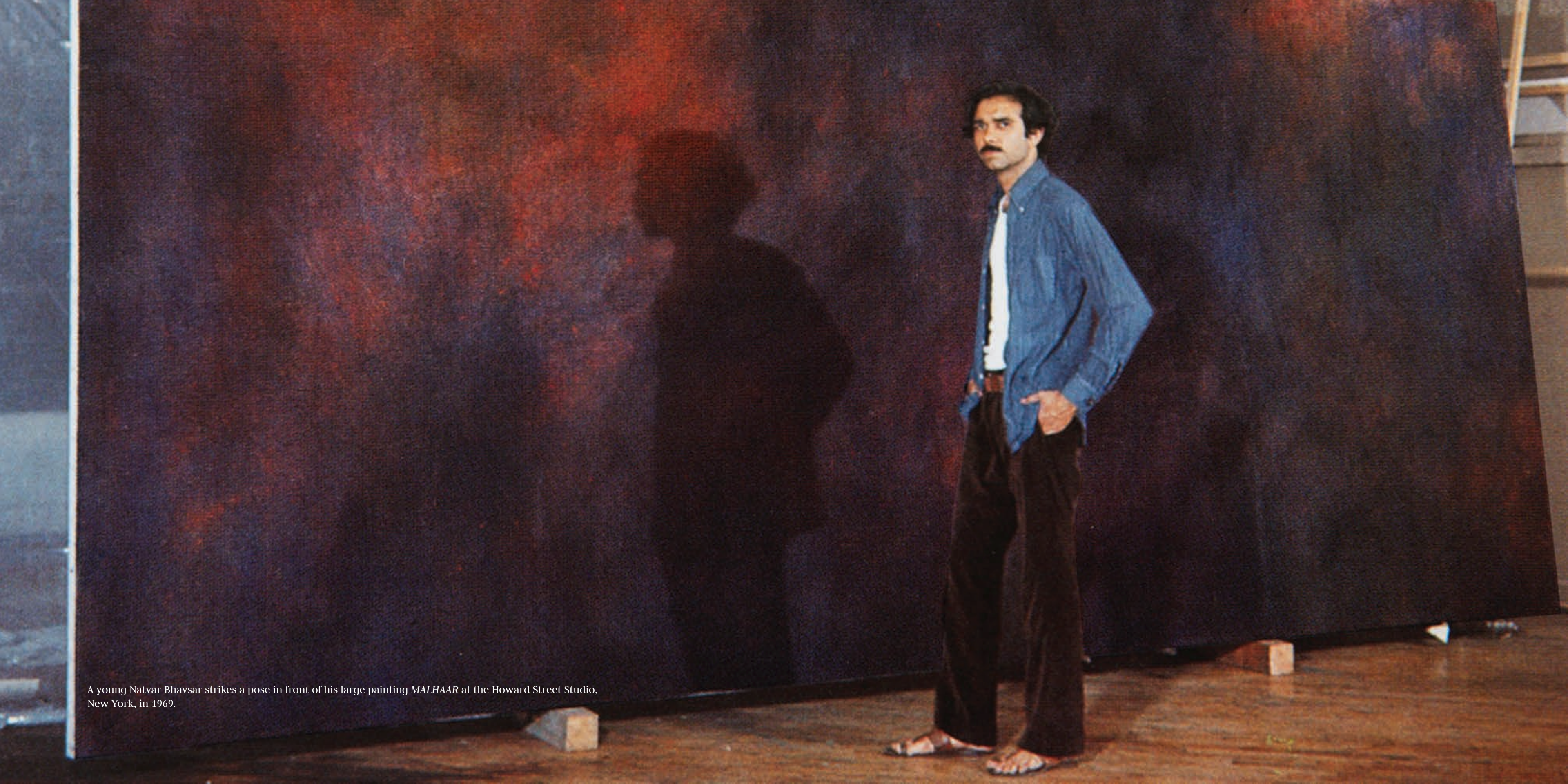

NATVAR BHAVSAR

Realms *of* Infinity





A young Natvar Bhavsar strikes a pose in front of his large painting *MALHAAR* at the Howard Street Studio, New York, in 1969.

NATVAR BHAVSAR
Realms *of* Infinity



NATVAR BHAVSAR

Realms of Infinity

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Preface

Realms of Infinity

At ninety years old, Natvar Bhavsar is still sprightly, still painting, and still conscious of the legacy he wants to leave behind in the world of art. It is these qualities I most admire about him—his tenacity and adherence to a routine that includes the time he spends in his studio; his ability to enjoy the company of the art world as well as friends; and to be mindful, always, as much of others as of himself and his legacy. His story, like his art, is larger than life, yet he carries himself with humility and a quiet confidence. A confidence that stems from an awareness of his role as a colour-field abstractionist whose unique methods have not only enriched but also transcended the traditions of a genre he inherited from its founders. In life and in the art world, Natvar stands tall as a legend.

At DAG, we have been delighted to represent Natvar, first hosting his retrospective in Mumbai in 2017, and displaying his works at solo booths at art fairs in Shanghai, Dubai, and now in New York at The Armory Show. His work is both universal and personal, and like the artist who embodies within himself the values of a universal humanity as well as an innate Indianness, his paintings are simultaneously global and Indian. It is a necessary duality for him, but few, if any, artists have managed it as well before him.

In this, his ninth decade, a little over six of which have been spent in America, it is time to toast Natvar's life and work. To see him being celebrated by Artsy as a 'Living Legend' among Asian American artists—the only one from India—and his work and name splashed across digital billboards at New York's subway transit stations in May this year was a heady feeling. We are committed to ensuring that the artist's work continues to gain the recognition that is his due and are working on a large exhibition that will celebrate his distinctive place among artists around the world.

ASHISH ANAND
CEO and MD, DAG

The Infiniteness of Natvar Bhavsar

‘When such familiar things as light and darkness—sunlight and shadow—migrate from ordinary space to the realm of the painting, transformations are inevitable’

CARTER RADCLIFF



When Janet Brosius Bhavsar took this picture of her artist-husband, Natvar Bhavsar, in his home studio in Soho, she could not have known that it might spark a question some decades later about size and scale in relationship with the artist. Here, Natvar stands diminutive, almost dwarfed by the massive canvas beside him. Other large paintings can be seen on different walls. There is no doubt that the artist, by comparison, is the smaller figure, even though he is the creator of these gigantic works. It was the freedom New York afforded him when he first arrived there in the 1960s—to paint freely without any restrictions of size—that was one of the reasons that led to his choosing the city as his home. Another, of course, was his quick absorption into the company of senior colour-field artists such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Piero Dorazio, among a few others. If America had become the centre of the art world, New York was its heartbeat—and Natvar would create his own dance to that beat.

