the signifying element can be exhilarating.

Natvar Bhavsar's paintings hold a remarkable consistency, but this is not to suggest that they are beyond change or beyond the effect of transition from one stage to another. Rather it is to suggest that the emotional respondent is given to color. And that color is the trajectory and the expedient conduit by which emotions are felt and somehow endured over time, over the temporal history in which painting is preserved and understood and assimilated into the stratosphere of linguistic meaning, and thus, given to the cosmos not as an effect but as a source of meaning. What Bhavsar's paintings achieve is a remarkable intimacy that leads us into the present fusion of language, technology, and the transmission of form. They represent the most unequivocal resolution of amorphous Being. This paradox of meaning is an Indian intervention into the stasis of cynicism that remains on the bleak shorelines of Western culture.

—Robert C. Morgan