

Matthew Krishanu: ‘What you’re looking for, when you’re building something out of nothing, is recognition, familiarity’

As a number of exhibitions open internationally, the British-Indian artist discusses his poetic paintings drawing on familial memory and imperial history, grief and suffering



Matthew Krishanu surrounded by his paintings for the *Religious Workers* series, featuring close personal associates of the artist pictured at work during the pandemic

Photo: Peter Mallet

Matthew Krishanu paints with a productive ambiguity. His works, often realised within ongoing series, draw on specific photographic images yet complicate their source material through emotion, memory, theory,

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Bedroom (Last Supper) (2021) draws on Krishanu's childhood

Photo: Peter Mallet

Matthew Krishanu paints with a productive ambiguity. His works, often realised within ongoing series, draw on specific photographic images yet complicate their source material through emotion, memory, theory, references to art history and the poetics of paint itself. Krishanu's personal background is crucial to his work. He was born in Bradford, UK, to a white British father, who was a priest, and an Indian theologian mother, and lived in Dhaka, Bangladesh, between the ages of one and 12. Family photographs of that period have informed Krishanu's best-known series, *Another Country*, featuring two boys, based on images of him and his brother, in the landscape or interiors, and the series *Mission*, which reflects on his father's role as a missionary in Bangladesh. People of the cloth also feature in *Religious Workers*, made during lockdown in London for the Hayward Gallery's *Everyday Heroes* show, and emblazoned across large expanses of the Southbank Centre close to the Royal Festival Hall—vicars, a rabbi and a hospital chaplain are depicted at work during the Covid-19 crisis. Krishanu has gained

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considerable prominence in recent years: he features in the Hayward Gallery's painting survey *Mixing It Up: Painting Today*, he has a first solo exhibition in Berlin at Tanya Leighton in November, and will show with Salon 94 in New York next year. His latest body of work, made for *HYPERR POSSIBLE* in Leamington Spa as part of the Coventry Biennial of Art, is *In Sickness and in Health*, and features paintings made of his wife and child over 15 years. The most recent are a series of portraits of his wife, who is seriously unwell and regularly in hospital.

The Art Newspaper: The earlier paintings in the *In Sickness and in Health* series, like *Girl on a Bed* (2007), *Girl with a Book* (2007) and *Girl with Slippers* (2012), seem to relate to your *Another Country* series, based on images of you and your brother as children.

Matthew Krishanu: Yes. We've always anonymised the *Girl on a Bed*; I never actually used my wife's name, but it's absolutely her. And the first of my *Interiors* paintings, back in 2005—I think of it as my first painting—was called *Boy on a Bed*. I had this commission for Leamington Spa and I was very keen to return to interiors. At the same time, I was starting to form paintings I'd been doing of family life, but grounded in the now rather than the past—although it's still a slightly mythical space. I also did a couple of interiors with the two boys that I'm going to be showing at Tanya Leighton in Berlin, one of which is *Bedroom (Last Supper)* (2021), which felt quite a significant piece to me because the two boys are entirely painted from my imagination, but definitely with our bed and the copy of Leonardo's *The Last Supper* we had above the bed. Then, obviously, things changed radically with the diagnosis and it felt right to paint my wife again in an interior, in a room. But now it was a hospital bed, rather than the bed of one's imagination or dreams, which I guess is what the earlier series are about—they're more about the bed as a site or a stage for a personality or the unconscious. Whereas now it's a stage for something else—grief or suffering.

There must have been a negotiation about depicting your wife in hospital, because it is such a direct and powerful means of addressing your present situation.

She was in hospital for five days and then a 12-day period, first in August, then in September. And she knew that I had these interiors paintings to

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make. And I said: "If I went to the studio, I can't imagine what I'd actually paint right now. This is the total focus for me." And she suggested it. It was probably about five or six weeks since I had last been in the studio and then I had images: the photos I'd taken of her at Whipps Cross [hospital in London], and then her friends came and she instructed them to take photos of her as well, for the paintings. In fact, the painting *The Convalescent* (2021) is partly based on a Gwen John [*The Convalescent* (1918-19), Tate] that she loves—it is the same scale. But essentially, we both had paintings in our minds in that situation. And, so sending those images meant that when I was in the studio, I felt a similar thing with *Religious Workers*, which was the significance of the present moment when harnessing an image. It wasn't so much about capturing something outside of time; it was something very much grounded in the present moment. Those paintings came with a force of purpose that I don't know if I have felt quite like that before. I realised once the *In Sickness and in Health* works were up at Leamington Spa that all the dates correspond to important moments in our life. *The Wedding Dress* was painted from life in 2009, just a year after we got married. In 2007, just a year after we'd met, I painted those three paintings [*Girl on a Bed*, *Girl with a Book*, *Girl with Slippers*]. The one of our baby on a bed was painted in 2010. And there's one of her pregnant, *Room in Brighton*, which is based on the Edward Hopper, *Room in Brooklyn* [1932].