It has been six decades since his arrival in America, and this year large billboards with images of his paintings more than dwarfed the artist, representing the only Indian that Artsy honoured among a group of Asian-American painters for whom New York was home. Natvar turned ninety years old earlier this year, but he continues to paint, undeterred by the challenge of the size of his paintings. But it is not just the scale of his work that is extraordinary; nor even the colours, which are magnificent and daring; but the physicality of the process of their creation that is arduous and deserving of an ovation. If large implies scale as so many of Natvar’s paintings do, it is also the making of the painting that requires a largeness—of vision, materials, ideas, and time—that is an essential part of the Natvar experience. His process is based on sieving dry, organically obtained pigments and fixing them with adhesive fasteners to the canvas, using his breath and the movement of his body to control the multiple layerings that create a tactile surface unlike that achieved by any other artist.

In the six decades that his career has spanned in New York, the artist’s technique has not varied in any significant manner, though there are times when his paintings have responded to a certain idea. Even so, it would be difficult to qualify his work into series. Art-historians and writers who have spent decades looking

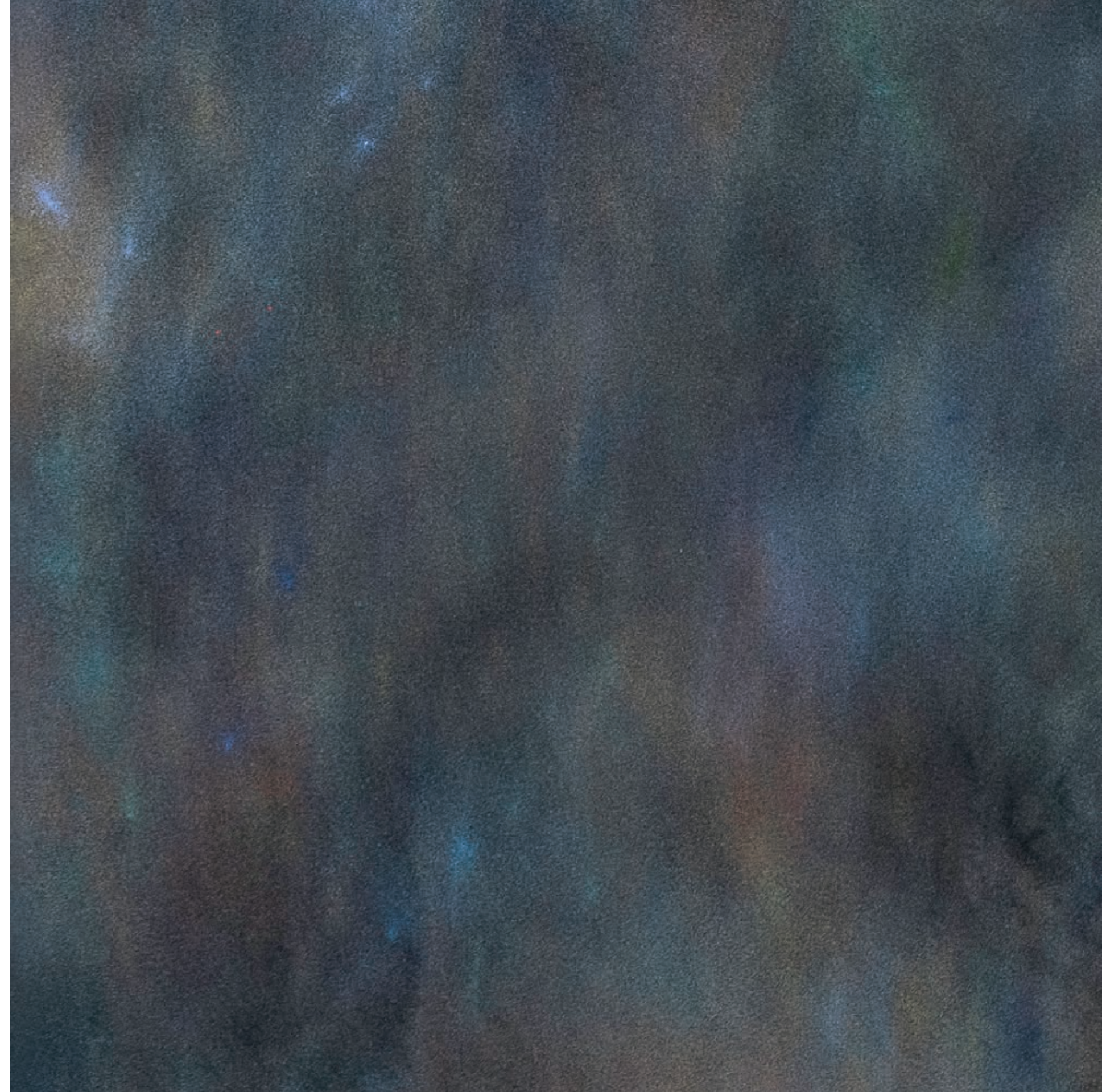
at his work have attempted to find the inspirations that have shaped his work. In giving his paintings titles that resonate with Indian names—in Sanskrit, Hindi or other Indian languages—the artist is establishing an identity that has shaped his consciousness, even though the ‘colour field’ aspect of modernism is something he acquired in America. They have also asserted elements such as his fondness for the spring festival of Holi and its celebration using colours, as well as his maternal family’s profession as textile dyers, revealing his foundational conditioning that informs his choice/use of colours in his practice.

While that may be fundamentally and notionally true, Natvar’s art does not specify or particularise ideas, anecdotes, places or objects. Looking at the span of these paintings, one can question whether these are about the infinity (and celestial beauty) of space; about festivities and celebrations; about the great unknowns of our landscapes; about nature in its vastness (or closeness). He implies energy as well as meditative calm within the same painting, depending on one’s perspective or mood when viewing his work; in this, one can read a philosophical construct. There is also his love of music and its cadences that seem to uplift the viewer to a plane beyond the sensoriness of the visual to the aural. Like most abstract artists, one may enter his paintings at any point, or exit it from any point, thereby finding in it forever evolving options of interpretation and understanding. And yet, you do not need to ‘understand’ his work. Merely responding to it is enough.

Natvar was carving a path for himself as an artist in Ahmedabad, painting murals and frescos with an emphasis on size, when he decided to enrol for a course at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art to study industrial design, discontinuing it later for a course in painting at the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, and subsequently gaining admission at the University of Pennsylvania for a graduate programme in art. Serendipitously, on the eve of his departure for India at the conclusion of his course, he was offered the John D. Rockefeller III Fund fellowship, thereby establishing and launching his career as a colour-field artist. Soon enough, he was picked up for a solo exhibition at the Max Hutchison Gallery in New York; the Jewish Museum displayed his large paintings; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired his works, sealing his reputation as an artist with the ambition and drive to create his own history.

Natvar has exhibited extensively in America and in select parts of the world, always to critical acclaim. His work is part of global museums and institutional collections. The artist has known success for the larger part of his career, aware of his place not as an ‘Indian’ artist, or an ‘American’ one, but one who is truly global and who, despite the massive scale of so many of his paintings, easily overcomes them with his vision and focus that marks him as one of the most important artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that the world has known.

