

ArtAsiaPacific

## BETWEEN SKELETONS AND SUNSETS: INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW KRISHANU

BY CLEO ROBERTS



MATTHEW KRISHANU, *Boat*, 2018, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Photo by Peter Mallet. Image courtesy the artist.

London-based Matthew Krishanu paints in series, creating chapters of works based on his personal experiences and childhood memories growing up in Dhaka. Combining loose washes of color with thick definite lines, the characters in his compositions—framed against natural landscapes and domestic interiors—are enigmatic. The two boys who appear throughout his show, “The Sun Never Sets” at the Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, for example, have seemingly indecipherable expressions. Representing the artist himself and his older brother, the figures are a beguiling provocation, aimed at blurring perceptions of innocence with a sense of the children’s knowingness and agency. Krishanu’s interweaving of naivety, interdependence and assertions of childhood independence will be further explored in a group show at Compton Verney, “Childhood Now,” in March. AAP sat down with the artist to discuss his recent and upcoming exhibitions, reflecting on one’s childhood, and the motifs in his paintings.

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## Tanya Leighton

*“The Sun Never Sets” compels viewers to reflect on the formative period of one’s life with large-scale works such as Boat (2018), of two boys steering a canoe with an elderly man on board, and Skeleton (2014), which depicts two boys standing over the remains of an animal. What is it about the figure of a child that intrigues you?*

The first time I depicted a child, I was painting an empty room and then added a boy into the work from my imagination. The painting became Boy on a Bed (2005). The boy felt like a stand-in for myself. It seemed a given that this boy would be brown and that the setting in the painting would be a child’s world. I was interested in sketching from imagination and I was doing lots of memory drawings. Eventually, I realized there were different series within these works and there were two central characters—two boys. I had a lot of freedom when I was younger and sometimes a sense of invulnerability. How children perceive their surroundings as enormous, and how they situate themselves as the center of this experience, interests me. Then, there’s the shift when children start to interrogate their relationships to adults, and question cultural norms.



MATTHEW KRISHANU, *Christmas in Dhaka*, 2013, oil on canvas, 35 x 45 cm. Photo by Peter Mallet. Image courtesy the artist.

*And yet, the expansive landscapes in your works can be seen to dwarf, engulf and marginalize the children. Is nature curtailing their freedom?*

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MATTHEW KRISHANU, *Ordination*, 2017, oil on canvas, 240 x 180 cm. Photo by Peter Mallet. Image courtesy the artist and the Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

I'm interested in the question of freedom versus societal construction. For me, nature has powerful and sometimes frightening aspects, whether embodied in water, trees, skies or birds. Alongside depictions of these elemental forces, there are paintings of Christian rituals and schooling in "The Sun Never Sets," showing a contrastive, constructed world. The elemental world was like a faith for me. Perhaps painting has a similarly alchemical, magical quality.

***What was your engagement with religion? Are works such as Christmas in Dhaka (2013), which depicts a festive church service, and Preaching (2018), a closely framed image of the titular act, autobiographical reflections?***

My parents led and attended services for the Church of Bangladesh, and as a child I got co-opted into the ceremonies and routine. I observed from a distance. We lived on the ground floor, beneath the church, so it was very much a presence in my life, but I never fully felt a part of that world.

***There is a figure in Ordination (2017) who seems to embody this. He stands on the margins and is painted in a looser style. It's as if his hesitance is reflected in the nervous brushstrokes. Can you tell me more about him?***

He was someone I put in at the beginning of the painting and then took out, only to

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Portrait of MATTHEW KRISHANU. Photo by Kate Green. Image courtesy the artist.

realize that he needed to be in it as there was this pyramid structure in the composition that needed to be disrupted. He is an entry point into the painting—an observer rather than a participant. The other characters in the scene show involvement and devotedness.

Throughout the gallery, there are figures who are rendered contrastively. I like the central figures to be painted in more concretely, but then, for example, the way my brother's foot is painted in *Limbs* (2014) [showing two brothers nestled in the branches of a large tree] is quite transparent. I think of the figures in these paintings as being more like ghosts, somewhere between substantial and immaterial.

***I would use the word “haunting” to describe your work. When you talk about the boys being ghosts, in what way are they ghosts? Are they nostalgic ghosts of your memories?***

The works are of places and people I have an emotional connection to so there is certainly feeling, but not really nostalgia. When painting portraits, I get a sense of the person's presence. Then, this presence is translated into the work, so it exists outside of time.

I think of the people like apparitions in space. When I get a sense of their interiority, I like to preserve it, so I project that interior life onto a painted face. I

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avoid depicting particular people with overly modeled faces though. I also paint relatively flat figures because I draw from the Ajanta cave paintings; they have limited spacial depth.

***Do you think the anonymity of your characters allows, in particular, children to have an affinity with your work? Is this something you consciously pursue?***

I care about children's interaction with my works. I am interested in painting brown children into the canon in a way that they are not othered and are not shown in a sentimental light. There is sentiment and feeling, but there is also an edge to them.

The question of how you perceive the world and communicate a worldview resonates with both children and adults. "The Sun Never Sets" is set up with two boys as the central figures. It was important to me that they are depicted high up in a painting looking down at the viewer, or that their faces are quickly and directly painted with their eyes more like eye sockets, because I want them to have a sense of immediacy and strength. They are physically empowered in the way that they are painted.

***"Empowered" also applies to the birds in "A Murder of Crows" (2012–18), an ominous series of paintings that have made Birmingham's Ikon gallery their habitat.***



MATTHEW KRISHANU, *Crow (Blue Eye)*, 2016, oil on board, 13 x 18 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

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I have had an interest in crows—including the both magical and sinister myths that surround them—since my undergraduate days. Even as a child, the sound of the birds was everywhere in Bangladesh. I would see them eating gizzards out of rubbish tips. When I see them here in England, I'm momentarily transported back to Bangladesh. Whenever I see a crow, I photograph it. There will be a number of crow paintings at my Matt's Gallery show, which will open March 30, but we're going to mix them up with my "House of Gods" series (2014– ). They are images of churches in India or Bangladesh, drawn from the backgrounds of family photos. They feature church spires, so there will be a dialogue between the cross and the crow.

Matthew Krishanu's "The Sun Never Sets" and "A Murder of Crows" are on view at Birmingham's Midlands Arts Centre and Ikon gallery, respectively, until March 10, 2019.