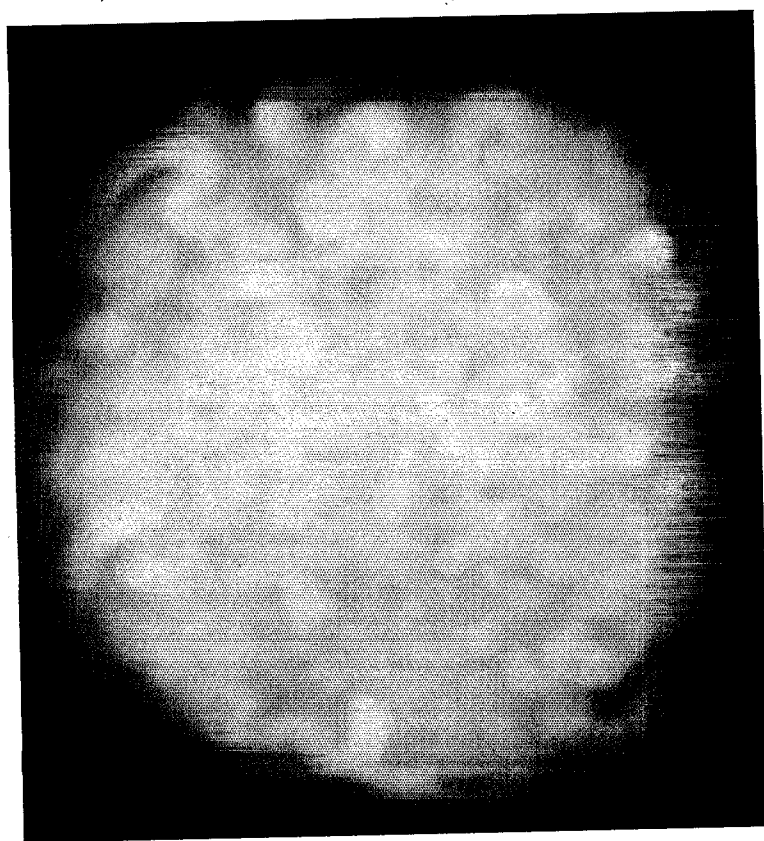


# Mutability and Metaphor

*Using dry pigments, intense hues  
and a meditative approach to  
the painting process, Natvar Bhavsar  
creates large compositions  
in which a cosmic vision emerges  
from lush materiality.*