KISHORE SINGH





Catalogue



‘The active facture at the edges of the 1972 pictures led to paintings whose surfaces were far more eruptive, although all-overness was maintained. Because of their assertiveness and drama, they look ‘expressionist’, but they are not, because they do not seem to express tempestuous inner emotions generally associated with expressionist painting. But the mood of Bhavsar’s pictures did change from tranquillity to exuberance. The explosive bursts, surges, and spurts of colour evoke luminous energy packed forces. Bhavsar thought of the movement of colour as a visual dance.’

IRVING SANDLER

SAR-A-VARA

Dry pigment, acrylic medium on canvas, 1973

81.5 × 96.0 in. / 207.0 × 243.8 cm.

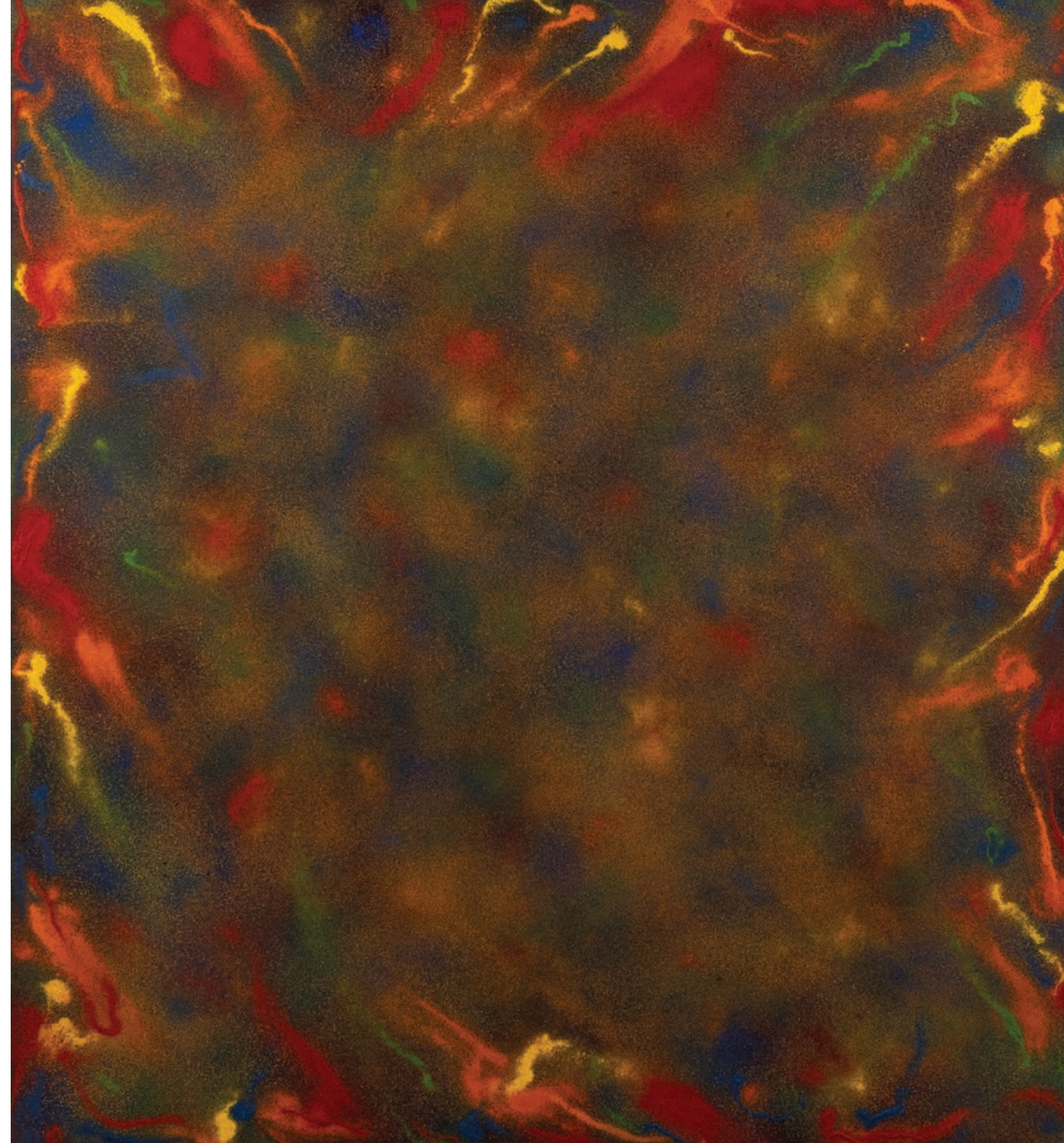
‘My sense of these paintings is that they have a sound equivalence that is very real. In all opposites, whether between sound and colour, space and time, actuality and illusion, the hum of the universe presides.’

ROBERT C. MORGAN

P-ROO

Dry pigment, acrylic medium on canvas, 1973

72.0 × 66.2 in. / 182.9 × 168.2 cm.





‘There are significant distinctions in Natvar Bhavsar’s approach to space and in the meaning that colour has for him and his work that are predicated by his cultural heritage; to discern those nuances, one must delve deeper than a literal surface impression. A beginning point would be a recognition of the differences in linguistic comprehension of the word ‘colour’. If for many of his contemporaries, ‘colour’ is a physical entity, more or less wedded to ingrained empirical associations and to the dilemma of how a three-dimensional world occurs on a two-dimensional surface, then for Bhavsar, colour is emotional and a metaphysical force on its own.’

LOWERY S SIMS

SWATEE I

Dry pigment, acrylic medium on canvas, 1976

108.0 × 44.5 in. / 274.3 × 113.0 cm.

‘The art of music, the art of dance, the art of thought- they all require devotion, involvement, or an invitation, and once you are invited into that *sanctum* you really have very little choice other than to keep digging deeper and deeper and deeper inside. You will find throughout history that artists of any time, whether you take Monet, Turner, or Rembrandt, respond completely to this invitation, and to put them into a box because of their particular time is very superficial—a linguistic necessity. This is where aesthetics, if you want to use the word “aesthetics” as a generalized term, becomes very, very important.’

NATVAR BHAVSAR

BHAWAR

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 1981

83.0 × 67.0 in. / 210.8 × 170.2 cm.





‘Natvar consciously adapts to a spiritual equation between light, colour, sound, and emotion. Each of his paintings or series is an exploration into this relationship that is quantified with the magnanimity of scale the artist adopts, multiplying the sensory impressions to create an elasticity of space that embraces the viewer, spiritually as well as with its material existence.’

JESAL THACKER

VENRA

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 1978–83

57.0 × 78.0 in. / 144.8 × 198.1 cm.

‘With his canvas unstretched and on the floor, Bhavsar covers it with layer after layer of dry pigment—sometimes as many as eighty—and then applies a fixative to hold the resulting colour—flow in place. When he describes this process, the artist often mentions his early memories of Holi, a Hindu festival in which celebrants douse one another in water infused with brightly coloured pigments.’

CARTER RATCLIFF

VEEBHA

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 1989

61.0 × 55.0 in. / 154.9 × 139.7 cm.





