

Art

Interview

Natvar Bhavsar

Ahead of his first Hong Kong exhibition, the world-renowned abstract expressionist and colour field pioneer tells **Mary Agnew** about making it in New York, hanging with Rothko and Pollock, and the search for ecstasy

On the phone from his home studio in New York's SoHo, the celebrated abstract expressionist and pioneer of colour field painting, 75-year-old Natvar Bhavsar, whispers deep insights into a time of tremendous art exploration and development. As an Indian immigrant artist Bhavsar quickly became a contemporary and friend of the likes of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman and a staple figure within the creative community of his newly found artistic homeland. His soft-spoken stories, much like his paintings, are bathed in the romantic light of a golden era.

What is the meaning of the title of the exhibition, *Rang*?

Rang is a word in Sanskrit which has a dual meaning. Rang is physical colour but is also a very emotive state of being. When you reach the ecstasy of dancing then you have reached a state of rang.

And this ecstasy is true of your art?

Art is in some ways documenting something and in some ways very emotive. There is always an undercurrent that takes you to another place besides yourself, and that is where you have the poetic centre of your being.

So in some ways colour itself becomes a sense?

Yes, colour can become the most important factor in creating your world.

How did this interest in colour become part of your artistic expression?

When I was 20 in India, I did this huge project as part of my university studies, an almost 80-foot-long colour decoration. The whole town came to see it and there was such excitement. When I came to America and encountered the work of Rothko, Pollock and all these very interesting people that were becoming accepted on an international level, I realised I had a lot more to say within their realm.

Did you feel that your works were in conversation with the abstract expressionists at the time?

My first solo show in New York was attended by almost all the professionals using this method at the time. [Willem] De Kooning and many, many of the artists that were working successfully came to see. One of the New York

critics used the names of Turner and Monet in comparison with my work.

Many of these great names are figures that led somewhat troubled lives battling addictions. How did you avoid that same path?

I basically did not think about it. Unfortunately Pollock had a drinking problem and Rothko ultimately succumbed to that problem later on. When I look at someone's art I see that person's spirit there, and that is what I admire. I rarely talk about their addictions because what you are really looking at is their expressive freedom.

What was it about New York at that time?

Paris and all of Europe after the world war had become quite dim. Many, many major artists made their way to America. America was the centre of the cultural world. It was the new world. Art always moves into metropolises where money and power congregate.

What has made you stay in New York?

I think it is the incredible camaraderie and intellect here. I often say that every single day here I have a completely new experience.

How does that environment affect your work?

I go into my studio and I confront the elements of my work. I am like a scientist. I get completely absorbed. When I work in my studio the process is very close to the state of nirvana. My arms and legs are constantly moving. It is like entering a state of aesthetic oneness. That is where I investigate my work. That is where I create.

Rang runs February 24 to March 28, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Road, Central.

Crimson tide Bhavsar is awash with colour