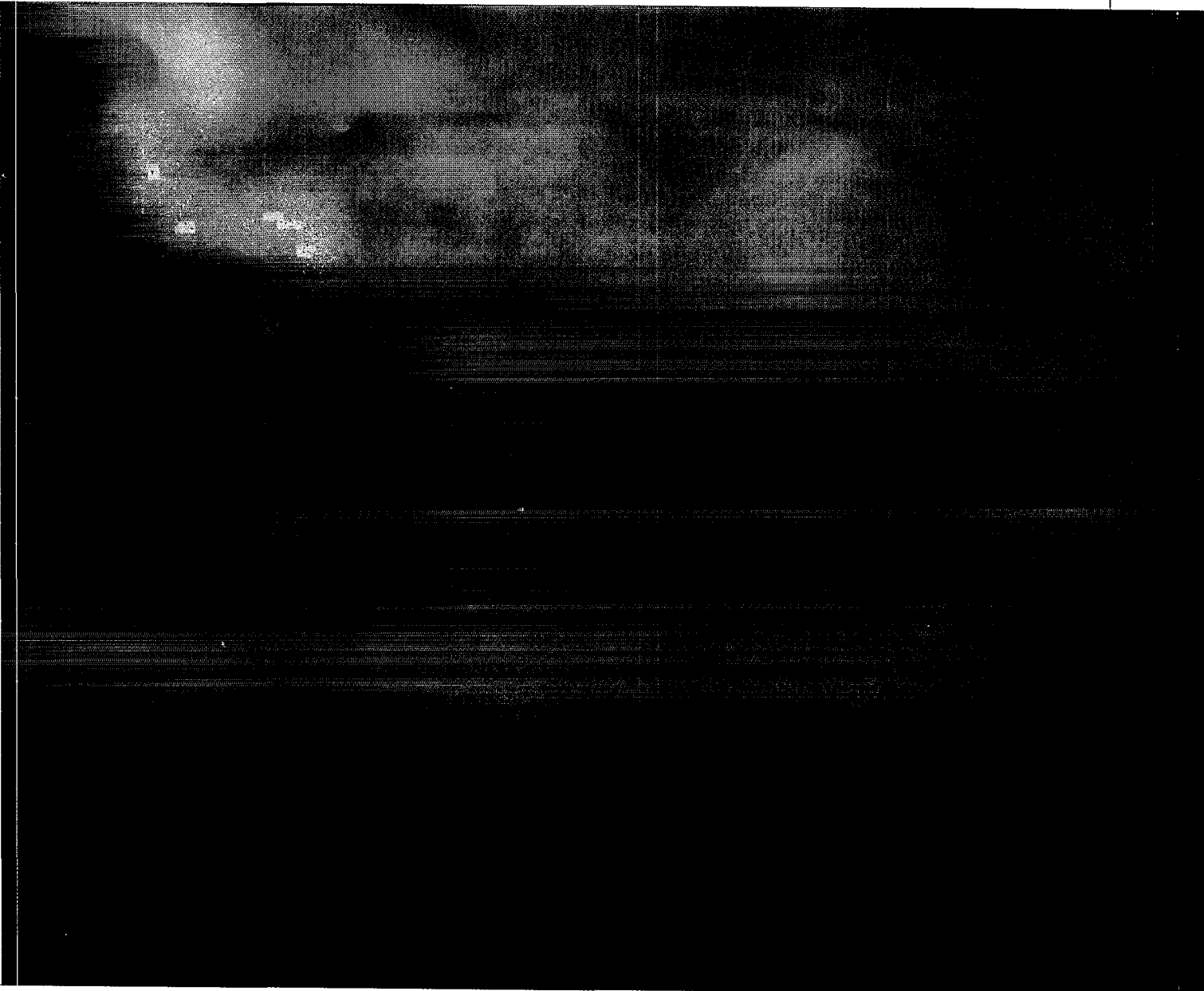
**BY CARTER RATCLIFF**



*Natvar Bhavsar: Cheeraa, 2001, oil on canvas,  
49 by 45 inches.*

*Prajnaa, 2001, oil on canvas, 55 by 108 inches.*

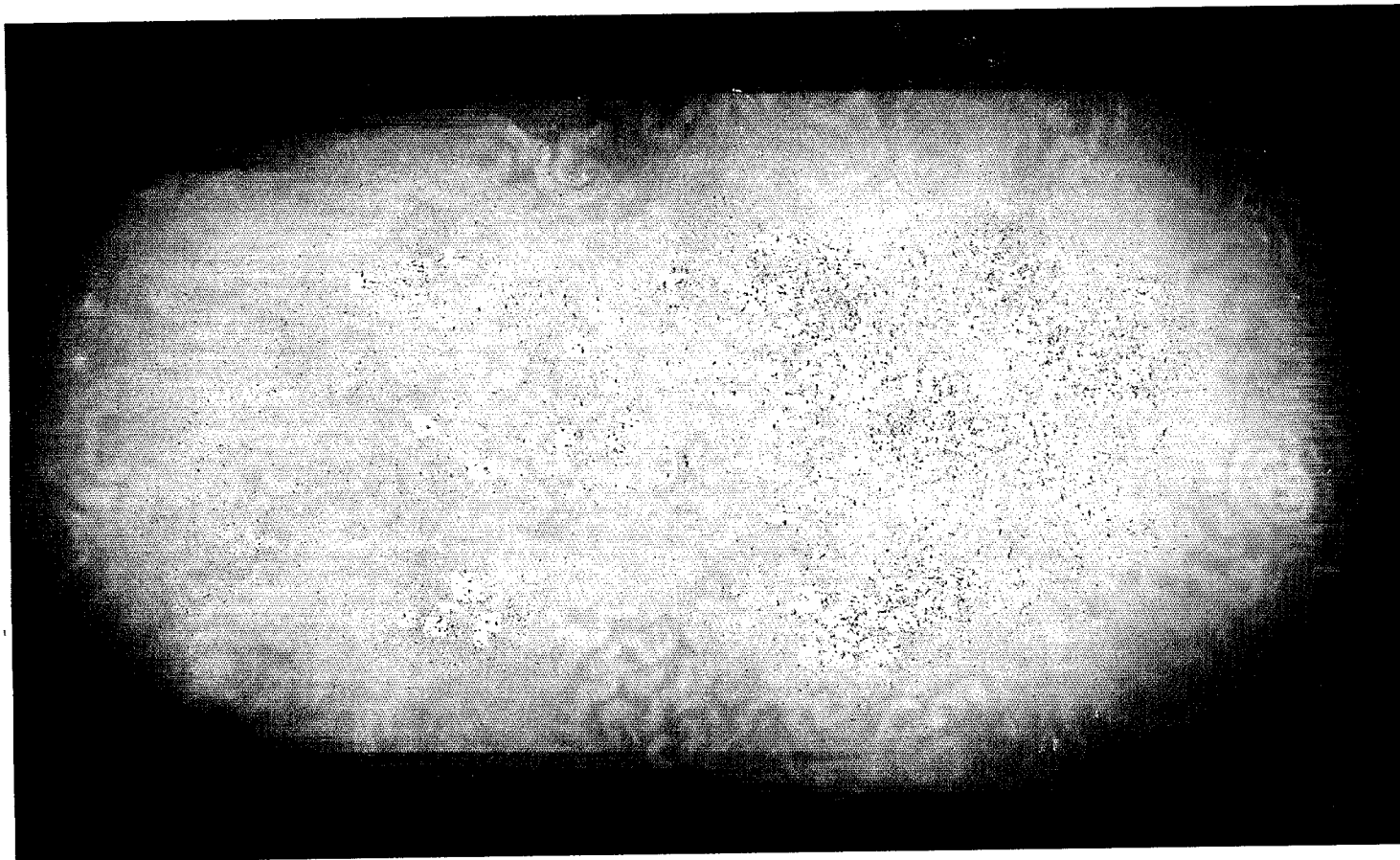
**S**ince the late 1960s, when Natvar Bhavsar first showed his paintings in New York, his art has gone through a series of grand cycles. At one extreme, the image is a field of color inflected only by the grain of the pigments Bhavsar sifts onto the canvas as it lies on the studio floor. Next, swirls and eddies appear. As these currents solidify, one sees at least the suggestion of radiant forms against equally radiant grounds. Then, before these shapes become definite, they dissolve back into the light. This surge toward form first occurred in the mid-1970s. It recurred in the mid-1980s and again in the early '90s. During the past two years or so, the powdery luminosity of Bhavsar's colors has once again been coalescing, more urgently than ever. *Cheeraa* (2001) shows a golden oval on a dark field of warm, ultimately indescribable color. The oval's border is elusive, as is its interior configuration, for this shape is woven of serenely writhing strands of color. Finally, it is not a shape so much as a concentration of energy. To trace the golden strands, with their dusting of red and orange, is to see form flow back into the swirl of incandescence that has animated Bhavsar's art from the beginning.



