



Swimming Pool, 2018
oil on canvas, 60 x 75cm

Figure and Ground

A small, dark brown form first draws you in to an angled patch of blue and then to a triangle of brick-ish red, before being pushed back by two long, grey rectangles – one paler than the other. *Swimming Pool* (2018), offers up more ground than figure; the recognisable narrative of a small child in an outdoor, domestic pool is shunted in another direction by a clever construction of colour and shape. Similarly, in *Crowd* (2018), the ground consists of equal areas of turquoise sky and golden-yellow sand, separated by a central, horizontal line of tiny colourful figures that dissect across the entire width of the composition.

More often though, in Matthew Krishanu's work, the figure is painted solidly while the ground dissolves around it, creating a feeling of being in constructed time. Sometimes, like in *Boys on a Rock* (2018) and *Kashmir* (2014), the subject is propelled into view from a place somewhere off the edge of the picture plane, adding to the sense of travelling through a thought – a moment in transit rather than being frozen in the frame. In *Ordination* (2017) and in *Mission* (2013) where the figures crowd out the ground almost completely, the atmosphere becomes confined, claustrophobic and airless. These two works are without the horizon acting as an anchor to slow things down as it does in those paintings with an open ground. There are also smaller, more fleeting paintings, where the figure is nearly lost in the ground, drowning in water rather than swimming through its surface.

This compositional push and pull shows Krishanu to be as much a story teller as he is a picture maker. Once completed, his paintings are allocated under thematic titles such as *Another Country*, *Expatriates* and *Mission*. More akin to cinema than to literature, these anthologies are without chronology or fixed number. Each series is recognisable by recurring characters, repeated landscapes and familiar buildings, usually executed in a simple, flattened style. However, despite its apparent simplicity, there is nothing naïve or unknowing about Krishanu's work. By choosing to paint in such a direct manner he deliberately avoids becoming embroiled in technique so as not to deflect from the work's immediate, emotional response.

Krishanu's dialogue with art history is clear to see: the evidence is there in the light and distance within the background landscapes, how figures stand alone or in relationship of one to another and in the significant role played by colour. Religious paintings of the European Renaissance, in particular by El Greco, icons from Eastern Europe and parts of Africa, Rembrandt, art from India, René Daniëls, Kerry James Marshall and Chantal Joffe are amongst an eclectic list of what he looks at and asks questions of. Having a passion for painting and possessing an enquiring mind has led him to understand what paint is and what it does. From studying traditions, he knows that by installing a formal discipline he is making room for revelation and invention. He has said that he wants freedom in his painting '...like a child in the world'. For him the activity of painting extends a space in which to dream.

How Matthew Krishanu occupies his studio and prepares for work is essential to how the paintings are brought into being. He constantly gathers images; a changing collection of family or found photos, clippings from newspapers and magazines, loose pages from books, postcards of places he may or may not have visited, and pictures of works by other painters, all spanning

different eras and geographies. In piles or pinned to the wall they are there as reminders, to be referred to but not copied. Paint brushes are hung systematically, according to size and thickness, on nails along one wall. Before beginning a painting, he will decide what size of canvas or board to work on, then make an appropriate selection of brushes before choosing a palette of colours which he lays out in order of tone, and in exact and equal measures of oil paint. His consistent apportionment of paint often means that the small paintings are thickly textured and gestural while the large-scale ones are thinly washed and stained.

Over time Krishanu has arrived at a language of colour that is personal and particular, not taken directly from nature but conjured from memory and desire. He uses colour knowingly to evoke the atmosphere of memory as well as its uncertain partiality, and – in the way of El Greco – add wonder to a story. His range of hues also suggests the kind of erosion seen in faded polaroids and tinted photographs as well as in the altered intensity of Technicolor films and John Hinde postcards. For example, the strong, heightened red and blue of the boys' T-shirts in *Limbs* (2014) holds them firmly together as they direct their gaze out of the picture, while their brown limbs tangle loosely with those of the tree in an abstracted arrangement that compresses time and distance. Paintings in the *Mission* series have been rendered differently, with a sweet and sugary array of colours that adds fragility to a heavy and ambiguous environment.

Scale in relation to volume is an important consideration in establishing a physical presence. Finding the right size can lead Krishanu to realising the same image at different times, on a larger or smaller scale, with each version remaining in existence as distinct works, not copies of themselves. Working on canvasses or boards of varying dimensions and formats means he can bring his characters and locations into an intense proximity to the viewer or keep them at arm's length. Also, with larger paintings like *Boat* (2018) and *Weapons* (2018), he can create a cinematic quality where light emanates from the washy ground to act like a screen, the figure and content projected on it to occupy their own world, with its intrinsic logic and specific colour values. By weighing up his subject to learn its correct size, Krishanu ensures each painting confronts its viewer in the present tense with meaning that remains fluid.

Autobiography plays some part in all Krishanu's work, whether populated by figures or uninhabited like his landscapes. The image, the scale, the colours and the volume he chooses for a painting all carry authenticity but are not intended as true documentation or a means of illustrating an event. Neither is he clouding his work with nostalgia; instead of looking back he is conjuring the atmosphere of a memory into the reality of now. He speaks beautifully about evoking the atmosphere of a remembered feeling of love for a place. However, his paintings are given a deliberate edge of uncertainty that folds reality in with the collapsing of time.

How all the paintings can be looked at and read is left generously open. While standing firmly in the present, the figures in the paintings are not charged with making a point or conveying a fixed meaning, nor are they judgemental. Formed in such a way that lends dignity and autonomy to the content, each of Matthew Krishanu's paintings is very much of its self: returning any scrutiny – out there and up for a conversation.

Jenni Lomax

Former director of Camden Arts Centre, now independent writer and curator



Weapons, 2018
oil on canvas, 180 x 240cm