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Layers of brilliance

Bhavsar takes sprinkled pigments to a new dimension

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We've seen many things done by installation artists with powdered pigment recently, even great rivers and waterfalls of the stuff, but through July, the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum on the main Rutgers University campus is showing the granddaddy of them all. "Natvar Bhavsar: The Dimensions of Color" is a retrospective of the Indian-born artist's "New York School" canvases -- 35 years of painting with sprinkled pigments in a Color Field style.

The real granddaddy of using powdered pigment, of course, is India's Holi festival, during which celebrants spray one another with the bright powders and water in celebration of spring (some Hindus say the tradition grew out of colorful medicinal herbs, which were meant to provide protection during the change of weather from viral fevers and other ailments). If you've ever seen video of a Holi festival -- many other Indian religions hold them now -- you've seen the way the powders clump, stain, and then run down faces, clothing, even whole streets. It's like for a day, reality gets painted by a 3-year-old who can't stay between the lines.

That's as liberating as it sounds, and a lot more fun than a dogwood blooming. The Bhavsar show is actually the third in a series of exhibitions focused on the work of Indians or Indian-Americans, a project developed by the Zimmerli with cultural partners in Central Jersey known as SARI (for South Asian Regional Initiatives). New Jersey has a large and growing South Asian population, and the Zimmerli is both welcoming that population and promoting a kind of cultural meeting of East and West.

Bhavsar is the perfect place to meet. He graduated from Gujarat University in Amdavad in 1960, got his master of fine arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania and moved to New York with a Rockefeller III Fund Fellowship in 1965 (he received a Guggenheim just 10 years later). Not long after coming to this country, he abandoned all figuration (there actually is a figural tradition of painting with powdered pigments in India) and gave himself over to complete abstraction. He still works out of a SoHo loft.

In 1965, abstract expressionism was the waning but still dominant trend in art, and Bhavsar seemed to glide like a great stork right into the trend. Bhavsar works with acrylic medium, pouring the clear plastic directly onto a canvas laid out on the floor; then he sifts powdered pigments into the wet layer through a screen, misting the colors down in thin layers. This process, according to Zimmerli curator Jeffrey Wechsler, is a slow and toxic one, in which Bhavsar wears breathing apparatus and goggles. A single picture background may get as many as 80 layers of polymer and pigment.

The artist gets a remarkable range out of the method, producing big, star-studded Milky Ways on indigo backgrounds, swirling smoke storms, pimply white surfaces that look like clotted cream, and floating lozenges of color, usually a square centered on a contrasting color, that remind you of Mark Rothko. For detailed work he uses a hollow tube -- sort of like a turkey baster, but made of wood and metal -- that can squirt a tiny beehive of powder onto one spot. With this device Bhavsar creates his most mind-boggling images, great swirling caterpillar trails of brilliant color over deeper color that beckon the viewer to pitch headlong into their imaginary space.

There's a great range in size, too, from pieces no bigger than a sheet of typewriter paper to wall-long murals like "Faalguna" (1975), which looks like a shimmering reddish Aurora Borealis. Some, like "Faalguna II," a plasma of bright yellow pigment with a cowlick of sharp red laid over a dark blue ground, are owned by prominent people like the painter Frank Stella. Bhavsar has more than arrived.

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