‘What is the content of Bhavsar’s painting? To absorb viewers, just as great music does listeners, to carry them away, to sweep them up, and even to strike them dumb. The sensation is primarily physical, apprehended through the body, like the heat of the sun and the sweat it produces. Bhavsar conceives of the experience of art as essentially biological. More than that, he believes it is biologically necessary; the human being requires it. The need for art may even be genetic—intrinsic to both body and spirit. Bhavsar’s canvases elicit a somatic response, so visceral that it is hard to find words to express it.’

IRVING SANDLER

MITHUNA VI

Dry pigment, acrylic on Rag paper, 1991

49.0 × 38.0 in / 124.5 × 96.5 cm. (framed size)

'In executing each painting, what Natvar Bhavsar produces is an atmosphere of colour dust with which he defines a segment of space.'

HOWARD E. WOODEN

PASCHIMAA

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 1991–92

40.0 × 37.7 in. / 101.6 × 95.8 cm.





'I believe nature is real. There is a new revelation every minute. Giving yourself to nature will deepen your desire to receive. It requires the antenna of a child. You need to be voracious.'

NATVAR BHAVSAR

URVASEE

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 1992

76.5 × 55.5 in. / 194.3 × 141.0 cm.

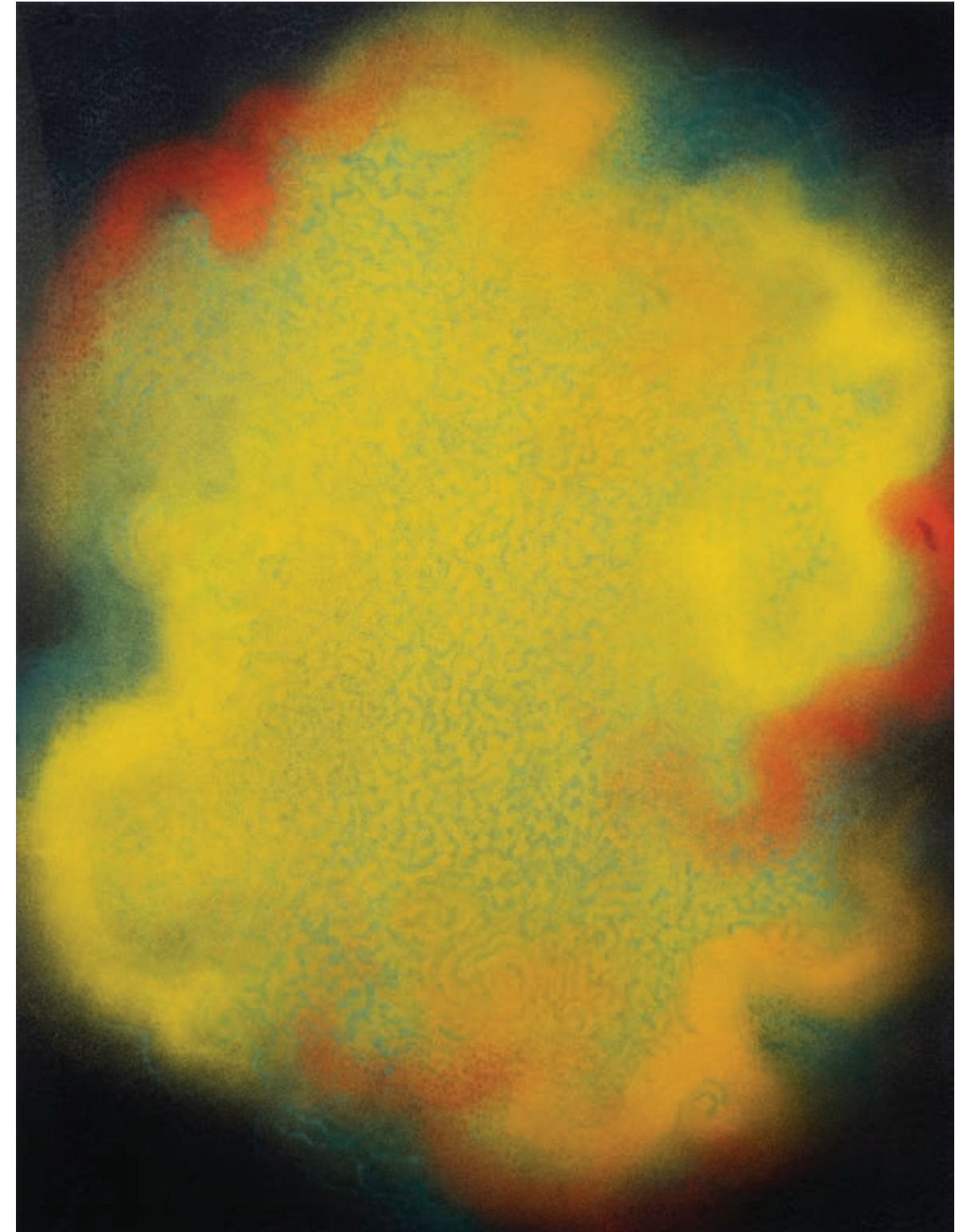
‘To look at a Bhavsar and to become immersed in the saturation of layers of pigment, to feel the intensity and density of these brilliant pigments, is in some way to know that the painting has a virtual substance beyond the purely formal aspect of painting associated with colour-field. For Bhavsar, painting was a heroic act, as it must have been for Rothko and Newman.’

ROBERT C MORGAN

SRENGAAR II

Dry pigment, acrylic on Rag paper, 2002

53.0 × 42.0 in. / 134.6 × 106.7 cm. (framed size)





‘I believe colour is based on physical elements. It has a real physical entity and an impact on our psyches. I brought colour with me from India. Our religion is imbued with colour; it is a part of our daily lives.’

NATVAR BHAVSAR

ATALAA

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2003

108.0 × 59.0 in. / 274.3 × 149.9 cm.

‘The grainy, powdery textures of his surfaces are the constant that unify his oeuvre, whatever the shapes are that emerge from the glowing field...tendrils of colour... Or perhaps they are more like a mapmaker’s indication of coves along an ocean’s edge. Or an astronomer’s rendering of flares erupting from the surface of the sun. The visual plenitude of Bhavsar’s paintings encourages metaphors to proliferate and yet we are always drawn back to the grain of his colour along with the intensity of his light.’

