

## Wall Street International

### Another Country

An interview with Matthew Krishanu and Cara Nahaul

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Matthew Krishanu, Skeleton, 2014, oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm

Two interesting young artists are these days in London at The Nunnery Gallery with Another Country, an exhibition of new paintings exploring "contrasting notions of familiarity and strangeness": Matthew Krishanu and Cara Nahaul. Matthew was born in 1980. In 2009 he completed an MA in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. He got awards, he held conferences and talks, he was involved in curatorial projects. His exhibitions carnet is rich. Cara was born in 1987. She is currently a Fulbright Scholar studying an MFA at Parsons The New School of Design. In 2009 she completed a BA in Fine Art and History of Art at Goldsmiths University and just like Matthew she got awards and has a rich exhibitions carnet. We discussed about their different approach to paintings which look at themes of travel, dislocation and memory, exploring with them their own concept of "another country".

Interview by Stefania Elena Carnemolla to Matthew Krishanu

**Another Country is an exhibition about travel, dislocation, memory. Which is your distant country? You must have one, your family must have one, even if distant in time.**

The material I was drawing on for Another Country was memories and photographs of my childhood growing up in Bangladesh and India. I am interested in the fact that many of the places featured in my paintings (Sylhet, Mymensingh, Kashmir) have not been painted much (if at all) in the canon of

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Western contemporary painting. For me, the paintings are about stepping in to 'Another Country' – one created from a combination of old photographs, memory, and imagination.

## **What was your source of inspiration?**

The show was initially inspired by the LP Hartley line 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. I like the idea of being able to enter the past through a painting, as if it still exists.

## **What is your relationship with memory? Looking at your pictures and drawings it does not seem to me that memory for you is nostalgia.**

For me memory is about restructuring and re-imagining the past. Essentially, it is an opportunity for me to tell stories in paint. If working from a photograph I will edit the content – change the scale (or number) of figures, reposition the landscape, heighten or mute the colours. A lot of it is about what happens during the painting process. In a way, just painting an image in quite a free and improvisatory way allows for transformations of memory, content, and composition. I am then interested in how the viewer might read the paintings – in terms of their atmospheric, emotional and narrative content (which can of course be very different from my initial memory).

## **Memory is about something we knew in the past, picking up from that box what we loved. However, have you ever invented characters or landscapes? When we invent something in the present it is because something we knew in the past suggests us new things. In this sense memory is a box of real and unreal.**

I like the idea of an exhibition being like a box of memories. I am interested in collecting together groups of paintings that explore a particular theme (such as Another Country, or my 2013 show Mission) – it allows for the exploration of a particular imaginary world (with its own logic and rules). I do often draw and paint from my imagination (without photographs / a particular memory) – usually this will be in sketchbooks or on paper / card. This allows me to be quite free in the painting process. I will then edit the imagery, and some of it will be worked up further into paintings (Boy and Bull was created in this manner).

## **In the exhibition Another Country your works are set as things dialoguing with each other. Let's make an experiment and begin our voyage. I will tell you the name of your works and you will tell me their story, going back in time. Let's begin with the paintings, that is, Limbs, Skeleton, Bows and Arrows, Kashmir, Safari, Two Boys.**

Limbs, Skeleton, Bows and Arrows, and Safari are all set in Bangladesh. They explore both the freedom of children to explore their landscape, and the relationship between the pair of boys. The two boys are two brothers – I am interested in the body language of an older and younger brother. They have a certain strength together in a pair, while one of them tends to dominate. Kashmir and Two Boys are set in India – I like the numinous atmosphere of these settings – ruined buildings, towering hills. They are all about creating a 'child's world' – one of play and imagination. The only adult to feature in the paintings is the man dressed in a white hat (with a camera case) in Safari. I like how this adult encroaches upon the world of the children (just by his presence).

## **And as to the drawing Bow and Arrow?**

Bow and Arrow shows one of two adults in the watercolour set – here the relationship between the man (holding a machete) and the boys is purposefully ambiguous – there is clearly an element of threat and danger, along with roleplay.

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## **Our voyage will continue with the lonely boy in your drawings, that is, Golly, Boy and Bull, Boy in Water.**

There is definitely a difference in how the viewer reads a single figure in relation to a pair. All three large paintings (Kashmir, Limbs and Skeleton) feature both boys, and (in Limbs and Skeleton) they seem to tower over the viewer, holding his or her stare. Golly, Boy and Bull, Boy in Water are much smaller works, and the figure seems more exposed / vulnerable in these paintings. The figures are much smaller in relation to their landscape as well – it has a greater sense of expanse around them than the paintings with two boys.