Sometimes, the large cycles of his oeuvre appear, much condensed, in the chromatic pulsations of an individual painting. He applies as many as 80 layers of pigment to a canvas, so a close look will bring an astonishingly lively texture of colors into focus. As one's focus shifts, new colors—or hints of new shapes—appear and give way to others. Sooner or later, one realizes that the act of seeing changes what is seen. So, to paraphrase Heraclitus, it is impossible to view the same painting twice. But then who—or what—is the producer of the work? The artist, common sense would say, and the idea that viewers create what they see has been familiar since the Romantic period. Cued by Hegel, Clement Greenberg and his followers argued that painting evolves via the medium itself, as it defines and redefines itself in response to the historical moment—as if painters were merely channeling the dictates of the spirit of modernist painting. A different sense of agency prompts Bhavsar to say that he creates in collaboration with a joyous energy “that flows on and on” and “puts you very close to the experience of God.” Though his canvases are static, literally speaking, attentive look-

ing endows them with a kind of mutability—metaphorical, to be sure, yet their manifold, layered colors make it impossible to reduce them to stable images. Bhavsar wants to persuade us that all is in motion. Modern physics makes the same point. Though Westerners usually trace this thought to Heraclitus, it appears in the writings of several other pre-Socratics. And in light of Bhavsar's Indian origins, it ought to be noted that all the cosmologies of India—Hindu, Jain and Buddhist—picture the universe in constant flux.

**B**havsar was born in 1934 in Gothava, a town in the state of Gujarat, on the western coast of India. In 1958 he earned a master's degree in art at the C.N. School of Art, in Ahmedabad, the Gujarati capital. The following year, he received a government diploma in art, and in 1960 he earned a B.A. in English literature from Gujarat University. By then, he had not only mastered a delicate and rather anonymous style of realism but also invented a style of his own, which owed much to Indian miniatures and even more to Cubism. Sponsored by a family friend in



Arupa, 1991-2002, oil on canvas, 54 by 90 inches.

Opposite, Kesuraa III, 2002, oil on canvas, 108 by 59 inches.

Ahmedabad, he came to the U.S. and entered the Philadelphia College of Art in 1962. After a semester there, he enrolled at the Tyler School of Art, also in Philadelphia. Within a year, he had moved on to the graduate art department of the University of Pennsylvania. In seminars directed by the painter Piero Dorazio, Bhavsar met Robert Motherwell, David Smith, Barnett Newman and others.

By this time, Bhavsar had become an abstract painter. Though the excitement of meeting those major figures of postwar American art remains a vivid memory, it was not until he saw a Clyfford Still exhibition at Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, in 1963, that he decisively abandoned the Cubist past for a present dominated by American abstract painting. The mid-1960s were, of course, the salad days of Pop art and Minimalism. As far as Bhavsar was concerned, they might as well have been invisible. Pop was too mundane and Minimalism was too puritanical. Among contemporary artists, only the Color Field painters impressed him, so much so that he wrote a seminar thesis in praise of Morris Louis, Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland.

Having received his M.F.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1965, Bhavsar was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship. Instead of returning to India, he moved to New York and landed a teaching job at the University of Rhode Island. Quickly, he made his way into the world of New York painters. By 1968, he had settled in the SoHo loft where he still lives. Two years later, a solo show of his paintings launched the Max Hutchinson Gallery, one of the first to open its doors in SoHo. Around this time, Bhavsar's work appeared in a number of group shows at museums in New York and elsewhere, including the Whitney Annual and "Beautiful Painting and Sculpture" at the Jewish Museum.

Bhavsar was welcomed in New York because his art could be seen—not entirely accurately—as resting on local foundations. There was an obvious affinity between his works of the late 1960s and the high-keyed abstractions of the Color Field painters. And there was a resemblance

between his way of covering the canvas and the paint-pouring methods of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. Behind them stood Jackson Pollock, who was particularly important to Bhavsar. Behind Pollock, however, stood the mobs of Indian celebrants who, during the spring festival of Holi, fling colored pigment and bucketsful of tinted water at one another.

**P**ollock's drip method inspired not only the Color Fielders but also those who became known as Process artists. This is significant because, as Irving Sandler has noted, Bhavsar won a degree of approval early on by inventing a process distinctively his own: first he soaks the canvas with a clear liquid binder; next he sifts a layer of dry, powdery pigment onto the canvas; and then he repeats these steps until the composition looks complete. Sandler is careful to point out, however, that not every artist's process has the same purpose. As he says, "Process Art emphasized the literalness of matter, matter as the physical stuff it was." Bhavsar, by contrast, "wanted to evoke the Sublime as much as the older Abstract Expressionists had." Moreover, "his Sublime was of an ecstatic and celebratory nature. . . . The joy that Bhavsar aims to create is not manic but calm, evoking the eternal, close to that of Nirvana."<sup>1</sup> Bhavsar was far from literal-minded enough to find a place among the Process artists, whose front ranks were filled by the likes of Barry Le Va and Richard Serra. Yet Greenberg and other supporters of Color Field painting found Bhavsar too much the literalist.