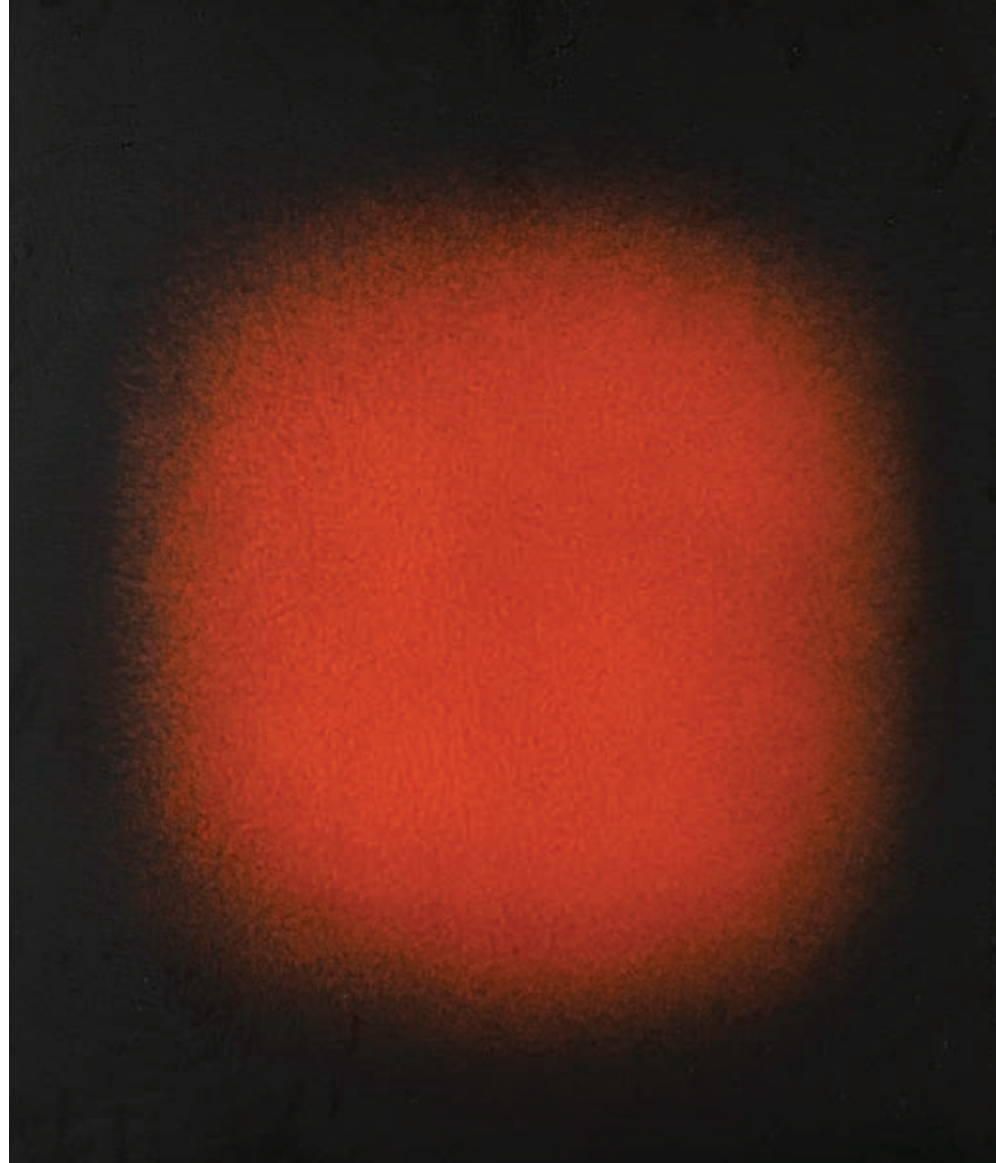
CARTER RATCLIFF

ARANG

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2008–09

75.0 × 68.7 in. / 190.5 × 174.5 cm.





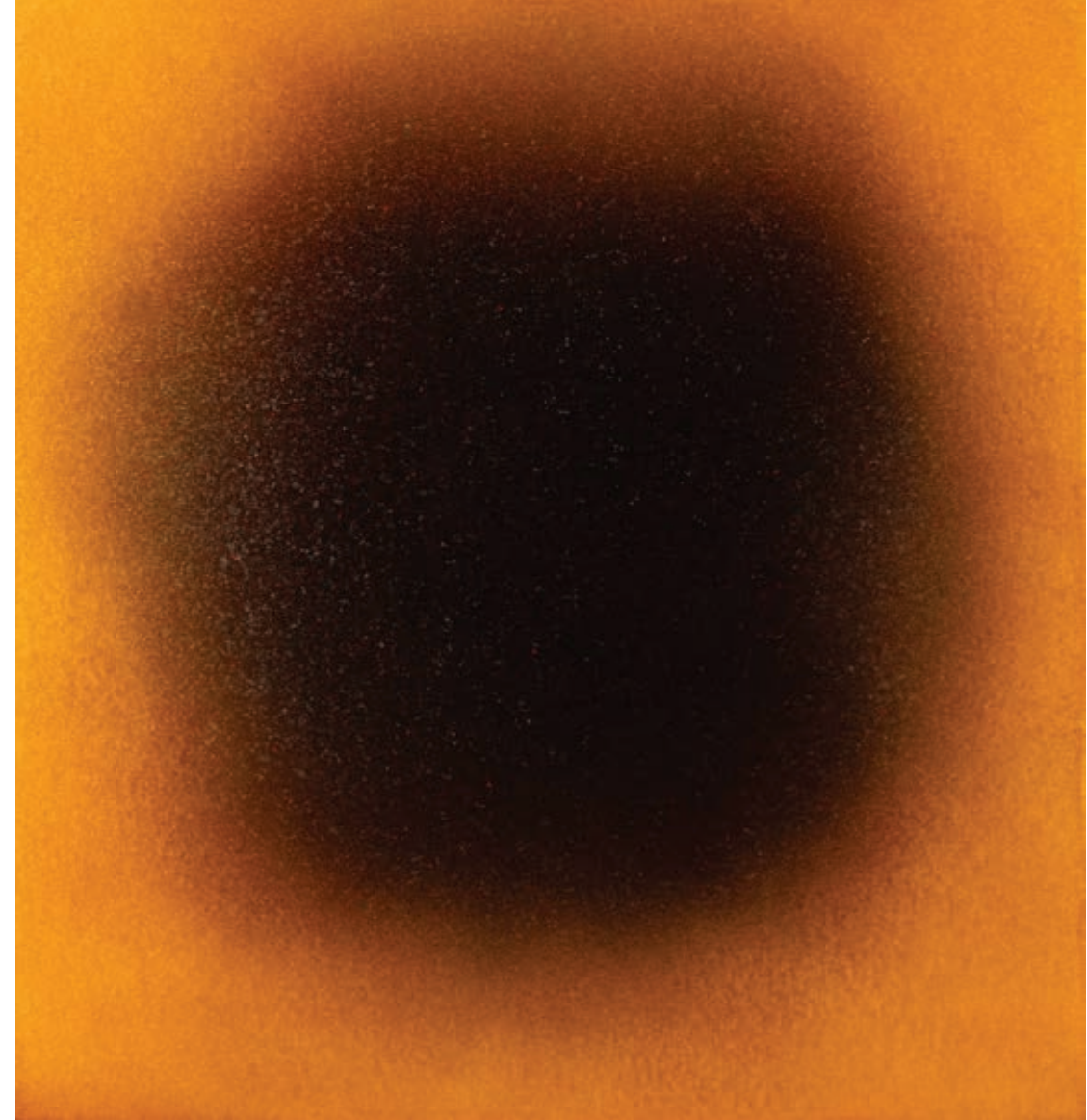
‘Natvar Bhavsar uses dry pigment to create large, brilliantly coloured, mural-like paintings. Critics often place the Indian-born artist in the context of the genesis of abstract art in America, comparing him with abstract expressionists and colour-field painters like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. But Mr. Bhavsar’s method of building up surfaces through layers of dry pigment is his own.’

