



Niru Ratnam

# Matthew Krishanu 'Playground'

9 November 2022 - 14 January 2023

## Matthew Krishanu 'Playground' by Mark Rappolt

At first glance the works in 'Playground' seem innocent enough: children climbing playframes, balancing on walls, going for walks and generally exploring the environment around them. It's the kind of exploration that seems a part of the natural process of growing up. Fun, even. But look again and there are other, less carefree, forces at play.



Playground, 2020, Oil on canvas, 55 x 70 cm



Boy on a Wall, 2022, Oil on canvas, 35 x 35 cm

Broadly speaking the images, like much of Matthew Krishanu's previous work, reference his own biography and, in particular, memories of his childhood in Dhaka. But other than the veneer of authenticity (Krishanu was born to an Indian mother and a White British father, for what it's worth) this gives the scenes depicted, it's not necessary to know this. Everything we need is in front of us as we stare at the paintings. In *Playground* (2020), the ground is all thinnish washes of greens, browns and blues. It might almost be air. All that is solid is a simple metal seesaw balanced on a wooden frame. A blond-haired White child is on the up, a dark-haired South Asian child is on the down. Standing behind the latter is a South Asian woman in a sari; behind the former is a White man, laughing as his hand stretches out to grip the metal and support the White child's ascent. People look like they are having fun. Except perhaps the South Asian woman who looks a bit grimaced. And even though we know that the relative elevations of the two children are about to switch, you can't help reading the work as a metaphor for colonialism. Or gender roles. Even though you've been told it's a scene of play. A scene that describes the dynamics of balance, just like the tottering *Boy on a Wall* or *Boy on a Climbing Frame* (both 2022). Although the tension in those works is about someone potentially heading for a fall. Indeed, as a viewer, you're not quite sure if you're imagining the fall to come as the boy stands upright having managed the ascent of the frame, or willing it to add to the scene's tension.



Indeed many of Krishanu's works play on what is in the work and what we project onto it. What do we think when we see the two South Asian boys standing either side of two White girls in *Four Children (Verandah)* (2022)? That it's a model for racial harmony? Or that it's a bit weird (given that we all know the world to be a lot less than racially harmonious)? And if it's the latter, are we, with our experience and projections, really the weirdos? The truth is that however innocent the images before us are, the true 'play' is with our own preconceptions and prejudices. With what we know of the present - from reading newspaper reports, TV reports or social media reports of racial injustice and inequality. A play between the ideal and the reality. With Krishanu's paintings balanced, like a kind of seesaw, delicately in between.



*Four Children (Verandah)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm



*Playpark (Bradford)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 35 x 35 cm

For all that these works might be sourced from an idyllic past, they also trigger the tensions of our present. And in that sense they are utterly contemporary. Another South Asian boy ascending another climbing frame in *Playpark (Bradford)* (2022) looks as much caged as he does free. Another verandah scene (*Verandah (Girl and Boy)*, 2022), in which one of the White girls from the previous verandah scene stands, arms folded, staring out of us with pebble eyes, in front of an open door, while the South Asian boy seems to be sliding away from her to her left, appears to be some sort of break-up scene. Unless it's an expression of their relative comfort with the capture of their images (Krishanu often paints from photographs).

What we're left with is a profound sense of uncertainty as to what's going on. A contrast to the simple, bold expressions of Krishanu's brush - flattened forms with just enough light and shade to give a sense of three-dimensionality; dots for eyes, lines for brows, lines and curves for mouths; and the thin washes that make up the houses, cities or landscapes that constitute the backgrounds to these scenes. They feel quickly painted as if to capture a moment, but equally as if already that moment is slipping away. Just the basic facts then. And what we do with them is up to us. Or, perhaps, an expression of us. Like some sort of mirror.







Matthew Krishanu  
Four Children (Verandah)  
2022,  
Oil on canvas  
150 x 200 cm





Matthew Krishanu  
Verandah (Girl and Boy)  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
45 x 35 cm







Matthew Krishanu  
Boy on a Climbing Frame  
2022  
oil on canvas  
160 x 120cm





Matthew Krishanu  
Playground  
2020  
Oil on canvas  
55 x 70 cm









Matthew Krishanu  
Wintercoats (Bradford)  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 30 cm