Do you feel there's a broader connection between *In Sickness and in Health* and the *Religious Workers* paintings for *Everyday Heroes*?

I chose not to talk about this during the *Everyday Heroes* show, because I didn't want to make it about the wider conversation around my practice but more about religious workers per se. But, for instance, in the painting *Deseta Singing —Burial* (2020) [featuring the Reverend Deseta Davis], that is either my hand or my brother's hand digging the grave, because it was actually my father's burial. So while Deseta was active as a religious worker during the pandemic, those paintings were more about me painting something deeply personal to me, because I paint my father in the *Mission* paintings. And therefore it's a different time frame, in terms of painting about the end of his life without mentioning him in the paintings. For me, that's what the brush does—in the sincerity in the depiction of her. Deseta is a good friend of my mother's. Similarly, I painted Reverend Eve Pitts [in *Procession (Revd Canon Eve Pitts)*]

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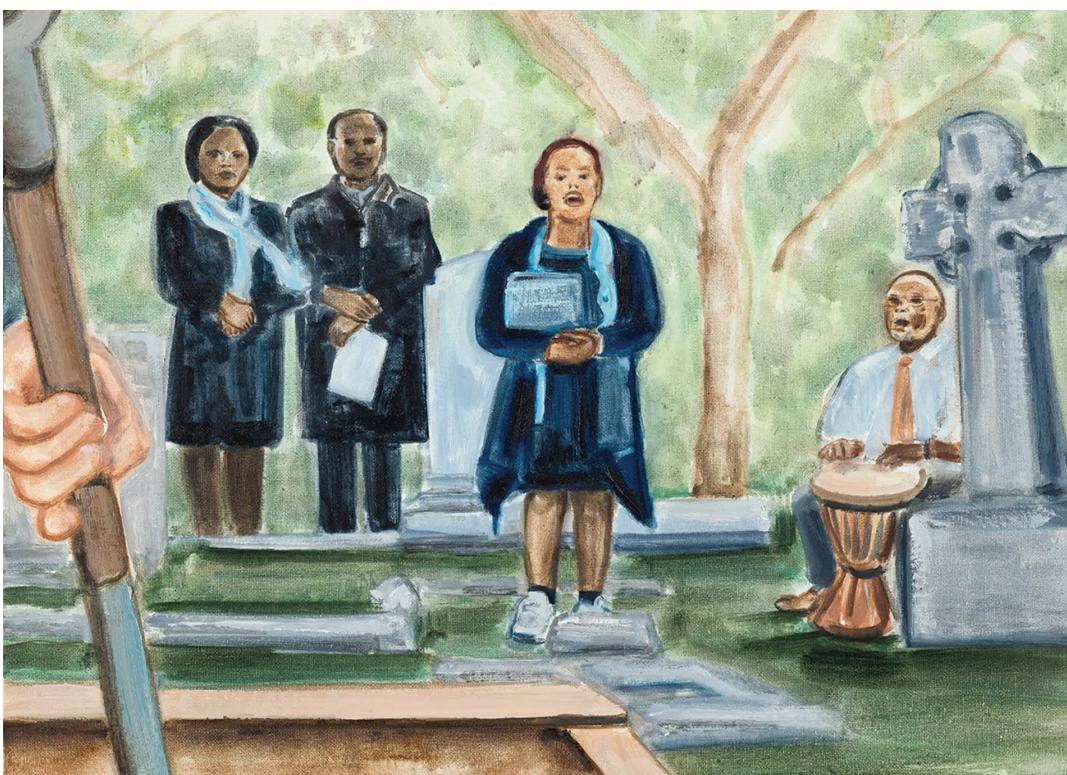
Hospital Bed (Whipps Cross)(2021) depicts Krishanu's wife as she undergoes medical treatment
Photo: Peter Mallet

(2020)], again, a good friend of my mother's, Rabbi Margaret Jacobi, a close friend of my father's who read Hebrew prayers at his funeral, and Rehanah Sadiq; my father was a hospital chaplain and he created her role as the first Muslim chaplain of Birmingham Women's Hospital, and she also read Duas

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at my father's funeral. So I've known these people as close associates of my family for years. What they were going through was related to knowing that my dad had been a hospital chaplain with the NHS himself.

In the *Mission* series, one is never sure of the moral or ethical position towards religion. But *Everyday Heroes* frames the religious subjects within a context that immediately establishes them as doing good. How does that framework affect the way that religious authority is transmitted in *Religious Workers* compared to the *Mission* paintings?



