

Tanya Leighton

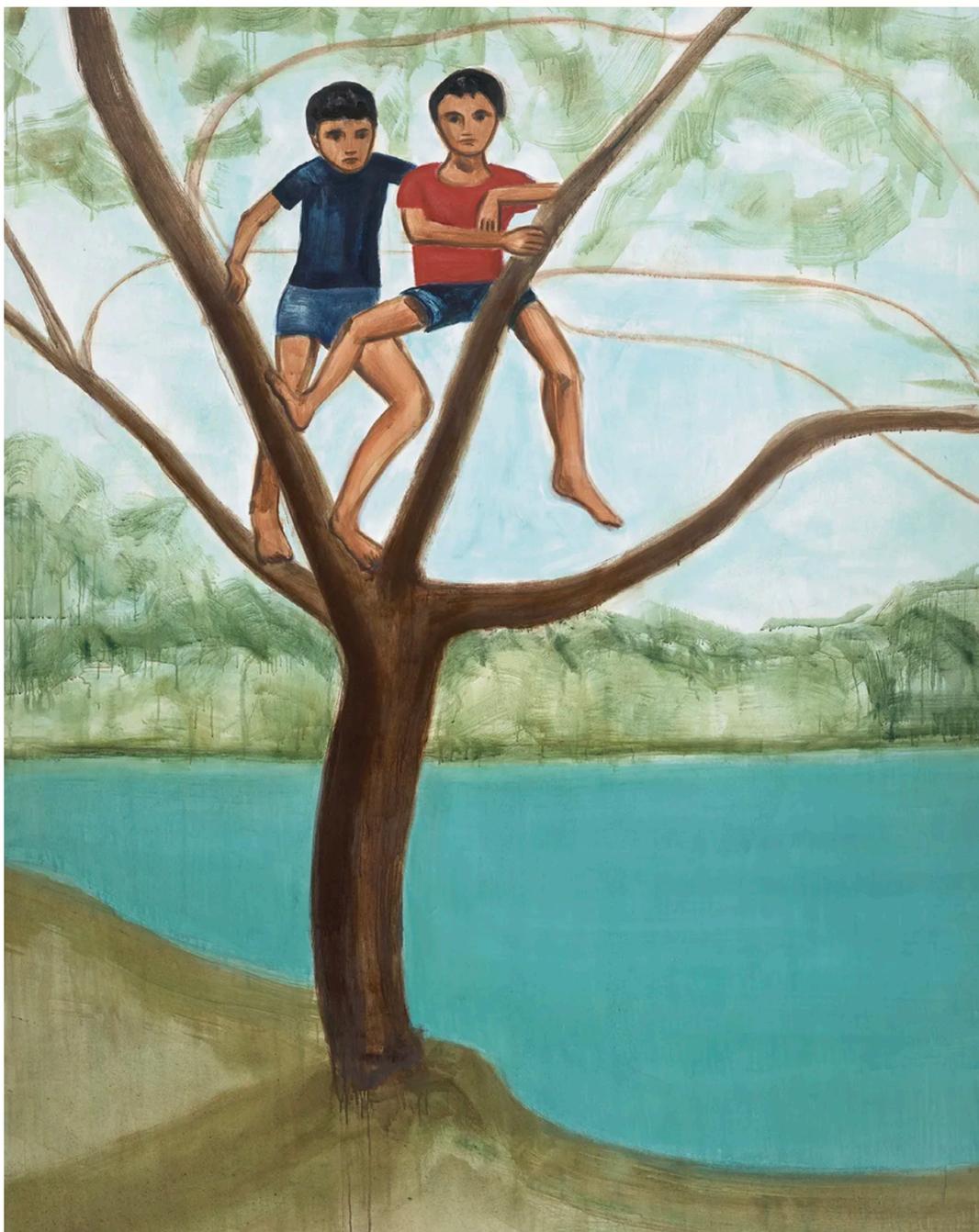
ARTFORUM

Matthew Krishanu

Jhaveri Contemporary

By Mario D'Souza ☼

October 1, 2023 12:00 am



Matthew Krishanu, *Two Boys in a Tree*, 2023, oil and acrylic on canvas, 106 1/4 × 78 3/4".

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Two brown boys perch precariously on branches, their delicate wrists and palms pressed against its trunk for support. They balance by spreading their legs, as if mimicking the branches on which they stand. We meet the pair in Matthew Krishanu's large acrylic-and-oil painting, *Two Boys in a Tree*, 2023. In another recent work, *Boy in a Tree*, 2023, a child in a red long-sleeved T-shirt stands alone without holding on, looking sideways as though he's distracted by something in the distance. These two large works set the tone of an exhibition, "On a Limb," that grappled with the conditions of dependence, fear, safety, and isolation—with holding on and letting go.

Born in Bradford in the north of England in 1980, Krishanu spent his childhood in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This body of work draws on photographs of family trips in Bangladesh and India, as well as on his recollections of a trip with his late partner to the city of Agra in Uttar Pradesh, India. Images coalesce like distant memories, blurry at the edges. But the compositions are resolved. Krishanu keeps the focus on his protagonists. With large, translucent strokes and rough brushwork, he reduces landscapes and settings to silhouettes—swatches of greens for forests and trees; browns for clay, bark, and in some cases architecture; blues for skies and water. The saturated palette remains largely true to the subtropical climate; occasionally it is muted to portray gloom. The artist also plays with distance in three small oil-on-board works from 2020: *Boy in Blue Vest*, *Boy in Dungarees*, and *Boy in Yellow Shirt*, each a waist-up portrait of a child with a deep, pronounced gaze. The intimacy unsettles.

A strong undercurrent of grief and loneliness runs through these works. The imagery can be stark, the scale distorted. Krishanu lets go of details, staying with the atmosphere. Trees have few if any leaves, for example. Things function as metaphors. In *Banyan (Red and Blue Boy)*, 2019, a child climbs a large, dense, seemingly unsurmountable banyan tree. The protagonist of *Boy in Tunnel*, 2023, is silhouetted and alone with the light shining in. One often feels these figures must be coming to terms with loss.

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Two kinds of protagonists appear in Krishanu's work: those who look you in the eyes like the boys on the tree, and the ones that look away in contemplation. In *Agra Fort (View)*, 2023, a woman dressed in yellow gazes out a window. In the distance, past the fields and waters of the Yamuna River, the Taj Mahal is visible. Krishanu's situating of figures in the scenography also differs. Some are centralized; others are placed at the composition's edge. *Agra (Water View)*, 2023, is an example of the latter. A red sandstone building rises up along the extreme right of the composition, with a man standing on its balcony. The two tones of blue that fill the remainder of the canvas are sky and water, and they establish the setting's expansive scale. The man's peripheral position illustrates the condition proposed by the show's title: out on a limb of isolation and precarity.