According to Greenberg's doctrine, bright colors properly adjusted produce "pure opticality," an ethereal effect that appears to dematerialize the canvas. From the Greenbergian point of view, the trouble with Bhavsar's art is that it never forsakes materiality. As his pigments accrue, they form a crust too lush to ignore. Unabashedly physical, the surfaces of Bhavsar's canvases luxuriate in a granular abundance of color.

**Unabashedly physical, the surfaces of Bhavsar's canvases luxuriate in a granular abundance of color. He evokes organic energy at the cellular level.**

Yet, even as vision rubs up against these textures, the imagination is lifting off. *Prajnaa* (2001) is 9 feet wide and almost 6½ feet high—a big painting, and yet most viewers would say that it looks bigger than it is, for its field of radiant blue suggests the night sky. One could, if one liked, see the grains of red mixed into the blue field of *Prajnaa* as the glow of distant galaxies or of cosmic dust. Around the edges of the blue area, red and a warm ocher and the blue itself coalesce into diaphanous streaks. Here one might think of the aurora borealis or, less explicitly, some shaping force inherent in space. Sooner or later a question occurs: Why assume that *Prajnaa* makes a cosmological reference? Why not, like Sandler and Robert C. Morgan, see the reverberations of music in Bhavsar's play of color?<sup>2</sup> Why not see the manifold buzz of thought—not a particular thought, but the ground of thinking, consciousness itself?

Turning from the dark luminosity of *Prajnaa* to the nearly fluorescent green of *Arupa* (1991-2002) and the warm but somehow snowy glow of *Abdhyaa* (2001-02), one may have a bit of difficulty in saying what changes. The weather? The mood? The subject or the scale? Maybe Bhavsar evokes organic energy at the cellular level. Or pre-organic energy at the level of subatomic particles. Few painters offer the imagination so much to do. The very grain of his imagery swarms with metaphors ready to come to life. Taking a close look at the surface of *Kesuraa III* (2002), for example, one might think of anything from sand to pulverized brick to the leathery hide of a somnolent reptile.

