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STEPHEN SNOWBALL sat down to interview Natvar Bhavsar, a celebrated artist of Indian origin, little did he realise that it would be a journey in self-exploration. His musings ...

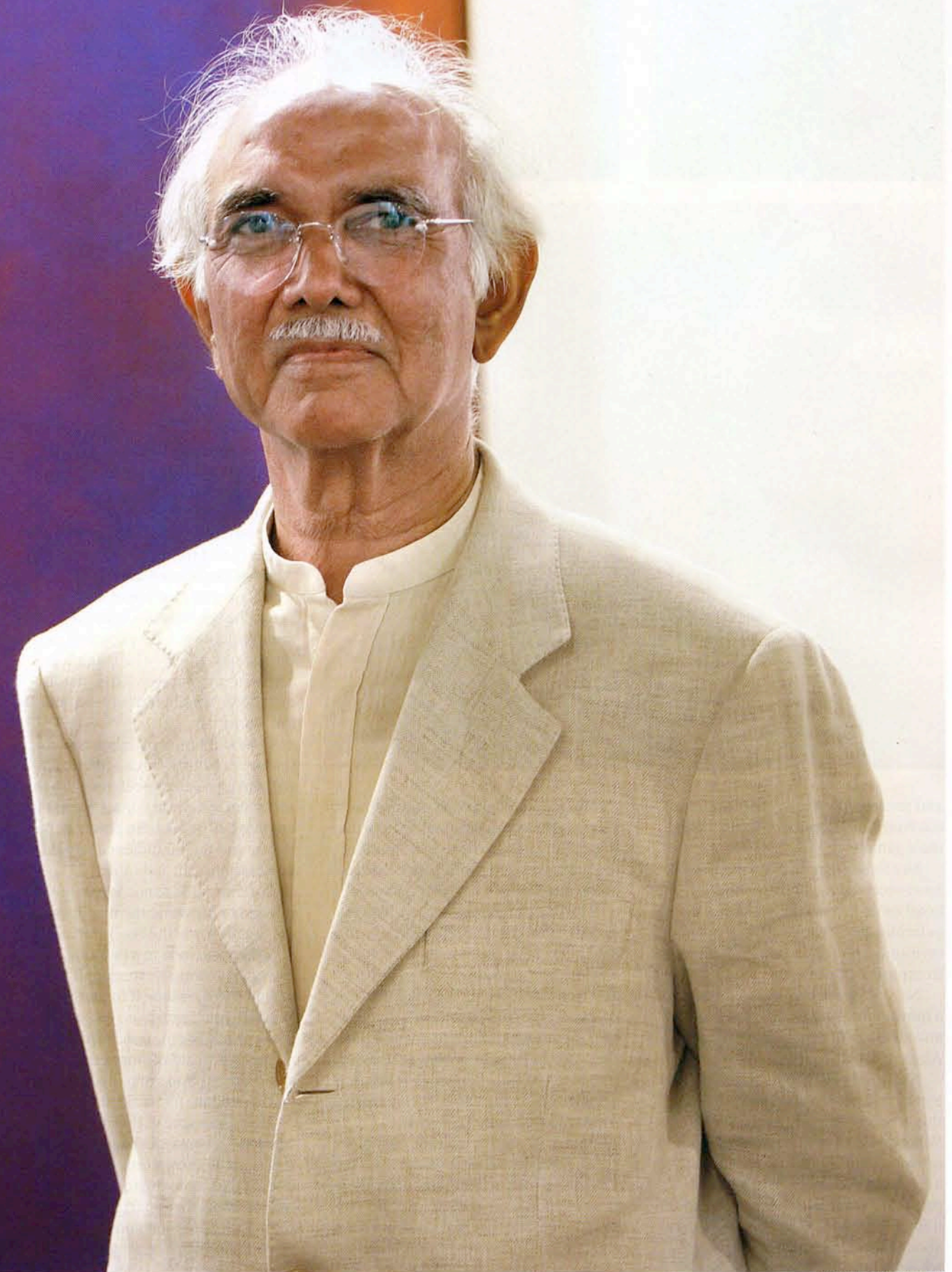
For a second let's forget his longstanding presence in New York City's most prestigious galleries. For a minute, set aside his long list of international tours and even longer list of esteemed accolades. Let's even put off our mind, for a moment, the fact that artist Natvar Bhavsar has been painting with passion and promise since, with the restless hands of youth, he first picked up a paintbrush as a child.