Deseta Singing—Burial (2020) refers to the artist's father's funeral
Photo: Peter Mallet

I never liked the title *Everyday Heroes*. It doesn't chime with how I construct a body of work. So I've always preferred *Religious Workers* because it's straight, it's not as loaded, there's no sense of deification. But in terms of venerating, they were all women, and obviously Margaret Jacobi is Jewish and the others are of colour. If I am painting people of colour, I am also aware of investing them with a sense of interiority and, potentially—in terms of old conversations around representation—a question of presence, as well.

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Because I understand the history of Western painting when it comes to depicting non-white subjects as other, I very much want to paint them in the I-to-you axis of intimacy. When I painted Rehanah Sadiq and Reverend Jackie Gayle, it's obviously very much about the loose language of painting, but it's also about the fact that these aren't other to me; these are my people. Similarly, the interiority of the smile was because I thought I can't paint people in face masks; it's too clichéd at the moment, there's so much bad art on Instagram of people in face masks. But here, it became about the face. And that's because it's something that I feel painting can do in a very particular way. It creates an I-to-you relationship of intimacy in a way that the photograph almost always renders the person in the third person, particularly in terms of history, whether it's *National Geographic* or anthropological photography—obviously, someone like James Van Der Zee is a notable exception.

But in *Ordination*, a work in your *Mission* series, you paint an image of your father with a bishop behind him and a fellow priest next to him, and it seems deeply problematic.

I am painting my father as a white priest. In that context, I'm deliberately constructing my father—in my mind, at least, and this is a lifetime project—in the third person, not as my father. I'm obviously drawn to paint him numerous times because of the personal connection, which I've already spoken about. But essentially, I'm interested in painting whiteness, and potentially unsettling that whiteness within the problematics of an understanding of racial injustice in relation to imperial history and in terms of how that's been represented in art. [The late Nigerian writer] Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a touchstone for me in terms of framing imperialism around the initial entry point or indoctrination of the missionaries. And so, yes, that problematic image, the *Ordination* painting, I really felt I couldn't paint for a long time because of that worry of being completely misread. But I thought: "Nobody else is painting about this." And I am so much formed by this relationship, to questions around whiteness and otherness in relation to the fact that, obviously, I'm very much a non-white person, and yet have a white father who I've seen in Bangladesh. If ever you want to see how white supremacy or white exceptionalism works, you just need to see how white foreigners are treated in India and Bangladesh

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compared to, say, how my mother was treated in Southampton in the 1990s. So, in a way, painting is a way of navigating those questions and taking that risk of being misunderstood and misread. But then that's why I'm so particular about the framing of works within the titles that I give series of works, within the titles that I give individual works and then certainly the attention I give to the discourse, the way I talk about it and the way other people talk about it, as much as possible.



Ordination (2017) examines the impact of white missionaries in countries such as Bangladesh and India, while also exploring the elevated position of Westerners there

Photo: Peter Mallet

You talked about the third-person address of photography and, of course, you're a painter who works with photographs. What happens in that translation? How much of it is to do with feeling, with the context of memory or just with the very stuff of paint?

It's an inextricable bond of those three things. That's what's so extraordinary for me about painting: the layering of what you just described, the stuff that makes up the image. It's building something out of nothing onto a blank canvas with paint and all the variables that go into the choices that one then makes on a physical, intuitive level: how thick or thin will this paint be? How many tones shall I mix? What will I layer? How will the surface breathe? All those things are happening so quickly, in addition to the personal content, which is feeding directly into that process. What you're looking for, when

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you're building something out of nothing, is recognition, is familiarity, is the point at which the person looks back at you and says: "I am here. I am now a presence."

Biography

Born: 1980 Bradford, UK

Education: 2001 BA, fine art and English literature, Exeter University, UK; 2009 MA fine art, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London

Key shows: 2021 *Mixing It Up: Painting Today*, Hayward Gallery, London; 2020 *Everyday Heroes*, Hayward Gallery, London; Niru Ratnam Gallery, London; Lahore Biennale, Pakistan; 2019 Iniva, London; Matt's Gallery, London; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK; 2018 *The Sun Never Sets*, Huddersfield Art Gallery, UK; *New Figurations: Matthew Krishanu and Sosa Joseph*, Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, India

Represented by: Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai; Niru Ratnam Gallery, London; Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles

- Matthew Krishanu: *Arrow and Pulpit* [↗](#), *Tanya Leighton, Berlin, 6 November-17 December*; *In Sickness and in Health in HYPER-POSSIBLE* [↗](#), *Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum, until 9 January 2022*; *Mixing It Up: Painting Today, Hayward Gallery* [↗](#), *London, until 12 December*