

Tanya Leighton

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Interview with Matthew Krishanu, artist

Matthew Krishanu's paintings explore the legacy of Christianity and his childhood churchgoing in Bangladesh. Interview by *Susan Gray*



IN THE autumn of 2020, visitors to London's Southbank Centre would have been surrounded by striking images of hospital chaplains, as the [artist](#) Matthew Krishanu's series *Religious Workers* covered the centre's grey concrete walls. It was a world Mr Krishanu knew well, as his father had been a chaplain at Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital, and the ministers featured had been his late father's co-workers, and family friends.

Religion is not always a straightforward subject in contemporary art, and Mr Krishanu emphasises that he makes paintings about religion but is not a religious painter. In his *Mission* series (2012-23), drawing on church scenes from the artist's childhood in Dhaka, figures — especially children — with

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their backs to the viewer, feature strongly. These recall the artist's own early years as an immersed observer of church hierarchies.

In his *Holy Family* series, portraits of priest and nuns are rendered in a subdued palette of greys and browns. *House of God* (2015) places churches in unexpected proportions and perspectives in the Bangladeshi landscape.

His series *Mission, Another Country*, and *Holy Family* will feature in his solo show "The Bough Breaks" at Camden Arts Centre, raising questions about childhood, religion, race, power, and the legacies of empire.

For the *Religious Workers* series, pre-existing relationships within the chaplaincy enabled the artist to obtain photographs of unsung **pandemic** workers and create a portrait series from the images. "That project was born out of my father's work as first a priest and then a hospital chaplain in Birmingham," he says. "So the work ended up all being of religious workers based in Birmingham, all of whom knew my parents well. And all were **women**. In depictions of faith around the world, so much of it is masculine, and even the pronouns of God are patriarchal.

"For me to depict these religious workers was also about depicting black, brown, Jewish women, all having faith, all working in a time of crisis for a common purpose. The fact that I knew them allowed them to trust me to make the work. You're giving your image and your name to the project: I wanted to do that justice."

Religious Workers is unusual in Mr Krishanu's output because it reflects one specific moment in time, in contrast to the out-of-time feeling of many of his paintings, although the year following the Southbank exhibition, Mr Krishanu's wife, the writer Uschi Gatward, was diagnosed with cancer in September, dying three months later. The series *The Convalescent*, echoes Gwen John's paintings of the same name. *Hospital Bed* shows Uschi in a hospital bed, with the recognisable NHS iconography of structureless gown

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and blue-lidded plastic water jug surrounding her. Last year, his paintings of his late wife, *In Sickness and in Health*, featured in the Whitechapel Gallery show “Life is More Important Than Art”.

AT HIS Camden Arts Centre show, “The Bough Breaks”, three references to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* echo back to reproductions of the painting in Mr Krishanu’s childhood home in Dhaka. His mother was a Bengali theologian, and he spent his first 12 years in Bangladesh. Leonardo’s image of Christ with his disciples before his Passion is a leitmotif running through the show: “There was a print of *The Last Supper* just above our four-poster bed as children.”

A lesson on genius at his English-speaking school brought awareness of the wider connotations of the image. “There was one lesson on genius and the two figures of Leonardo and Michelangelo. What is this idea of the genius white man? And what impact does it have on the power of images like the Sistine Chapel, and Leonardo’s *Last Supper*, or Leonardo’s other Christs, when you depoliticise them? You don’t think about them as political art.

“The Sistine Chapel is not [considered] political art: it is a work of ‘genius’. Political art in the Western mind is what is made by Lubaina Hamid or maybe it’s shown in “Entangled Pasts” [2024 show at the Royal Academy]. Political art is about black people and it’s about women. But when we paint a white patriarch as the all-powerful creator, that is genius.”

“The Bough Breaks” includes some early works from 2010 — postcard-sized paintings of two boys, recalling the artist’s Dhaka church childhood — together with the *House of God* paintings, depicting a small church at the top margin of and then a field running into the distance. Mr Krishanu draws parallels between his treatment of religion and Francis Bacon’s *Screaming Popes*.

“I’m always interested by the way that viewers of different faiths read these scenes, and it’s rare in the contemporary art context for religion to be depicted in a way that is simply critical, in the way that Francis Bacon’s *Popes* are clearly about destabilising the power of the Pope.”

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He acknowledges that it is difficult for Christians to read works such as *Pink Christ* (2020), which offers a critique of Westernised depictions of Jesus, as anything other than a Crucifixion scene. He says his work is open to multiple readings. “I don’t foreclose people viewing the religious elements and relating to them in terms of their own spirituality, although my own response is discomfort looking at these images, and discomfort at the questions that arise from looking at them.”

ALTHOUGH baptised, Mr Krishanu was not confirmed and is not a practising Christian.

“I was quite disengaged from church as a child,” he says. “Another word is ‘bored’. The Good Friday service was three hours long, and we had to sit through it; so I’d take the Chronicles of Narnia, because Aslan was Christian enough for us to read in church. I was using it as a time to escape into my own imagination.

“My feeling was anger at: why do we have to go to church?” he says. “I’m sure many children of Christian parents experience it. I felt uncomfortable seeing communion leaflets being handed out to brown children, and all the subjects within them were white.

“I don’t align myself with Christianity, because God is so gendered, so patriarchal. Art history has painted this figure of God as a white man, and I didn’t believe that as a child. This white bearded man flying around the sky in the pink robe — there’s the absurdity of it. And the fact that people around the globe have that impression imprinted deeply in their minds — that is my discomfort with Christianity.”

Christianity’s positives can be found, he believes, in “liberation theology and the black-theology side of Christianity. The way Gandhi or Martin Luther King might quote Jesus — I’m totally aligned with that. But what might be termed imperial Christianity, the way Christianity has been used to justify wars and justify white supremacy, or help participate in the creation of *white supremacy*, I’m deeply troubled by.”

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Mr Krishanu would not describe himself as an atheist or agnostic, preferring a “no-labels” approach: “I haven’t got a Richard Dawkins bone in my body.” And he embraces a reverence for social justice, nature, and family love. “Water brings me joy, painting water, painting trees, that brings me joy. The giant Banyan painting that’s going to be in the Camden show, with a child in the top right, it’s a massive, quite abstract painting. And nature — that’s my sublime. Crows bring me joy and humour.”

The New Testament’s teachings on justice also resonate: “Ultimately, the New Testament is largely about justice issues and about wealth exclusion, and what that does to people. I believe in the power of opposing oppression, and the power of bringing meaning to what is otherwise a chaotic and often frightening world, and the solace we get from poetry, from music, from film, from literature. When my wife was diagnosed with cancer, I was reading poems and listening to music, and that’s the place I go to — which is more than enough.”

Contemplating the possibility of a life beyond this one, Mr Krishanu draws on the cyclical nature of the universe: “The idea of entirely linear construction, where the present moment is one thing more than any other present moment in the future and past, is much more about how we perceive our everyday life.

“I’m totally open to the idea of life being a vast ocean. Art, the study of faith, philosophy, literature, politics, all of these things are so vital to be a part of this world that we’re in.”

“The Bough Breaks” is at Camden Arts Centre, Arkwright Road, London NW3, until 23 June. Phone 020 7472 5500 (camdenartscentre.org).