No, what convinced me that I was truly sitting down with a genuine artist was when the one-hour interview slot I was given organically grew into a three-hour conversation about LIFE, which was then followed by an insistent invitation to join him and his wife Janet for dinner!

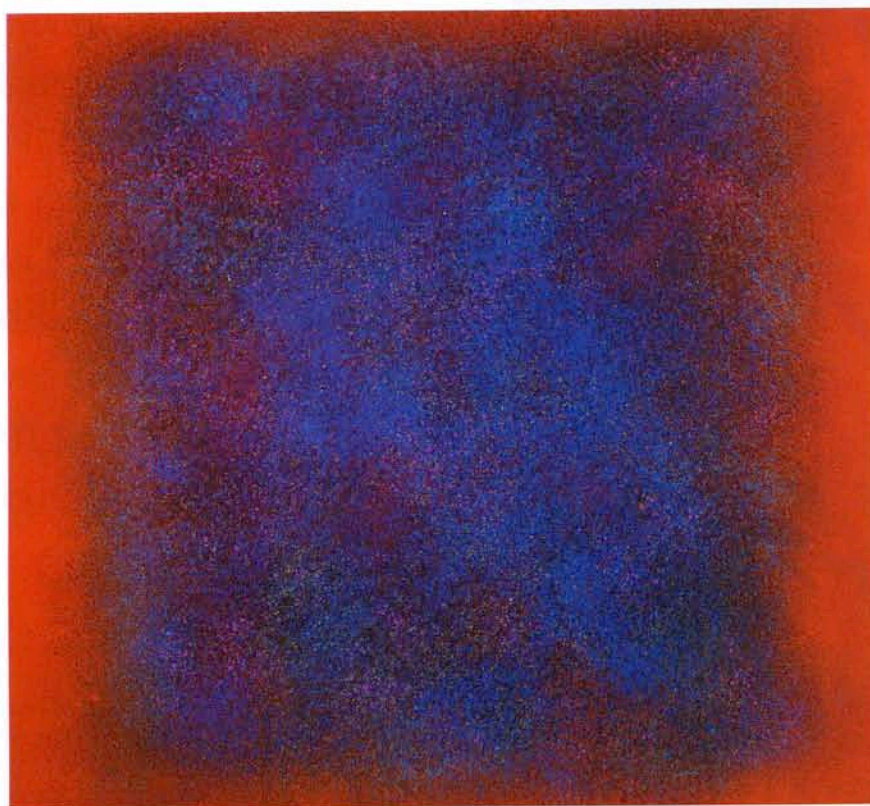
All in all, my inquest into the man and the artist lasted well into the morning hours of the next day, covering everything from his new epitomic property in India, to his grandchildren, to Dubai, to (of course!) his art.

This is the intrinsic nature of an artist no degree, award, or press conference can accurately reflect. As I recall from my days living with artists in Vancouver, this wild openness

A master's stroke



PHOTOS BY KISHORE KUMAR/ANM



and restless interest in other is core to the energy and perspective that fuels their genius.

Not long ago now, Natvar and wife Janet received me in their upscale hotel room in a fashion he hopes his paintings reach each viewer – openly, invitingly and with a powerful impetus to explore.

Natvar's work belongs to a movement known as "Color Field", an extension of a movement within Abstract Expressionism.

Now perhaps this sounds to you like a perfectly good place to stop reading this article! After all: "Abstract Art! What on Earth is so amazing, profound or wonderful about Abstract Art?! Can't a five-year-old knock over a can of paint, roll around in it, frame it, and sell it for \$10 million? Why should I worry about a few circles and squiggles on a piece of paper?"

