

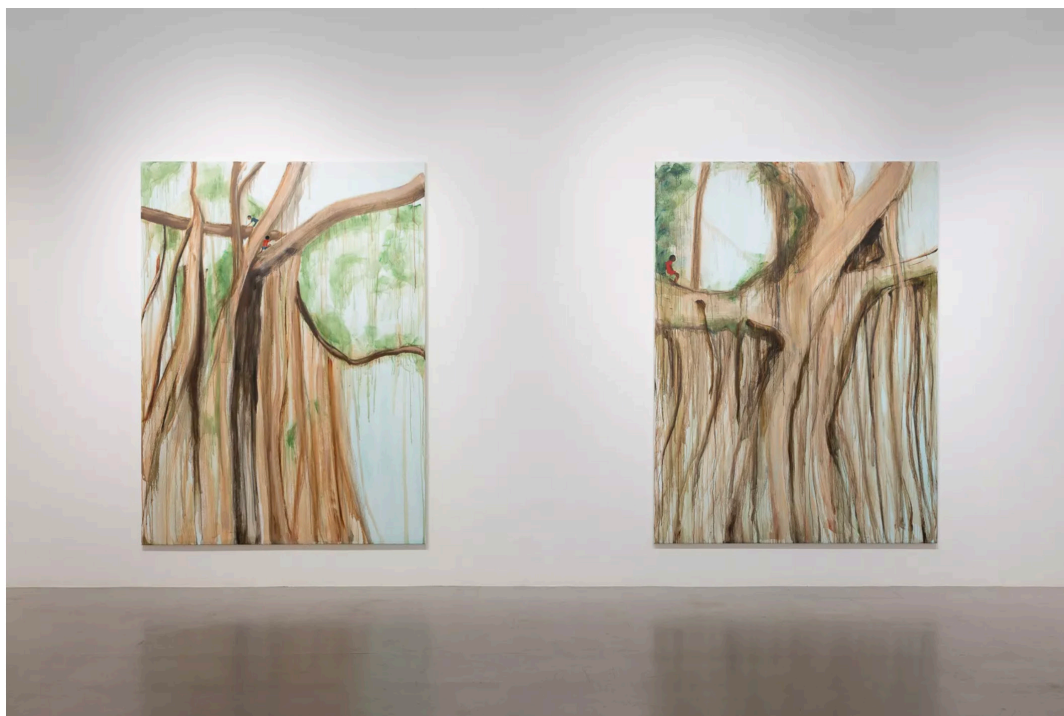
Tanya Leighton



Matthew Krishanu's Divine Paintings Reflect on Family, Religion, and Power Dynamics

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Matthew Krishanu, installation view of "The Bough Breaks" at Camden Art Centre, 2024. Courtesy of Camden Art Centre.

In the world of Matthew Krishanu's paintings, water embodies freedom. For Krishanu, "divinity" is located in "family, babies, children, water, nature." Discussing his exhibition "The Bough Breaks" the morning after it opened at Camden Art Centre last month, he spoke reverently of "the banyans and the fruit trees" he and his brother climbed as children, and the woods and lakes of Epping Forest on the outskirts of London that he visits with his daughter.

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That elemental freedom extends to his handling of paint. The great trees of his “Banyan” series are painted in fluid gestural sweeps that leave thinned earth tones dripping down the canvas to form trailing vines. Elsewhere, the little boys that appear as protagonists in many paintings are pictured blissfully submerged in the velvet waters of a night-lit swimming pool or placid lake. The exhibition counterbalances these visions of liberty with the precisely rendered “Mission” paintings, in which airless ecclesiastical interiors are rammed with compliant, worshipful bodies. In an informal work on paper, a young South Asian boy jabs a bearded character Krishanu describes as “a white Sistine God” in the eye. Take that!

I’ve known Krishanu’s work since visiting his uncanny, atmospheric installation – a murder of painted crows – at Matt’s Gallery in South London in 2019. In the years that followed, his work seemed to become ubiquitous. During the pandemic, the façade of London’s Southbank Centre carried reproductions of his paintings of hospital and prison chaplains and rabbis from his series “Religious Workers”

(2020). There were solo exhibitions at his London gallery Niru Ratnam, and a wall of canvases in the Hayward Gallery’s major painting survey “Mixing it Up” in 2021. “The Bough Breaks” is Krishanu’s first major institutional show in London, and follows a run of solos at GRIMM in New York and Jhaveri Contemporary in Mumbai, among other galleries.

The gaze with which Krishanu meets the world is that of the boys in his paintings: intense but wary. When we met at Camden he looked wired but exhausted, like he’d just sat down after weeks running on adrenaline. He told me he was taking time off now to take stock. I hope he achieves it.

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Matthew Krishanu, installation view of "The Bough Breaks" at Camden Art Centre, 2024. Courtesy of Camden Art Centre.