VIBHUTI PATEL

DHYAANAA V

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2005

23.0 × 19.7 in. / 58.4 × 50.0 cm.



‘He is the best known and most successful Indian born contemporary artist on the planet.’

JAY JACOBS

LAYAA X

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2012

32.2 × 34.2 in. / 81.8 × 86.9 cm.



‘To appreciate Mr. Bhavsar’s paintings you need to spend a long time looking at them. The more you look, the more you get out of them. You may also begin to realise that in some ways these paintings are all about looking, and the ability of areas of pure colour to make a powerful, even emotionally resonant visual statement.’

BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

PR-KRITEE

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2012

54.0 × 90.0 in. / 137.2 × 228.6 cm.

‘The tension between dissolution and coalescence is part of the allure. But Bhavsar’s paintings also simply revel in the way colour interacts with the eye while also conveying powerful moods and emotions.’

STEVEN LITT

ABHAY

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2012

75.0 × 68.5 in. / 190.5 × 174.0 cm.





‘Bhavsar’s monumental works are created using dry pigment released onto the canvas in patterns that parallel the movements of the artist’s body as he works.’

MARIUS KWINT

ZANJAA

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2013

48.0 × 52.0 in. / 121.9 × 132.1 cm.

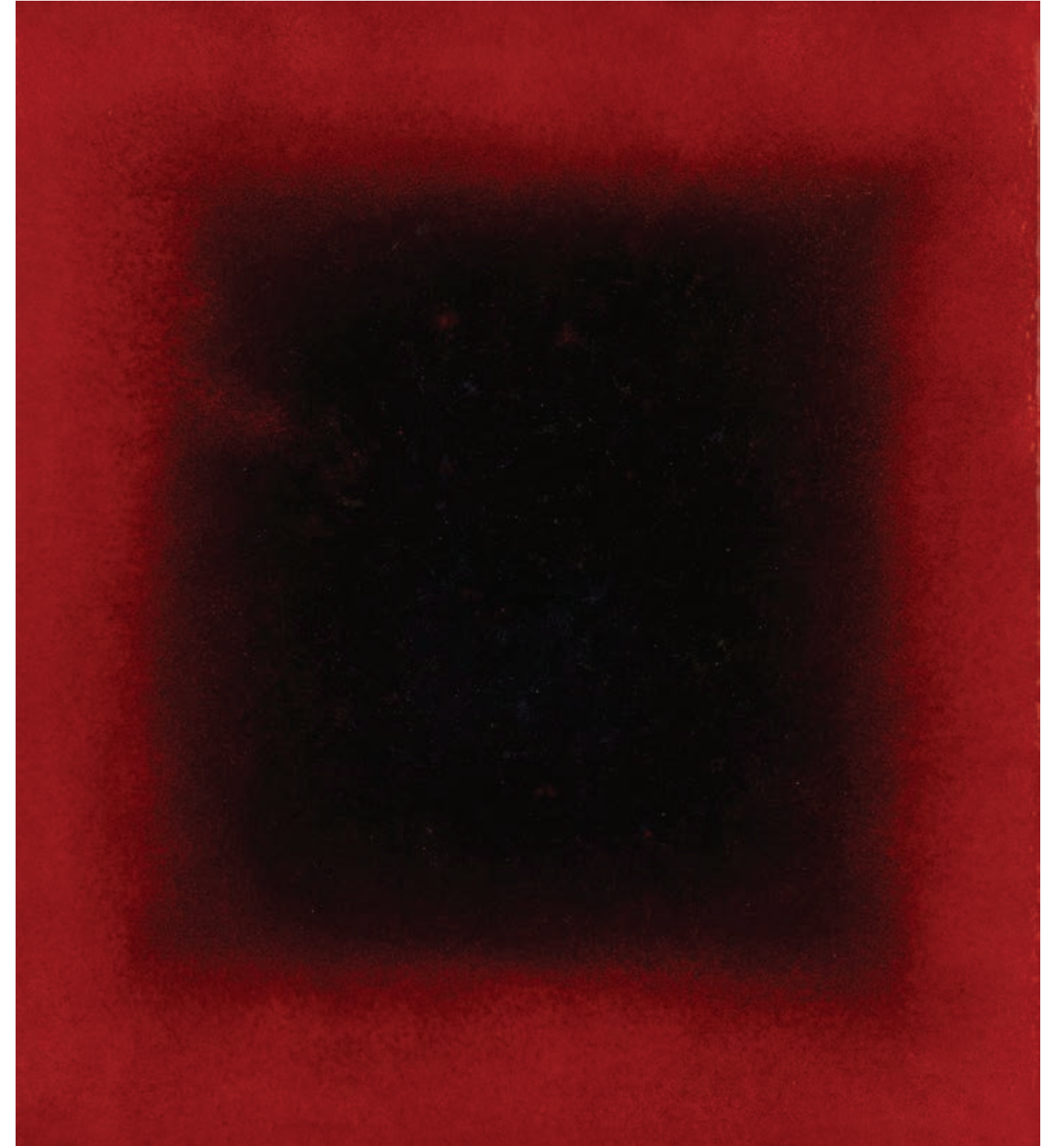
‘To listen to him is to be struck by the poetic authority of his language. One is instantly brought into a world of absolute precision and infinite expanse...His speech is as much an art as his painting. His phrases are as original as the aggregations of colour on his canvases, his verbal faculties no doubt honed by the fact that his art pretends to no linguistic sophistication but plays only to the foundations of our sensory-cognitive apparatuses. Bhavsar confesses to a “certain Romantic affliction” with words.’