## **And the lonely boy in your drawings Boy and Golly, Boy and Dog, Peacock, Boy and Cow, Boat?**

The watercolours similarly explore solitary figures – here they are accompanied by creatures – the dog, peacock and cow. I like the strangeness of animals in the eyes of children – it often feels like they are encountering a creature as if for the first time. In Boat the two boys are in a boat with an adult. The boys seem in charge – the boat looks precarious, the adult is not the agent in the narrative.

Interview by Stefania Elena Carnemolla to Cara Nahaul

## **Another Country is an exhibition about travel, dislocation, memory. Which is your distant country? You must have one, your family must have one, even if distant in time.**

For me it's unclear what exactly is my distant country – I have frequently visited both of the countries where my parents come from so I have never felt a great distance in terms of where they were born. The title of the exhibition comes from the opening line of an LP Hartley novel that Matthew was inspired by, 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. I was struck by this idea of looking at my own past as something foreign – a physical space unknown and elsewhere. Having worked primarily with documentary footage in my previous work, it seemed to me that this required something much more personal so I began looking through old family photographs as a way to access my past.

## **What was your source of inspiration? Stories they told you, old photographs, domestic and familiar places.**

I found these photographs of my grandparents, and there were two photographs that caught my attention. The first one of my grandfather is taken in Malaysia, and he is sitting on a wooden chair outside his home. He looks relaxed and calm. In the second photograph, he is with my grandmother and their children. My mother is four years old in this photo. The photo was taken in a photography studio; everyone is smartly dressed and composed. In comparison to the photo of my grandfather, this one was much more formal. I thought of how uncommon it is nowadays to take such stylized photographs. This formal representation of the family is very of its time and I felt that this directly addressed the concept of our show. I also began writing about these photographs to record my experiences each time I looked at the photograph. It was also wonderful to hear my mother recount stories of these photographs. It is almost impossible to have a clear linear narrative about one's own history, but I embrace this dislocation and I try to reflect that in the paintings.

## **They say of you that when you paint you create new worlds, making them context free. I'm very curious to know the story of two palms: the palm of Sit and Pry and the one of Proposition for a backdrop. Which are the places you portrayed? Why did you portray**

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## **them and why that palm.**

Proposition for a Backdrop is my own version of a studio backdrop. In the photograph of my grandparents they are sitting in front of this image of a fake tropical landscape. It appeared to be so absurd to sit in front of an image that mimics the very place where they're from. I am fascinated by these kinds of images that depict something "aspirational". Of course this backdrop had palm trees, and it occurred to me that the palm tree has this iconic value of a sign – for many it symbolizes vacation but for many more it means home. Sit and Pry also comes from a very similar place, but I also wanted to make more explicit the feeling of working with the photographs and the ideas about representation I had been thinking about throughout. In this painting, I imagine myself to be the studio photographer, or at least a voyeur entering the photograph, choosing the objects to paint and showing my findings. Someone told me that they imagined the objects as standing in for the people instead.

## **Could you reveal me the meaning of Margins of Error?**

I painted Margins of Error after You Are Here and Untitled. In a way I think it could be the first version of Sit and Pry. It is a projection of an imagined room, and I wanted the painting to resist any depiction of a concrete space. I am aware when making work that addresses the themes of Another Country there is a danger of making yourself 'exotic' for an audience. It can be difficult to be expected to speak on behalf of a culture and to perform to a certain expectation of an audience. I know when I recount a story of my family and their history; it is through my perspective that has been shaped by growing up in England. That being said however I think it's an interesting problem and not one to shy away from. Margins of Error becomes an attempt to create somewhere one can truly be free oneself, or perhaps it becomes something that is much more displacing.

## **Could you please give me a comment on the black, purple and white sitting object on the red and white floor portrayed in a room with yellow walls? That room must have some story. Let's discover it together.**

This object is a chair from the photograph with both of my grandparents. The original photograph is very small, and black and white. Not only is there a loss of detail for me to identify but also colour. The invention to what the photograph might have looked like in colour is a big part of my process. In this painting, I could only see part of the chair and had to imagine what the rest of it looked like. Following that logic, it seemed that the painting should make the chair an abstract object existing within a fictional space. Each part of the photograph became about surface but a painterly one.