

Rainbow in Translation

by Liang Pu

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Closing this week at Sundaram Tagore's Hong Kong space is the first East Asian retrospective of Natvar Bhavsar, a famed Indian artist who made his career in New York and his name in Venice. I must agree with the acquisition curators of major museums around the globe: his work is stunning. It is at once immediate and meditative, and refreshingly bereft of conceptual conceit.



Bhavsar left his native state of Gujarat at the age of 24 to pursue an M.F.A. at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. Upon graduating in 1965, he moved to New York's then near-derelict SoHo district, where he has lived ever since. The artist's early career coincided with the rise of minimalism and the color-field masters, and he numbered many of today's household names such as Rothko, Newman, and Motherwell among his good friends. As he recounted some years back in an interview with Rediff India Abroad, "(Rothko) was supposed to come to my show the week he committed suicide. I went to visit him and the doctor had told him not to drink or smoke. He would go out of the room to drink vodka. He asked me to get him a pack of cigarettes. I did it."

The personal association this quote belies was coupled with an artistic affinity that had a profound effect on Bhavsar's art over the last fifty some-odd years. His works are completely abstract color-field experiments with a technique he developed that consisted of soaking a canvas with acrylic-based binders that caused sprinkled paint pigments to affix to its surface. This allowed him to create mesmerizing compositions without ever laying a hand, brush, or pallet directly to the canvas. Instead, Bhavsar sprinkled tiny layers of carefully mixed pigments onto the upturned picture plane—sometimes with the help of either a finely tipped cone or sifting screen.

You could say that this work is "process-driven" in the contemporary Minimalist/1970's New York vein, and you wouldn't be wrong. However, the work perhaps more directly invokes the Indian tradition of sand painting, and the art of *rangoli*—in which the floor just outside a door is typically adorned with decorative patterns of color pigment, sand, or even flower petals. Bhavsar's process is also linked

to the Indian holiday of Holi, where people collect on the streets and throw brightly colored pigments at one another, staining clothes and faces in a rainbow frenzy.

Hence, Bhavsar's work is almost ostentatiously hybrid. Though his admittedly themeless paintings invoke feelings the "universal," they are actually very particular artifacts of the synchronicity that two traditions can perhaps serendipitously settle upon. These canvases are diagrams of cultural translation. But what does such work mean here, in Hong Kong? What happens when another culture intervenes?

Is all this sophisticated cross-referencing lost in translation? Perhaps this third space is the true test for the artist's own intention that his pieces mirror the inner consciousness of each viewer who confronts them.

-- Liang Pu

(Images from top to bottom: *Kundan*, *Ksheetee*, *Anantha XII*. All images courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery and the artist.)