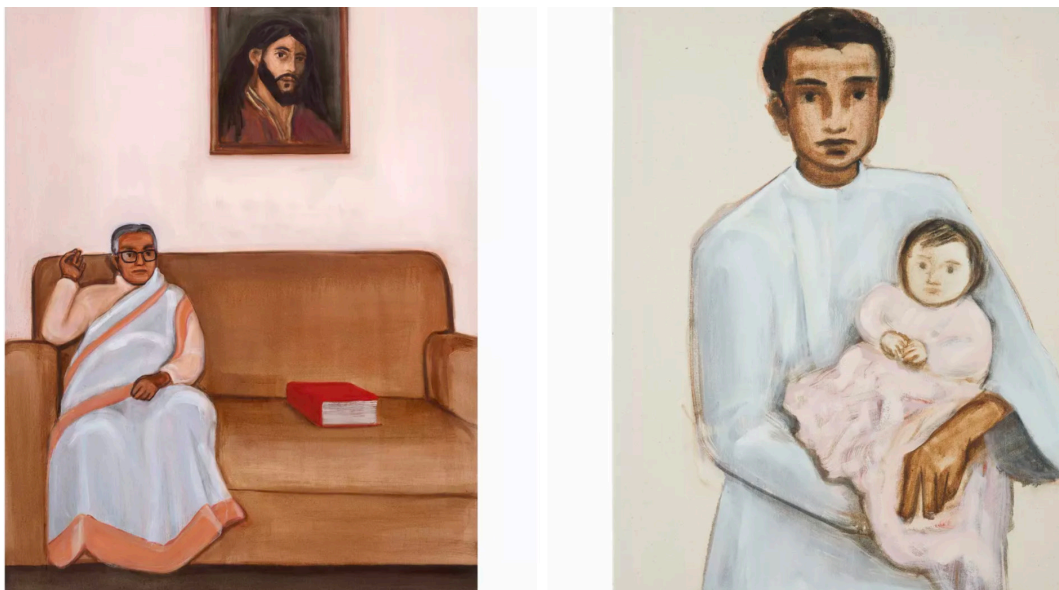
This was the first time that I'd seen Krishanu since the summer of 2023, when Whitechapel Gallery showed the exquisite but eviscerating display of paintings as love letters, "In Sickness and In Health," which documented the blossoming of romance with his wife, their early years as a young family, and her terminal illness. Autobiography is unquestionably a part of his work, pulsing hot beneath the surface of his cool-toned paintings. Born in Bradford in the U.K., the son of a (white, British) priest and (Indian) theologian, Krishanu and his brother spent much of their childhood in South Asia. These characters, and the landscapes and structures they passed through, populate his work.

The "Mission" series, which he commenced in 2012, is, he said, "one hundred percent" a critical workthrough of dynamics around him as a child. "Religion was obviously very present. The fact that so many of the religious figures were white, you notice." In two of these paintings — *Blessing* (2024) and *Ordination* (2017) — white priests

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Matthew Krishanu, *White Sari (Christ)*, 2024. Photo by Peter Mallet. Courtesy of the artist. Matthew Krishanu, *Priest and Baby*, 2016. Photo by Peter Mallet. Courtesy of the artist.

paintings—*Blessing* (2024) and *Ordination* (2017)—white priests stand at the center of a South Asian congregation, a position of power in which the titular benedictions are theirs to bestow.

Often, Jesus appears as a white European in paintings within the paintings. Leonardo's *Last Supper* hangs above two boys sleeping in a womb-red bed. A head of Christ attributed to Rembrandt gazes down at Krishanu's maternal grandmother seated on the sofa in *White Sari (Christ)* (2024). "There's a power relationship here, and certainly in terms of representing divinity as whiteness, it is a deeply problematic, dangerous tool of empire," he said. "Quoting those images within this context, where they are othered and surrounded by brown people—even the white priest is surrounded by brown people—turns the history of imperial Christian painting on its head."

Krishanu's relationship to all of this is understandably nuanced. This is not a world of tight binaries, but one in which familial bonds form complex webs of relations between works. In the Camden show, the central work in the display of "Mission" paintings is *Preaching* (2018),

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Matthew Krishanu, *Preaching*, 2018. Photo by Peter Mallet. Courtesy o

in which his mother stands at the pulpit flanked by female candle bearers. In the “Holy Family” series positioned opposite, nuns and priests are painted as radiant figures against raw white backgrounds. Among them, the sublime *Priest and Baby* (2016), shows a white robed South Asian man carrying an infant in echo of the Madonna and Child. It is a pivotal work—a “seed painting”—which Krishanu had kept back for himself and barely exhibited before.

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to read Krishanu’s paintings as pure autobiography. His work is animated by grand themes of liberty and control in which familial relations, freeform nature, art, and architecture all play their role in reinforcing power structures. He is preoccupied by formal concerns, balancing sharp crosses and horizon lines against loosely rendered elements of the landscape,

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playing with the perception of scale, and at times boring optical holes into the picture plane with pitch-black shadows.

Krishanu constantly checks in with the work of beloved painters. He described how works by Chaim Soutine “unlocked the puzzle” of how to balance *Banyan (girl)* (2024) by bringing a flash of red into the composition. Krishanu keeps details from Rembrandt’s *A Woman Bathing in a Stream* (1654) pinned to his studio wall and enthuses about the Dutch artist’s extraordinary paint handling: “When you see those sweeps of paint in abstract, as a detail, it’s so inspiring.” The composition of *A Woman Bathing in a Stream* is echoed in Krishanu’s painting *Girl and Sea* (2024). Among contemporaries he cites René Daniëls, the subject of an earlier exhibition at Camden, which has an important history of monographic mid-career painting shows.

Krishanu works in long-running series which evolve in parallel, but two of the most recent works stand alone: paintings of a woman and girl, Krishanu’s daughter and his late wife, in Epping Forest. “It felt like something I wanted to do again, paint them together,” he said. In one, the mother leans against the low bough of a tree as her daughter scales its upper branches. In the other, *Mother and Child (Water, Epping Forest)* (2024), the pair sit on a jetty facing a peaceful lake. They are a little distant from us, emblems of the divine, of a part with this great body of water bordered by trees. ■