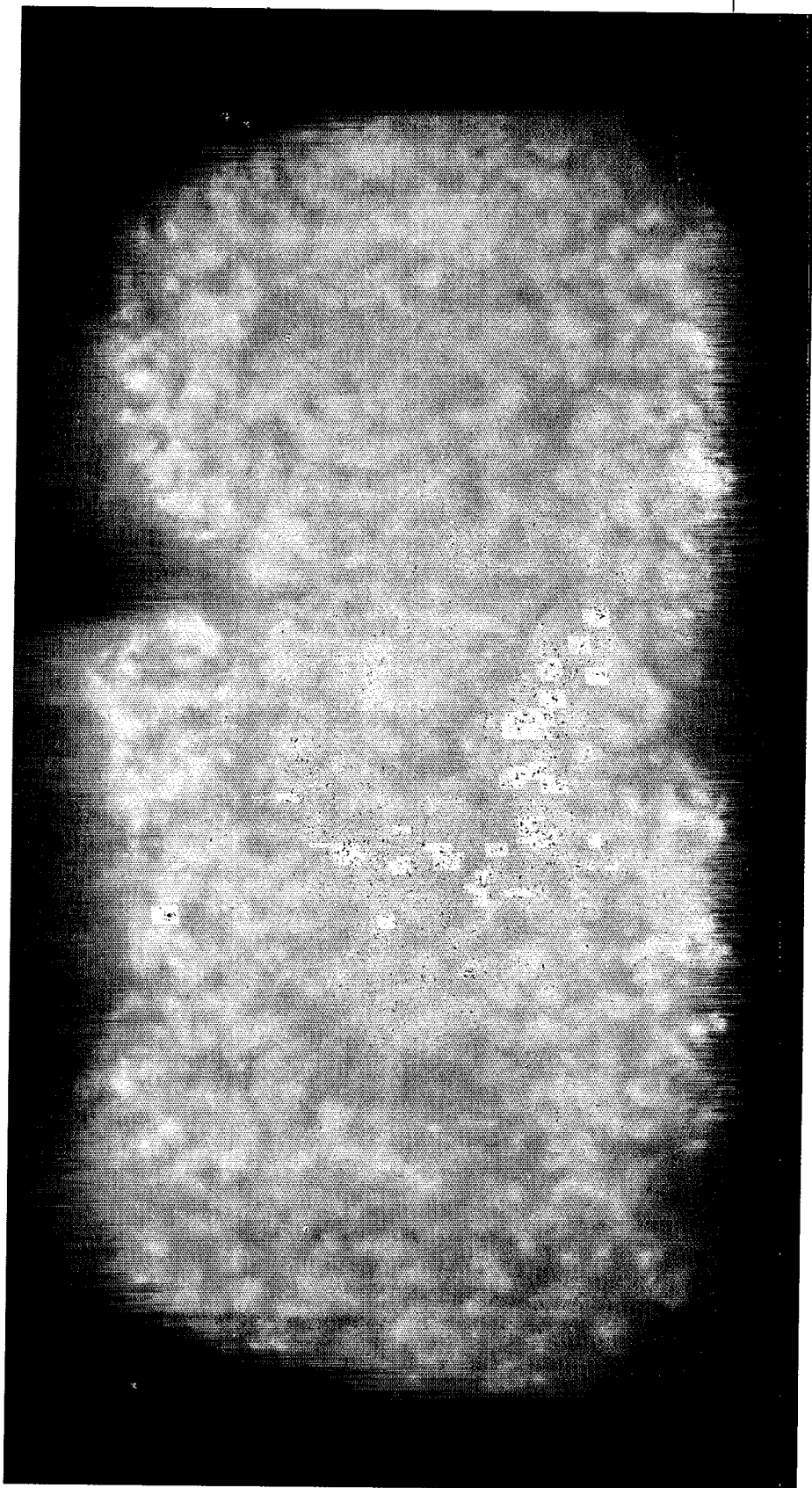
Interpretation really is endless. Still, as engrossing as Bhavsar's grander metaphors may be, they remain elusive. My experience comes into sharp focus when I see his works not only as images of cosmos or consciousness or whatever but as occasions for being conscious of what I am doing: reading meanings into fields of pigment. Whenever my reading takes a new direction, Bhavsar's colors are refreshed and, more often than not, a fresh metaphor occurs. And then another and another and so on, potentially without end, though interpretation finds a center when one realizes that its ultimate subject is oneself—or, at the very least, one's power to make sense of what one sees. □

1. Irving Sandler, *Natvar Bhavsar: Painting and the Reality of Color*, Sydney, Craftsman House, 1999, p. 24.

2. Sandler, *Natvar Bhavsar*, p. 22; Robert C. Morgan, "Natvar Bhavsar: The Sound of Color," *Natvar Bhavsar*, exhib. cat., New York, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 2002, p. 16.

"*Natvar Bhavsar: The Sound of Color*" was on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York [Nov. 21, 2002-Jan. 14, 2003]. Bhavsar exhibitions in Europe include shows at the Pardo/St. Croix Gallery, Milan [Nov. 14-Dec. 4], the Pardo/St. Croix Gallery, Rome [Dec. 12, 2003-Jan. 5, 2004], the ACP Viviane Ehrli Gallery, Zurich [Oct. 30, 2003-Mar. 1, 2004] and the Art Garage, Zug, Switzerland [Oct. 31-March 2004]. Sundaram Tagore Gallery will present another exhibition of his work in 2004.

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