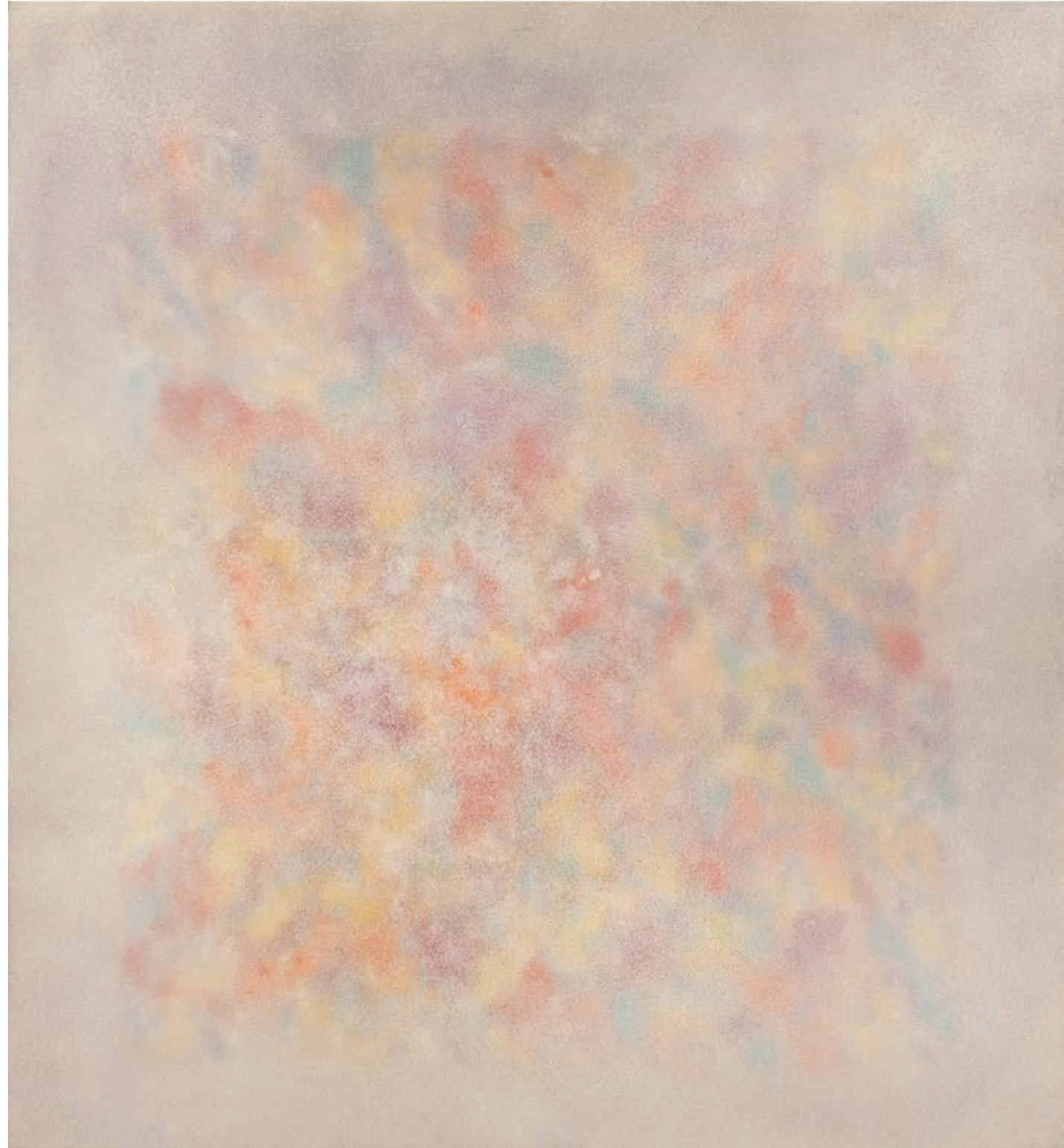
MARIUS KWINT

ADHEEK III

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2015

23.7 × 21.2 in. / 60.2 × 53.9 cm.





‘Bhavsar’s work draws the viewer in, commanding serious contemplation. After a few minutes you can almost feel rich textiles, constellations and cloud-like patterns emerging from the mesmerising layers of thick colour.’

EMILY WALDORF

ALPAA

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2018

52.0 × 48.0 in. / 132.1 × 121.9 cm.

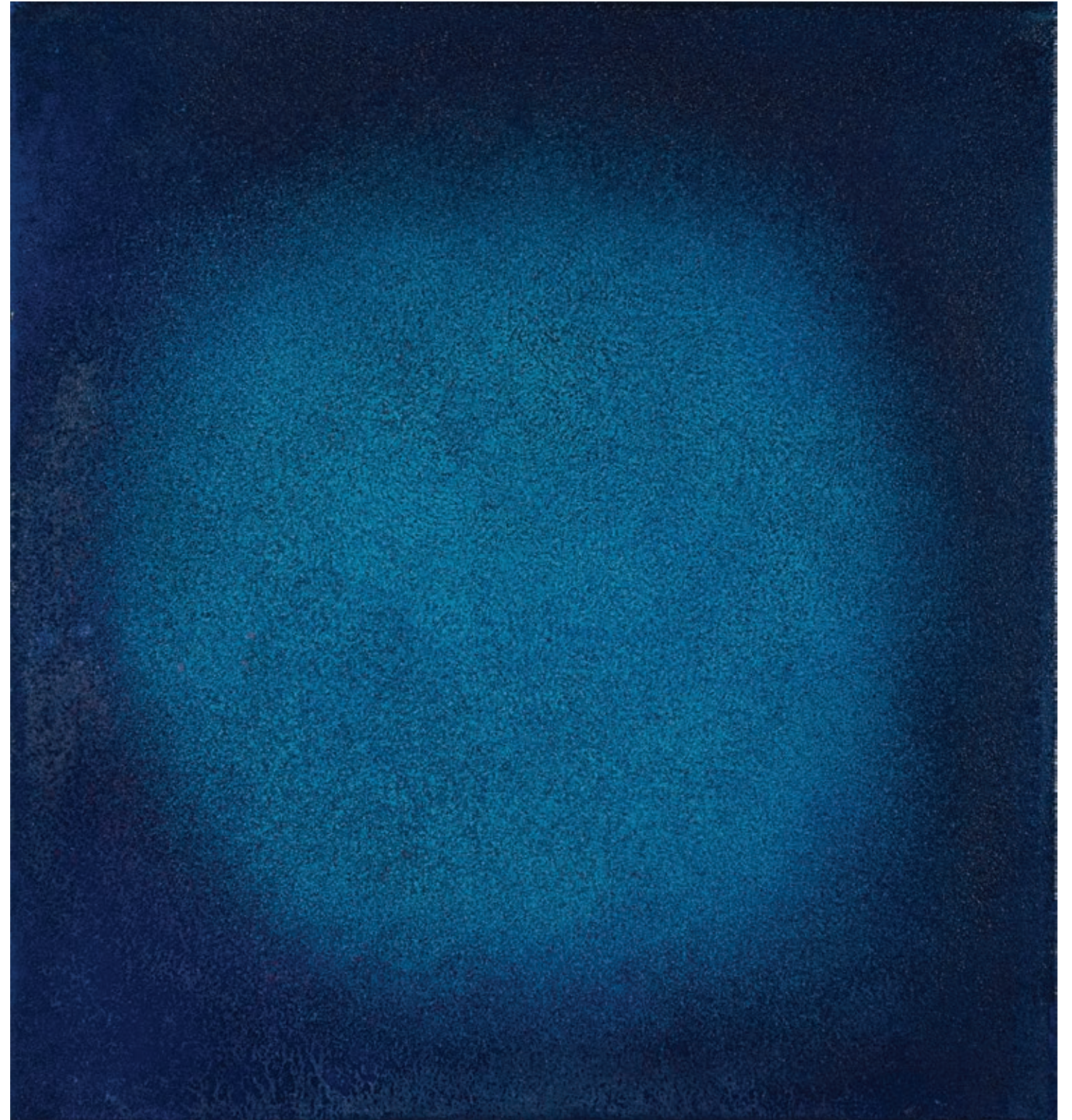
'Art is in some ways documenting something and in some ways very emotive. There is always an undercurrent that takes you to another place besides yourself, and that is where you have the poetic centre of your being.'

NATVAR BHAVSAR

SOORUNG IV

Dry pigment, acrylic medium and oil on canvas, 2023

34.2 × 32.0 in. / 86.9 × 81.3 cm.





