



The Sun Never Sets

Matthew Krishanu

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23 June - 15 September 2018

Huddersfield Art Gallery, Princess Alexandra Walk, Huddersfield, HD1 2SU

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London-based painter Matthew Krishanu's early childhood is a tale of three cities, spent in Bradford, Birmingham and Bangladesh's capital Dhaka. His British-born father trained as a priest for the Church of England in Mirfield, West Yorkshire, having earlier met and married Matthew's mother while teaching in India. Matthew's Indian-born mother is a scholar in liberation theology - a field that focuses on poverty and inequality in relation to faith. The young family relocated from the north of England to Birmingham in the West Midlands at the very start of the 1980s, where Matthew's father trained to work for the church overseas - as a missionary. On completing his training, he was offered a post as a priest for the Church of Bangladesh, and in 1981 the family - mother, father, Matthew and his older brother Richard - began their new life in the large, densely populated metropolis of Dhaka, where they would stay for the next eleven years. It is this period in the artist's life and the family's history that has been the main subject of Krishanu's painting practice since he graduated with an MA from Central Saint Martins in London in 2009.

Within Krishanu's practice sit a number of ongoing series of works, perhaps the largest of which to date is 'Another Country'. Inspired by the opening line to L. P. Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there', this particular series records the experiences of the artist and his brother out and about, playing, exploring and having adventures. In *Making Weapons* (2018), while they are on holiday in Sylhet, a gardener who is skilled at woodwork offers to make



Making Weapons, 2018
Oil on canvas
75 x 60cm

them something, and they ask for a bow and arrow. The brothers sit patiently as he crouches on the ground, carving the bow. A related work, *Weapons* (2018) shows the finished article being tried out by Richard, with Matthew close to him, looking on. The man also watches, standing barefoot with a machete in his hand.

In other works from this series, we see the two boys climbing trees, rowing a small boat with paddles, or standing behind the skeleton of a large mammal - possibly a cow - in the middle of a field. The brothers sometimes look a bit awkward or sheepish; Matthew almost always appears shier than Richard in the paintings, who in turn generally has the air of confidence that comes with the status of being an older brother. Often in expansive, partly verdant, partly arid terrain, we see the boys standing on dusty roads, on empty beaches, in swimming pools and natural lakes - they have a strength in unity, quite different from when they are portrayed singly, as solitary, sometimes lonely, figures.

As if seen through the eyes of the two boys, the artist documents the international ex-pat community in Dhaka, in a series of works entitled 'Expatriates', several of which depict white women wearing saris. These small, full-length portraits of women variously standing alone indoors and out, against walls or in front of doors, next to buildings or on driveways, suggest their subjects may or may not be at ease in their adopted fashions. It is an ambiguity carefully created by the artist, enhanced by the economy of painterly means he uses - just a few brush marks can suggest the features on a face, or a strong outline imply the tilt of the head. Expressions, personality and demeanour are all skilfully rendered by Krishanu with a confident and considered lightness of touch that leaves us with a vivid impression though with a faint underlying uncertainty as to whether we have 'read' their body

Magenta Sari, 2016
Oil on canvas
35 x 25cm





Boat, 2018
Oil on canvas
200 x 300cm



Weapons, 2018
Oil on canvas
180 x 240cm

language and faces correctly. In other works from the series we see a man wearing a western-style suit, a brigadier in his uniform, and a rambler out in the woods, and it is up to the viewer to decide if each figure seems arrogant or modest, confident or insecure, austere or warm.

Krishanu is very much aware of the complex politics that accompany ex-pat communities in an economically developing country such as Bangladesh - how some people come to profit from a poorer nation, how some come to try to help improve it, how some seek to take control, and others to support. Krishanu's paintings invite us to consider the presence of Europeans - particularly the British - in Bangladesh today, against a backdrop of British colonial rule and of Christian missionary history. The exhibition's title, 'The Sun Never Sets', references the saying 'the empire on which the sun never sets', so vast was the British Empire at its peak that part of it was always in daylight. As a country that was formed out of the British partition of India in 1947, and its ensuing war of independence in 1971, Bangladesh's problems, and its progress, are inextricably intertwined with British intervention. Krishanu presents us with what he and his family saw and experienced whilst living in Bangladesh, from people running charitable initiatives for organisations such as Save the Children - as can be seen in the painting *Save* (2018) - to the grand private residences of affluent ex-pat districts represented in a work such as *Gulshan* (2018). The latter is from a series entitled 'City', which explores the different areas of Dhaka and beyond.

Through the work of both parents, Krishanu's life in Bangladesh was also bound up with the life of the church - while he would attend his father's services, he always felt an observer to the scenes - more of an outsider than a participant. In the series



Save, 2018
Oil on canvas
200 x 150cm

'Mission', Krishanu portrays this world - whether his father leading an ordination service of a new priest (*Ordination*, 2018), holy communion (*Communion*, 2017), religious school for the congregation's children (*Mission School*, 2016), or services for churches in rural areas (*Mission*, 2013). The scenes Krishanu depicts mostly show simple spaces with handmade decorations and often a plain wooden cross or crucifix. Unlike the highly ornate churches many might associate with Europe - especially Catholic churches - these are humble, basic rooms for worship and the wider work of the church. Krishanu's paintings capture this sense of modesty and poverty with large expanses of empty wall, a plain floor, or a sermon taking place between huts and tree trunks. A number of paintings show the congregation from behind, as if we are among or behind the churchgoers, with Krishanu's father leading the service from the pulpit or altar at the front. These works are painted with a simple, humble approach that reflects the basic, almost utilitarian feel of the church premises. Often filled with people, there remains an understated sense of quietness and peacefulness throughout the series - a gentle feeling of community, of spirituality and of shared faith.

Krishanu's painterly language, with its thin washes or glazes of paint and subdued yet welcoming palette, is one that simplifies, abbreviates, flattens, outlines, summarises, and in doing so it points towards the graphic and the illustrational, poised between virtuosity and 'naivety'. There is a sense, though it is hard to pin down precisely, that Krishanu's approach to painting hovers between western and non-western styles, between linear perspective and a flattened picture plane, and it is these qualities that give the work its simultaneous familiarity and strangeness as well as its charm. It is a painterly language that perfectly reflects Krishanu's background between Britain and Bangladesh, as seen through the prism of childhood.

Matt Price, June 2018



Ordination, 2017
Oil on canvas
180 x 240cm

Courtesy of the artist and the Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.



Gulshan, 2018
Oil on canvas
95 x 125cm

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