I fully understand this reaction, as for years it was mine, but I urge you to take this opportunity to hear an account of the processes and significance from one of the movement's defining creators.

The five or ten minutes it will take to walk from this line of the article until its end may just be enough to create a whole new passion for art in the abstract. Considering the relatively low cost and potential payoff, let's together take these few minutes to consider the thoughts and works of Natvar Bhavsar.

So let's begin where Natvar began: decades ago in the small, scenic town of Ahmedabad (formally known as Amdavad), India, in grade school art class. The art teacher took the class into a field and instructed them to use their pencils and sketch pads to capture a piece of the beauty that lay about them.

As a First Class First (a.k.a. smarty pants), Natvar had a keen eye and

In his introduction to a book on Natvar Bhavsar, *Poetics of Color*, Carter Ratcliff, a leading art critic wrote about some of Natvar's works:

Far left: *Yakshi* (painted in 1971) as blue surges into its field of red, the painting expresses a sensuous melancholy.

Left: *Aaruv V* (2005) raises the question: is the yellow expanding or contracting? Suspending the endless alternation of light and dark at a moment of optimum complexity, Bhavsar invokes flux with a static image

Left below: *Manthan III*, (painted in 2005) is happy, without a doubt, until one sees its play of blue against orange and red as an evocation of serenity persisting against the pressure of gloom.

interest in each subject, but something extra special gripped him as his teacher began to move the pencil about the page.

"I didn't understand it!" Natvar beamed in recollection as he sat across from me, staring into some distance, still engrossed in the mystery of the phenomenon: "How could a little piece of wood and lead take an object as ordinary as a tree and open up a whole world of impression and meaning?"

Natvar and I sat silent for a moment before he reiterated, with a continuing, thoughtful awe in his presence. He again puzzled, "The man took a little scrap of paper, a tree in the distance, a small piece of lead and drew the world."

Over our hours together, Natvar seldom produced three sentences without a passionate reference to this sort of 'magical' encounter. He spoke emphatically about the power of nature to lure and the boundless energies of exploration, self, and other.

For him, such magic layers the entire process of his work: the inspiration, the creation and the reception.

When you look at a painting by Natvar, if you are alert enough to not in a moment assume it to be sheer simplicity and move on, you are pulled into a world of emotion, a world of memory, a world of story and exploration – you are pulled into every world and into no world at all.

His works spread like massive windows, at once peering into intimate secret areas known only to oneself, yet also, in that moment, to public, distant worlds altogether apart. With all this room for expression and exploration, since a young age he's expressed his desire "to paint for a thousand years".

This is an expression of his desire to engage himself, the world, and the other for not a thousand years, but for ever – without end, without a goal or finishing line.

So how do you achieve such a lofty, er, goal? His work is the integration of thousands upon thousands upon thousands of microscopic, precision-placed dots of colour. The effect is overwhelming to the patient stare.

His canvases stretch as far as 30 metres, yet any given square inch of the surface comes as a thick quilt of innumerable, intentional specs of colour. They exist at once as micro images, definitive expressions of individuality, but also cohere with one another in massive murals representative of grand narratives.

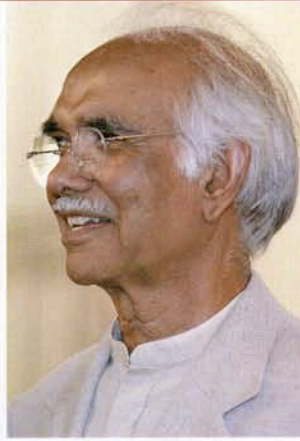
He understands this as a powerful metaphor for life, the work of science, love – he sees its significance and pattern everywhere.

This mixture unfolds as an inescapable avenue towards exploration. A matter of minutes spent tracking the dips and ridges of colours and paint sends one into a forest path. A look from a few feet away lures you into the calm of one colour, one pattern,

blending into a new one – like the transitions of passions in life and love.