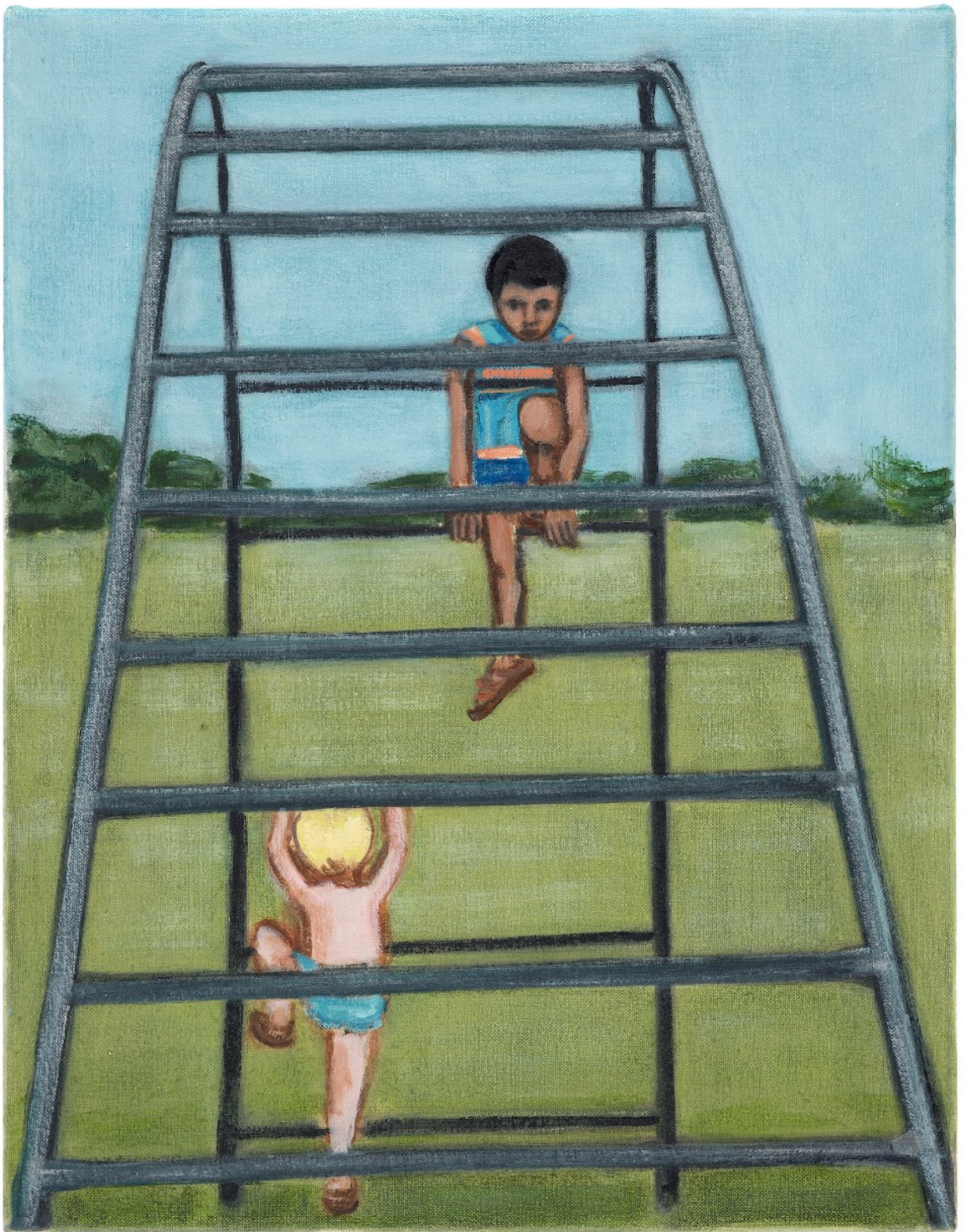
Matthew Krishanu  
Boy and peacock  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
35 x 35 cm





Matthew Krishanu  
Boy Climbing Wall  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
35 x 35 cm





Matthew Krishanu  
Climbing Frame  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
45 x 35 cm









Matthew Krishanu  
Boy on a Wall  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
35 x 35 cm





Matthew Krishanu  
Playpark (Bradford)  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
35 x 35 cm





Matthew Krishanu  
City Walk  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
50 x 65 cm



## Annex



Matthew Krishanu  
Campsite  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
45 x 55 cm





Matthew Krishanu  
Waterside (two figures and a boat)  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
45 x 55 cm





Matthew Krishanu  
Old Fort (Kashmir)  
2022  
Oil on canvas  
35 x 25 cm



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**Art**

## Secrets of the seesaw: the painter harnessing the unsettling power of the playground

**Elizabeth Fullerton**

Tue 8 Nov 2022 15:49 GMT



► 'A response to the historical disempowerment of the brown figure' ... Krishanu with a work in his studio. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Born in Bradford but raised in Bangladesh, the artist paints children playing on swings, seesaws and climbing frames to make subtle points about race, empire and excluded faces

Advertisement

*'Secrets of the seesaw: the painter harnessing the unsettling power of the playground'* by Elizabeth Fullerton  
The Guardian, November 8 2022

To read the article in full please [click here](#) or on the image.





## About Matthew Krishanu

Memory and imagination are central to the work of the London-based painter Matthew Krishanu (b. 1980, Bradford), whose figurative paintings explore childhood, religion and the legacies of colonialism and empire.

Krishanu completed an MA in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins in 2009. Recent solo exhibitions include 'Undercurrents' LGDR, New York (2022), 'Arrow and Pulpit' Tanya Leighton, Berlin (2021), 'Picture Plane', Niru Ratnam, London (2020), 'Corvus' Iniva, London (2019), 'House of Crows' Matt's Gallery, London (2019) and 'The Sun Never Sets' at Huddersfield Art Gallery (2018), Midlands Art Centre (2019) and 'Murder of Crows' Ikon Gallery (2019)

He has recently been in the group exhibitions 'The Kingfisher's Wing' GRIMM, New York (2022), 'Prophecy', Mead Gallery, Warwick (2022), Coventry Biennial (2021), 'Mixing It Up: Painting Today', Hayward Gallery, London (2021), 'John Moores Painting Prize' Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (2021) 'Everyday Heroes' Hayward Gallery/Southbank Centre, London (2020), Lahore Biennale (2020)

He has works in collections including the Arts Council Collection, Government Art Collection (UK); Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; Huddersfield Art Gallery; The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, India; and Jiangsu Art Museum, China.