Natvar Bhavsar

b. 1934

Natvar Bhavsar is an abstractionist known for his colour-field paintings, executed on large canvases with pigments made of natural and organic materials. Born in an educator's family on 7 April 1934 in a small town in Gujarat, he studied to be a drawing teacher and began his career in Chanasma. He then joined the C. N. School in Ahmedabad for its five-year diploma course in art offered by Sir J. J. School of Art; simultaneously, he continued to study for his master's in teaching art.

As a twenty-seven-year-old, Bhavsar learnt about the possibilities of further education from a class fellow's father and enrolled at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art to study industrial design, but once there, changed course to study painting at the Tyler School of Art, Temple University. Here, he met Janet Brosious, an artist and art educator; they would later marry in 1978. In 1970, his first solo show opened at the Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York.

His paintings invariably have an Indian title, linking his works closely to the land of his birth and youth, and they often address subjects or myths familiar to those from India—whether in a literal or abstract sense. 'Bhavsar is at once a thoroughly American painter and product of Indian culture,' Carter Ratcliff, art writer, said of him. Well established and widely appreciated, Bhavsar lives and works in New York.

About DAG

Established in 1993 as an art gallery, DAG has grown exponentially to become India's leading art company with a comprehensive collection starting from the eighteenth century onwards. From acknowledging recognised masters to restoring the legacies of generations of artists marginalised over time, from acquiring the custodianship of artists' studios and estates to bringing back to India works associated with Indian art and heritage from overseas, DAG has revisited the history of three centuries of Indian art practice with a repository of artists that, taken together, tell the story of Indian art.

In the over three decades since DAG's foundation, the Indian art world has seen far-reaching changes in which the company has played a stellar role. Its iconic exhibitions that are curated to provide historical overviews have brought to the fore important artists neglected through the passage of time while also documenting critical art movements and collectives. New generations of art lovers have been able to reclaim the inheritance of forgotten masters through DAG's pathbreaking curations at its galleries as well as participation in international art fairs, and collaborations with museums and cultural institutions in India and abroad.

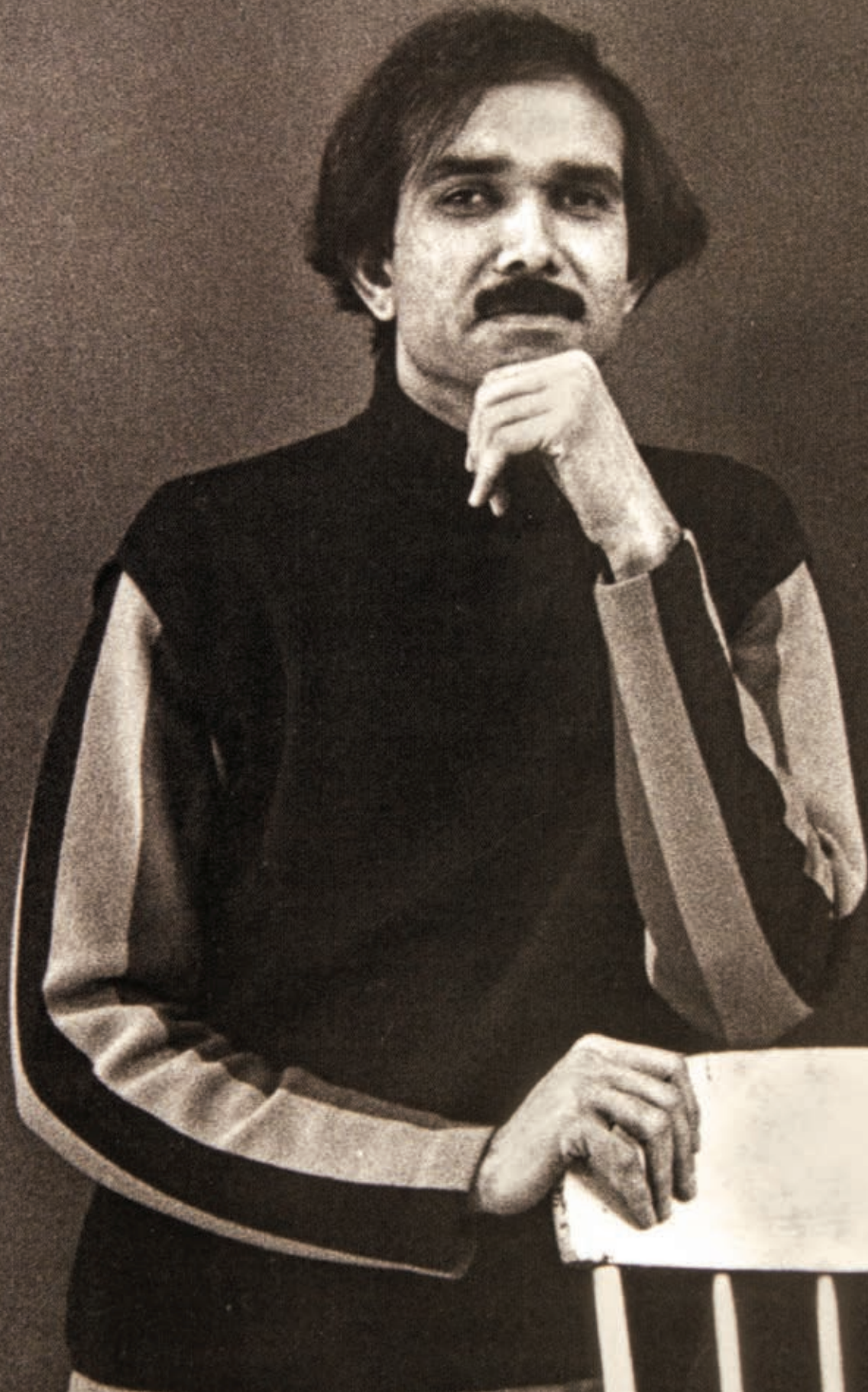
At the heart of the company's programming is ongoing curatorial enquiry and exploration for its exhibitions; a rigorous publishing calendar with an impressive library of books to document Indian art history; a museums programme focussed at engaging the public to increasingly democratise its outreach; commissioning of videos and films in relation to artists and their work; and engagements with artists, critics and the art community at large. Through these initiatives, DAG remains steadfast in its commitment to foster an appreciation for, and the dissemination and promotion of Indian art.

An important aspect of the company's collaborative efforts has been to work with institutions and museums, whether for hosting DAG-organised exhibitions or for establishing immersive public-private museum exhibitions such as those undertaken at Delhi's Red Fort (*Drishyakala*) and Kolkata's Old Currency Building (*Ghare Baire*) with the Archaeological Survey of India. Set up as museums, these exhibitions ran for periods of three years and two years, respectively, garnering an amazing response from large numbers of viewers.

DAG recently acquired Jamini Roy's studio-cum-house in Kolkata and is in the process of setting up its first single-artist museum dedicated to the National Treasure artist. It has galleries in Mumbai, New Delhi and New York.



Natvar Bavsar's paintings on display at his exhibition at DAG, Mumbai, in 2017.




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