Such changes come sharp and suddenly at times, or at other times gradually, with infinitesimal in-between steps along the way. The point (if you'll indulge an unavoidable pun) is it is not long before the passion and depth that went into the work has awoken the emotions that lie deep within ourselves. "One must resist a design, or style, or goal as such." Natvar shared as he spoke about his creative process. "To open yourself with a preconceived notion of what you will find could be the most costly mistake. To engage in self-exploration, or to approach another person with a goal or design for an outcome is disastrous."

We must be open, we must be willing – eager even – to share. Vital, however,



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in achieving this with some sense of success, we first and foremost must be honest in these efforts.

For Natvar there certainly is no design as such. When creating (for ten or so hours a day, seven or so days a week), he likens his state of mind to an indescribable plain between meditation and ecstasy. Colour, individuality and unity come as the most natural vehicles for his lifelong, "emotive need to share".

With these tools he is able to trace his thousand new paths to beauty, pain and pleasure – wherever an "overpowering sense of connection" with the energies of self, other, diversity and unity steer

him. He truly feels enraptured as he walks through these mysterious, marvellous paths.

The focused devotion of the creative process renders equally enchanted pieces, that stand like portals into wild unknowns: most intimate, warm friends and most distant, indifferent strangers.

All abstract art is marked by necessitating viewers to see beyond the "aesthetic" value a work may have. Natvar has contributed an unrivalled ability to turn this (often times difficult) necessity into an inviting prospect.

The colours are warm. They are massive. They are the inexhaustible detail of starry night condensed into metres of canvas. A fit comparison for his art thus comes as the awe-inspiring, mysterious, beautiful night sky. As this celestial shroud enchants, encouraging reflection on the important things in life, so too, some time in front of a Natvar can stir and nurture heart and soul.

OK, I'm going to take a big leap and hope that at least for a minute now, we've agreed that in this sense, "Abstract Art" is not as idle and ridiculous as some misconceptions at times suppose. If you will grant this, a look at Natvar the man will illustrate how his art has come to embody his life as a whole.

So put down this article and get out there already! The world, the art, the friend, the stranger – they're all waiting! **E**

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NATVAR BHAVSAR, THE MAN, AN INDIAN

If the name doesn't give it away, Natvar Bhavsar is Indian. As such he is but one expression of the more than one billion perspectives the subcontinent has produced. This in itself, this volume, is overwhelming to most of us. How can more than a billion people call the same place home? My flat houses four people, and between us alone there's enough diversity and history to spend a life time exploring: how does one begin to discuss a billion people under one banner? How does each hold its place, how does each fit the whole?

I've been lucky enough to visit the subcontinent that defines contrast and contradiction. Immersed in *bhindis* (okra) and *beedis* (rustic cigarettes), I've been in third class cabins on 30-hour train rides, swam the Great Ganges and walked the paths of Gandhi.

To this day, India – the extremities of affluence and deprivation, the architecture, the psychology, the spirituality, the history, the people – all wrapped up in a bundle of grandeur and grotesque, is one of the few places that truly defy description. India changes you.

As I sit back and survey these thoughts I cannot help but recall Natvar's canvases. Indeed, they truly are Indian. As such, Natvar treats India like his art. His passion for both further impel his innate urge, his necessity to share.

Two things bring him endless satisfaction: introducing people to art, and introducing people to India. Each of these introductions will unfold uniquely for each person. Neither allow for predictable results, but more often than not, lifelong, inexplicable friendships form. At present, both India and Natvar's work are growing on the global scene. With the unstoppable, steamrolling economy of India emerging and growing by the

second, its corresponding culture, art and history are receiving equally unprecedented attention.

Though Natvar has made New York City his hometown since arriving in the 1960s, his connection and affinity for his homeland has never wavered.

As such, he has collaborated with artists from every discipline and architects from every school and built a true "work of art" residence in childhood hometown, Ahmedabad.

When you combine the fact that he uses the art-ridden estate to host dinners, gatherings and evenings of conversation with people from all over the world from all walks of life, it is easy to understand that this Indian home is a true, living monument to the highest ideals of globalisation.

Through his home, art and life, Natvar grasps each opportunity he can to implore those around him to engage themselves, life and those around them with an eager, open commitment to honest exploration.