

Tanya Leighton

## Matthew Krishanu

[Zehra Jumabhoy](#)



Matthew Krishanu, *Skeleton*, 2014, oil on canvas, 59 x 78 3/4". From the series "Another Country," 2012–.

"The Bough Breaks" seemed to topple visitors into a tropical paradise. The banyan tree, symbol of eternal life—some say the Buddha found enlightenment under its spreading branches—was the leitmotif in this exhibition of paintings by an artist who was born in Bradford in the north of England, grew up in Bangladesh, and now lives in London.

Featuring sixty-five works made between 2010 and this year, the presentation was Krishanu's first substantial solo show at a British institution, an artistic coming of age. Delicate works on paper—such

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as *Boat on Water*, 2015, in which smears of acrylic paint suggest the contours of a boat bobbing on indigo seas—counterpointed large-scale dramas in oils. The exhibition's relatively recent works are permeated with memories of Krishanu's Bangladeshi boyhood. The series "Another Country," 2012–, tells the tale of Krishanu and his brother, depicted both as small boys and adolescents, roaming Bangladesh's verdant foliage. The protagonists of *Two Boys on a Boat*, 2017, perch on a little vessel as it traverses cerulean waters. *Two Boys on a Horse*, 2024, sees them riding through rolling green fields, whereas in *Banyan (Boy)*, 2023, a minuscule red-shirted figure nestles on a swooping brown branch of the vast tree. Visitors also meet the artist's Indian mother, a scholar of liberation theology, and his white British father, a priest in the Church of Bangladesh. In *Preaching*, 2018, we see the mother robed in a flaming-orange sari reading a Bible as two candle-bearing nuns cluster around her. Her head veiled, she resembles Mother Mary. But, just as we think that these are vignettes of a blessed childhood, we think again: *Skeleton*, 2014, shows Krishanu and his brother standing on the carcass of an animal, its head contorted as if in anguish.

In these paintings, lush dark-green trees wave their branches over gleaming turquoise seas and endless cerulean skies as children frolic. Yet, as we walk around these sun-kissed scenes, tranquility makes way for something else: unease. Often, the specter of the cross looms over us. Perhaps Krishanu is reminding us of Christianity's engagement with colonialism in South Asia. *Pulpit*, 2023, shows a lectern, a crucifix affixed to the wood and another seeming to stand guard behind it. The room is eerily empty. More unsettling still is *Shrine (Candles and Christ)*, 2022: Brightly colored candles, with fluttering flames, line up at the entrance to a dark cave. As our eyes travel upward, we see a cross on which a miniature Jesus, complete with halo, has been emblazoned. *Shrine* could be a

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reference to the welding together of Christian and Hindu rituals in South Asia, but the merger seems ineffectual against the ominously gaping cavity at the heart of the image. Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism all make appearances in these paintings. Yet religion does not always offer solace. In the oil-on-board *Pink Christ*, 2020, the figure of Jesus nailed to the cross looks like an abandoned puppet.

For all of Krishanu's technical virtuosity, his real achievement is his poignant rendition of childhood, the pain of growing up, the failure of faith to heal, the inevitability of death. *Hotel Bed (Delhi)*, 2023, is a small work that would have been easy to miss. In it, we glimpse Krishanu's late wife, writer Uschi Gatward, sleeping in a vast bed. Her uptilted face is almost all that is visible of her: She is buried amid the white sheets and beige blankets. She looks achingly vulnerable, her closed eyes foreshadowing a longer sleep to come. She died of cancer in 2021. As the nursery rhyme quoted in the show's title warns, "when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall."