

MATTHEW KRISHANU
ON A LIMB



Photo: David Levene

JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

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3 AUG—9 SEPT 2023

In Matthew Krishanu's painting, *Boy on Branch*, 2023, a young boy — perhaps around eight years old — poses, perched on a skeletal tree. The horned branches frame the crouched figure, furnishing the painting with an intimate vulnerability. The landscape is delicately depicted with washes of muted colours suggesting soil, foliage and trees. The paint is thinly applied and the painting feels casual, capturing a seemingly carefree moment. Who is the boy posing for? Where are we? How long is it before the boy injures himself, falling from the fragile branch?

The image is typical of Krishanu's work; merging landscape and portraiture to say something about both. Young Brown boys playing in an open field. White Europeans posing in a Bengal landscape. Kids perilously climbing atop a monumental Henry Moore sculpture. While often seemingly serene, Krishanu's work subtly surveys the ways in which power insidiously operates through people and places. His images are freighted with a barely concealed politics that lies just beneath the washes of the paintings' surfaces.

The paintings are often worked in acrylic and then oil paint over many weeks and, while they betray a wide variety of painterly marks, they are characterised by a concision and painterly economy. Krishanu's paint shifts from a mimetic to a more abstracted application, moving from concrete to symbolic registers with ease. From the thingness of paint to the abstractedness of imagination, the work is full of painterly questions: how can paint mimic tree bark? How do you portray the warm suppleness of skin and the cool hardness of rock? How can you conjure the Taj Mahal with a couple of brushstrokes? Krishanu encapsulates a varied terrain with minimal gestures; we sense when objects and subjects are brittle or impenetrable, fragile or resilient with a few cursory marks.

Many of the works are loosely based on family photographs taken during the artist's upbringing in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and visits to India. These form a scaffolding for the final paintings that are an amalgam of recollections and experiences imaginatively transformed through drawing and painting. Final compositions are changed and details are painted out. Seemingly insignificant details are scaled up, while monumental details are often rendered diminutive. Collectively, the works have the quality of reverie and anecdote. Memory operates much like a painter's brush and Krishanu edits, redrafts and revises history through the image which — much like recollection — becomes an unreliable archive.

In *Agra Fort (View)*, 2023, the back of a woman's head (Krishanu's late wife) — silhouetted against the sky — is mirrored in a window frame. Similarly, in *Two Boys in a Tree*, 2023, the boys' legs criss-cross, inverting and echoing the shape of a tree branch that supports them. These paintings are pervaded by echoes and refrains with the body and landscape perpetually mirroring each other. These reverberations are thematic and formal. The land in Krishanu's paintings becomes site and subject; the figure's emotional state extending into the environment. The work registers the politics of the bodies and land it depicts in subtle and covert ways. Amplifications, refrains, echoes, and silences: Krishanu's art plays on specific repetitions while situating the viewer within a broad emotional repertoire.

Sari and Dungarees, 2023, depicts a middle-aged White woman dressed in a sari flanked by two young boys in smart clothes. The woman holds the hand of one and puts her arm around the other boy's shoulder. On what occasion was the image taken? What is their relationship? We read the figures' body language and the artist's titles for insight and yet remain in a state of uncertainty. The woman's stance is assertive, the boys' bodies feel tentative, and their gaze is pensive. How and where people look is significant in these paintings. Whether returning our gaze or averting our eyes, looking from below or at us from above: to see and the right to be seen is of deep political consequence. Krishanu sets up an uneasy power dynamic between the three that suggests a level of unconscious, yet coercive, control. His paintings are full of these tensions. The image's perceived levity is infused with something ominous and expectant.

Two works on paper, *Boy in Tunnel* and *Two Boys on a Cliff*, both 2023, cast children as intrepid adventurers exploring caves and cliffs. The figures' youthful exuberance is rendered vulnerable against cavernous backdrops. Similarly, in Krishanu's Banyan paintings, trees overwhelm the boys as they climb. The branches are entangled and abstracted with expanses of painterly washes and marks covering the canvas. In these paintings, small abuts the colossal, youthful softness comes up against granite hardness. Nature cocoons and supports and occasionally threatens.

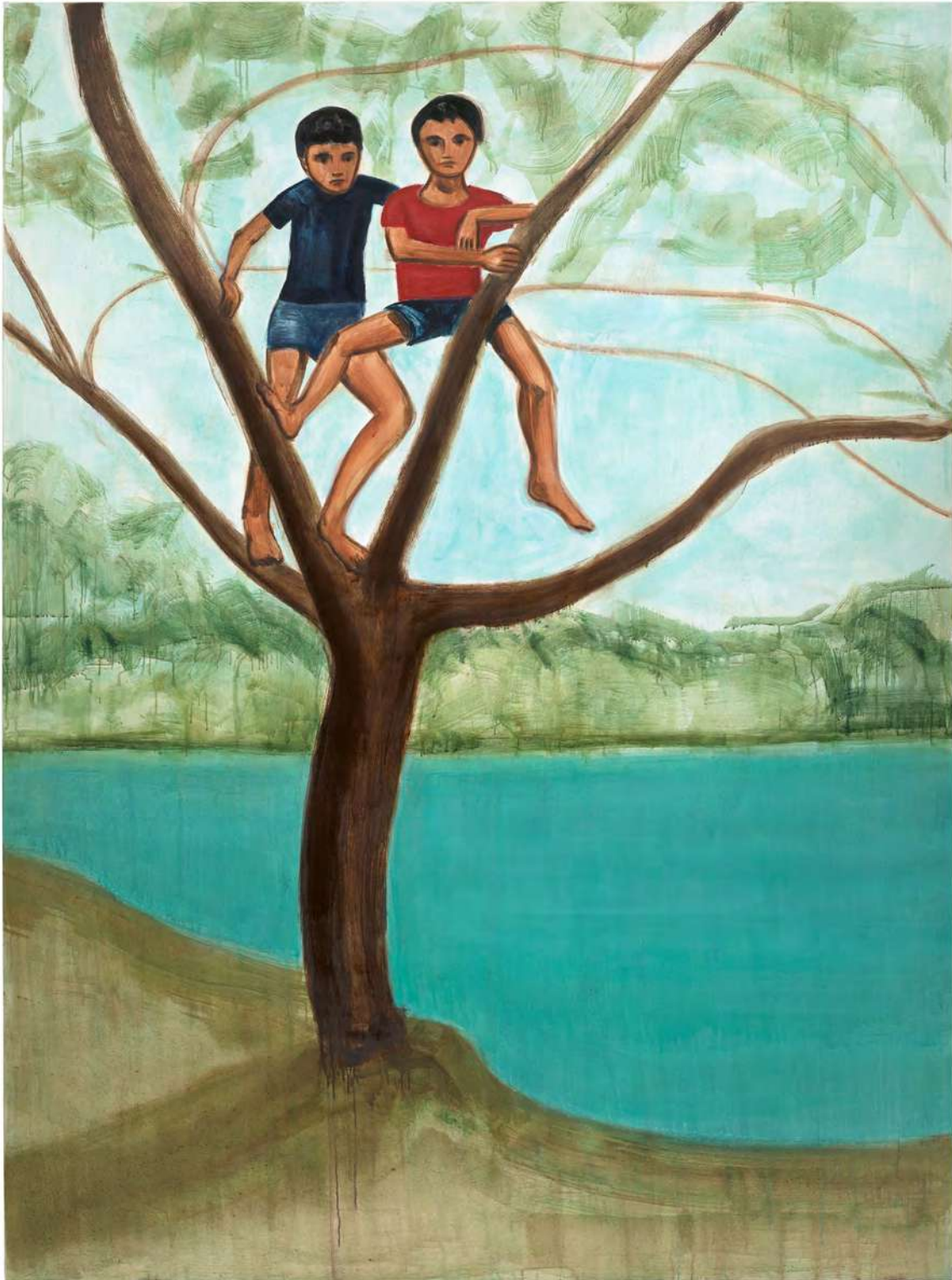
The sense of human fragility feels most overt in *Agra (Water)* and *Agra (Water View)*, 2023, in which two figures are framed by a subdued painterly wash. Krishanu often situates subjects at the sides of the composition alongside abstracted expanses of thin glazes that stand in for the land, sea and air. The implications are manifold. Space offers an opportunity for the viewer to impose themselves upon the narrative. Yet, the emptiness here feels existential as much as formal. The mouth of a cave, the moment before a fall, the space between representation and abstraction; these works continually operate at the edge of material and metaphorical thresholds.

The title of the exhibition *On a Limb* references an idiom that dates to 19th Century America. To be "out on a limb" suggests vulnerability, and its origins refer to a person or an animal climbing a tree and going slightly too far. This sense of intimate fragility pervades Krishanu's new paintings.

While continuing his focus on the figure in the land, collectively these works also seem to reflect on the nature of time: the split-second moment after a tree branch breaks, deep geological time of rock contrasted with the fragile human time of early childhood, instant photographic time and the revisionist time of the painter's studio. Restful time. Productive time. The time it takes to make and the time it takes to look. The type of time that stretches uninterrupted over a summer's afternoon. The finite nature of human time.

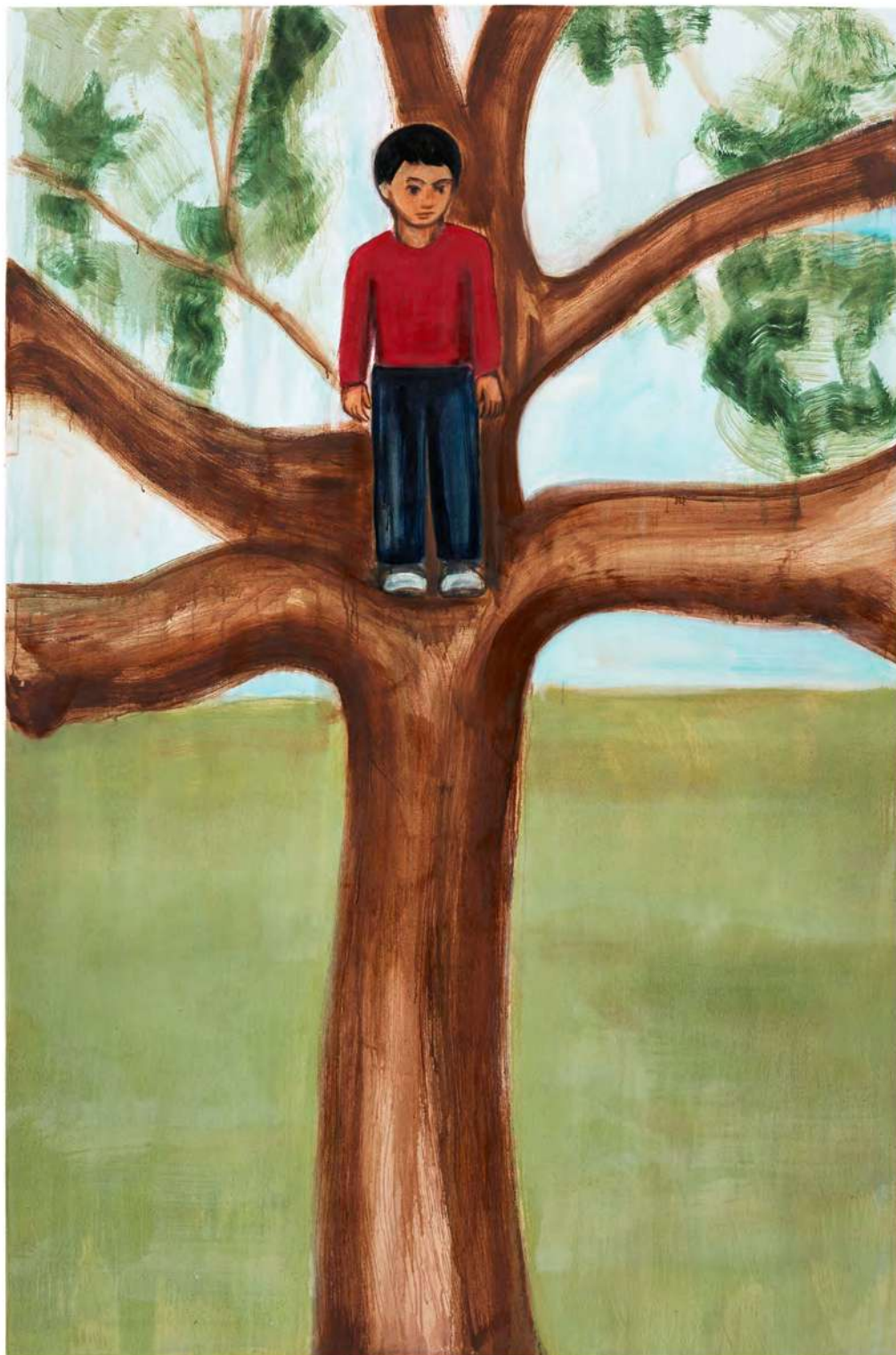
George Vasey, 2023
Curator and writer

MATTHEW KRISHANU



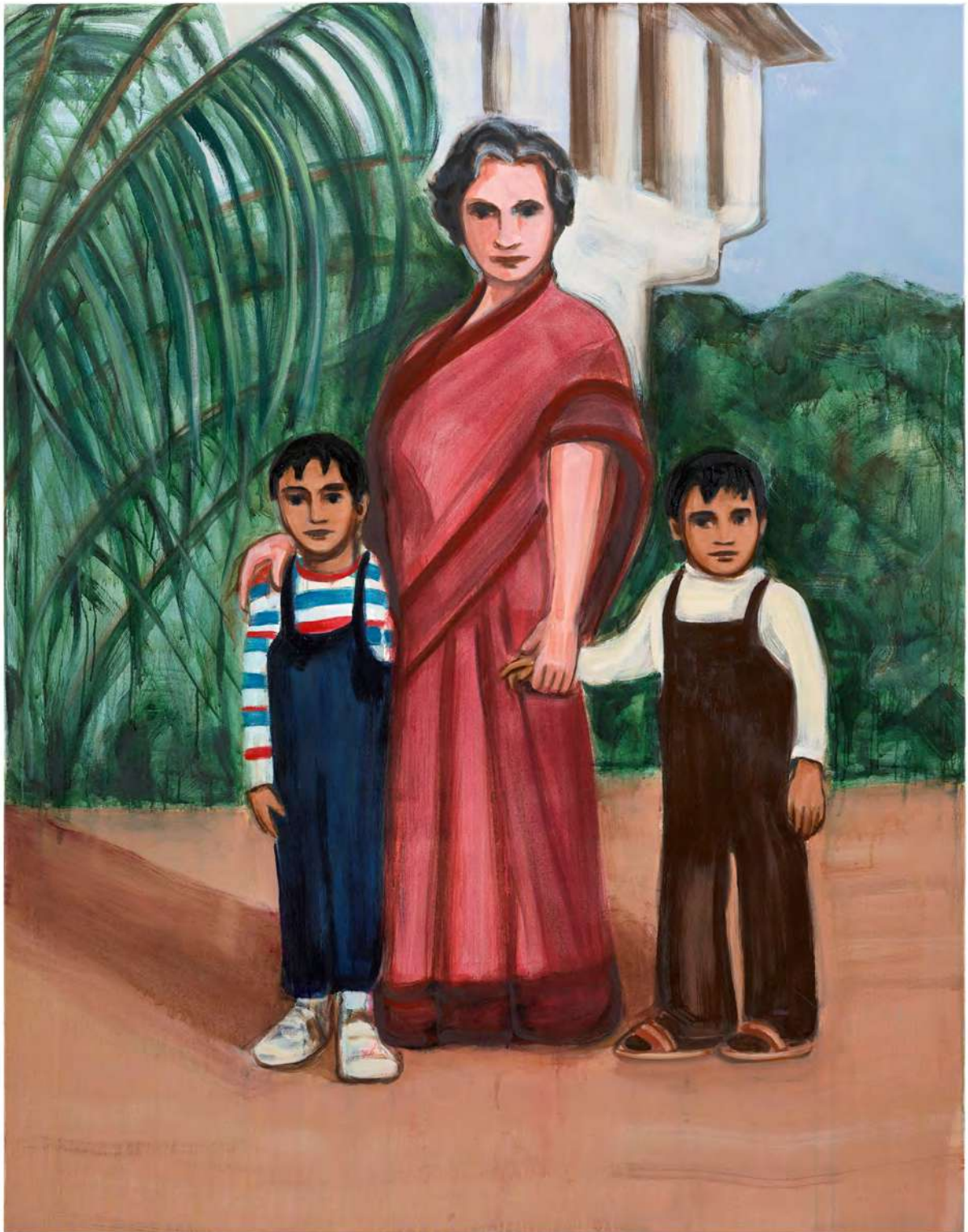
Two Boys in a Tree, 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
270 x 200 cm
106.2 x 78.7 in

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Boy in a Tree, 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
225 x 150 cm
88.5 x 59 in

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Sari and Dungarees, 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
180 x 140 cm
70.8 x 55.1 in

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Seesaw, 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
45 x 35 cm
17.7 x 13.7 in

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Sculpture Park (Two Boys), 2023

Oil and acrylic on canvas

60 x 90 cm

23.6 x 35.4 in

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Banyan (Red and Blue Boy), 2019

Oil on board

60 x 45 cm

23.6 x 17.7 in

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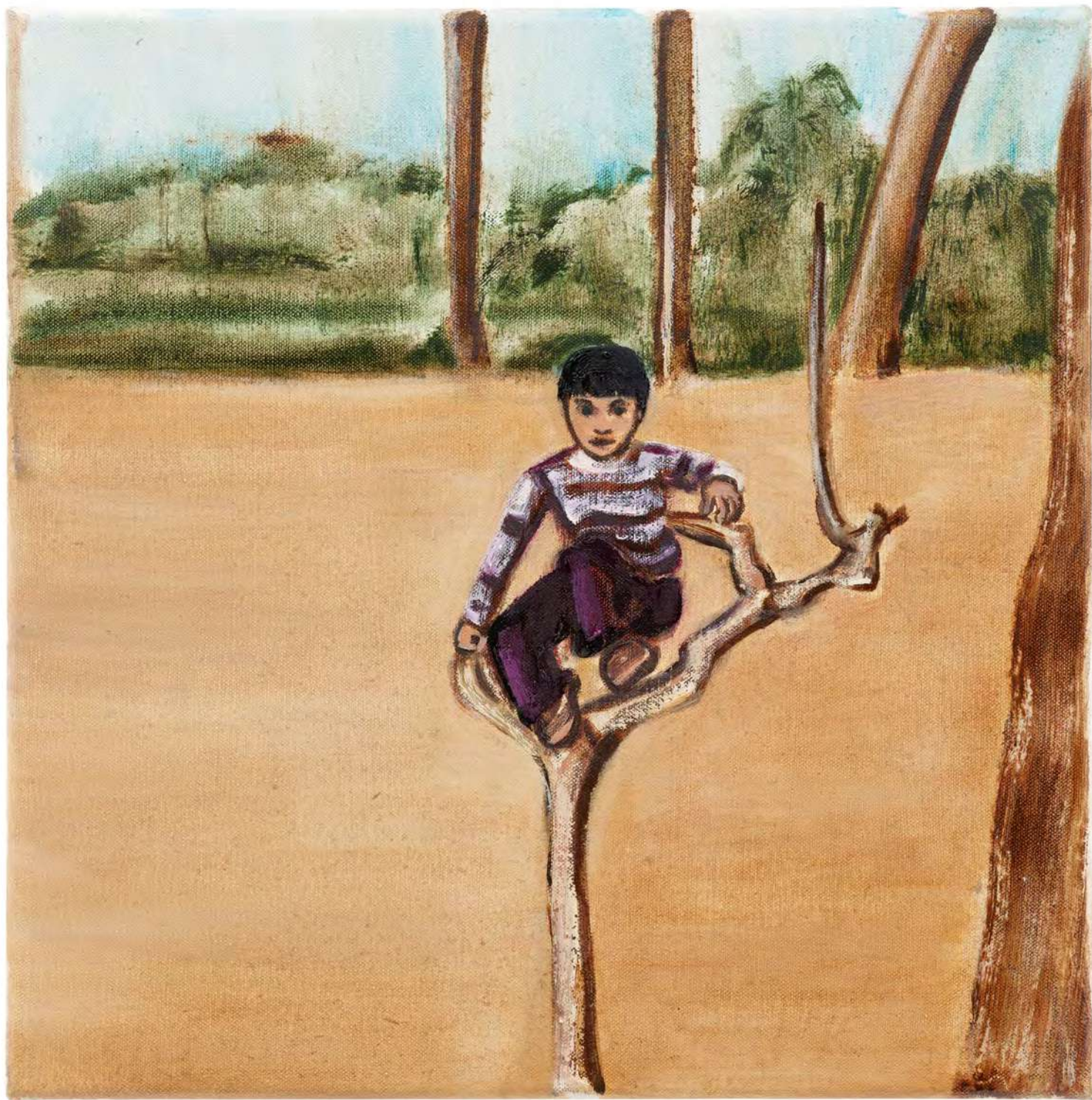
Banyan (Two Boys Climbing), 2019

Oil on board

60 x 50 cm

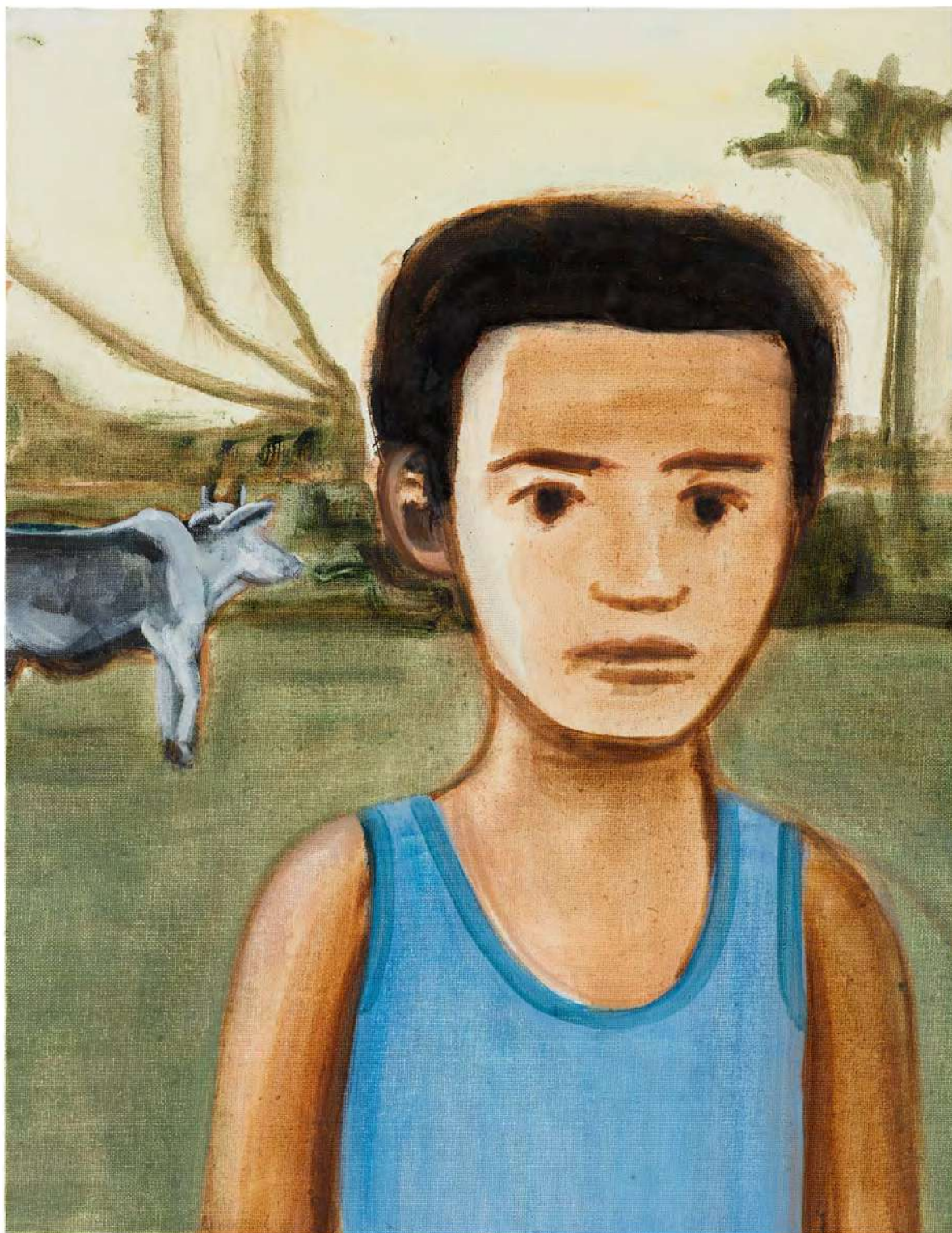
23.6 x 19.6 in

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Boy on Branch, 2023
Oil on canvas
35 x 35 cm
13.7 x 13.7 in

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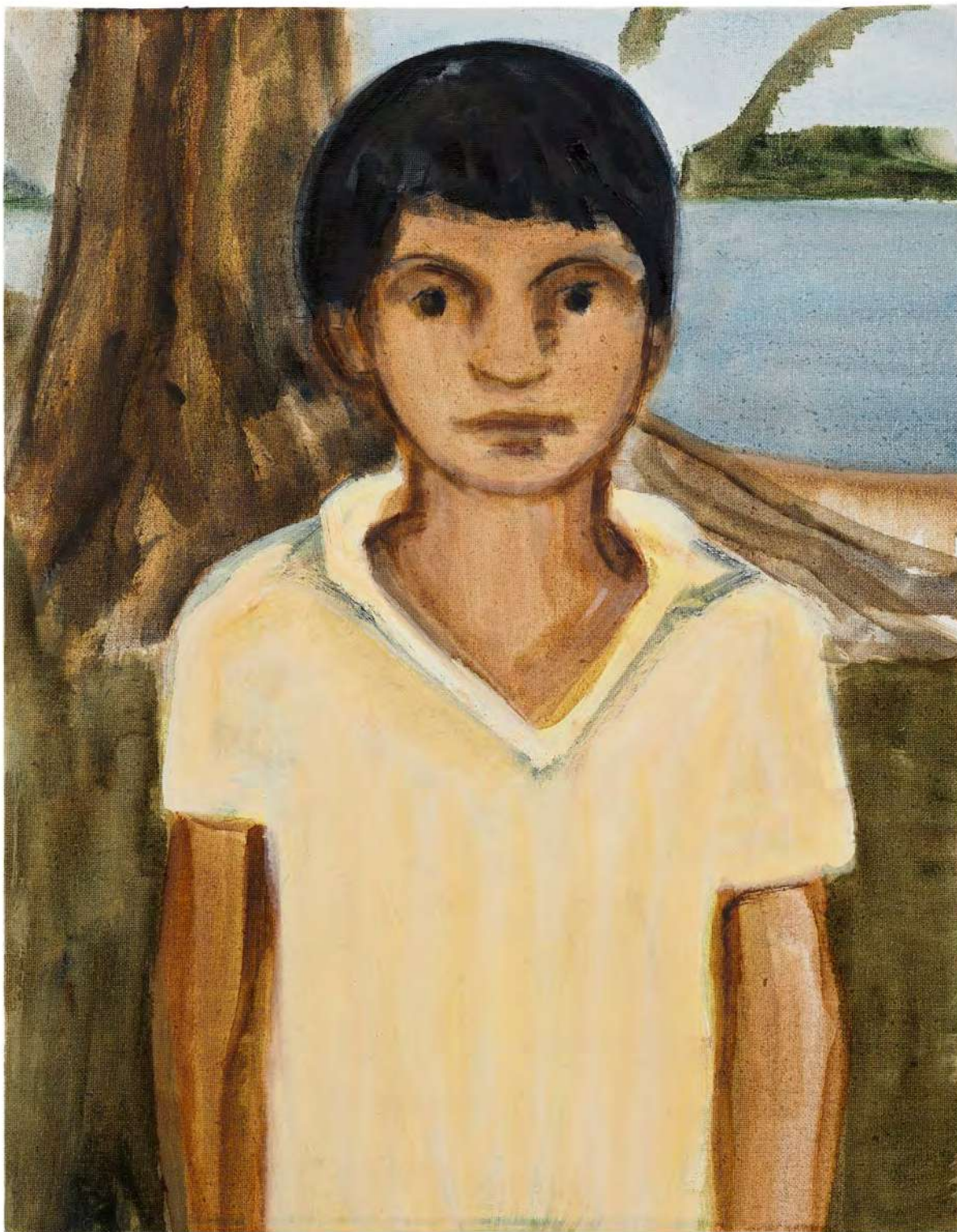
Boy in Blue Vest, 2020
Oil on board
45 x 35 cm
17.7 x 13.7 in

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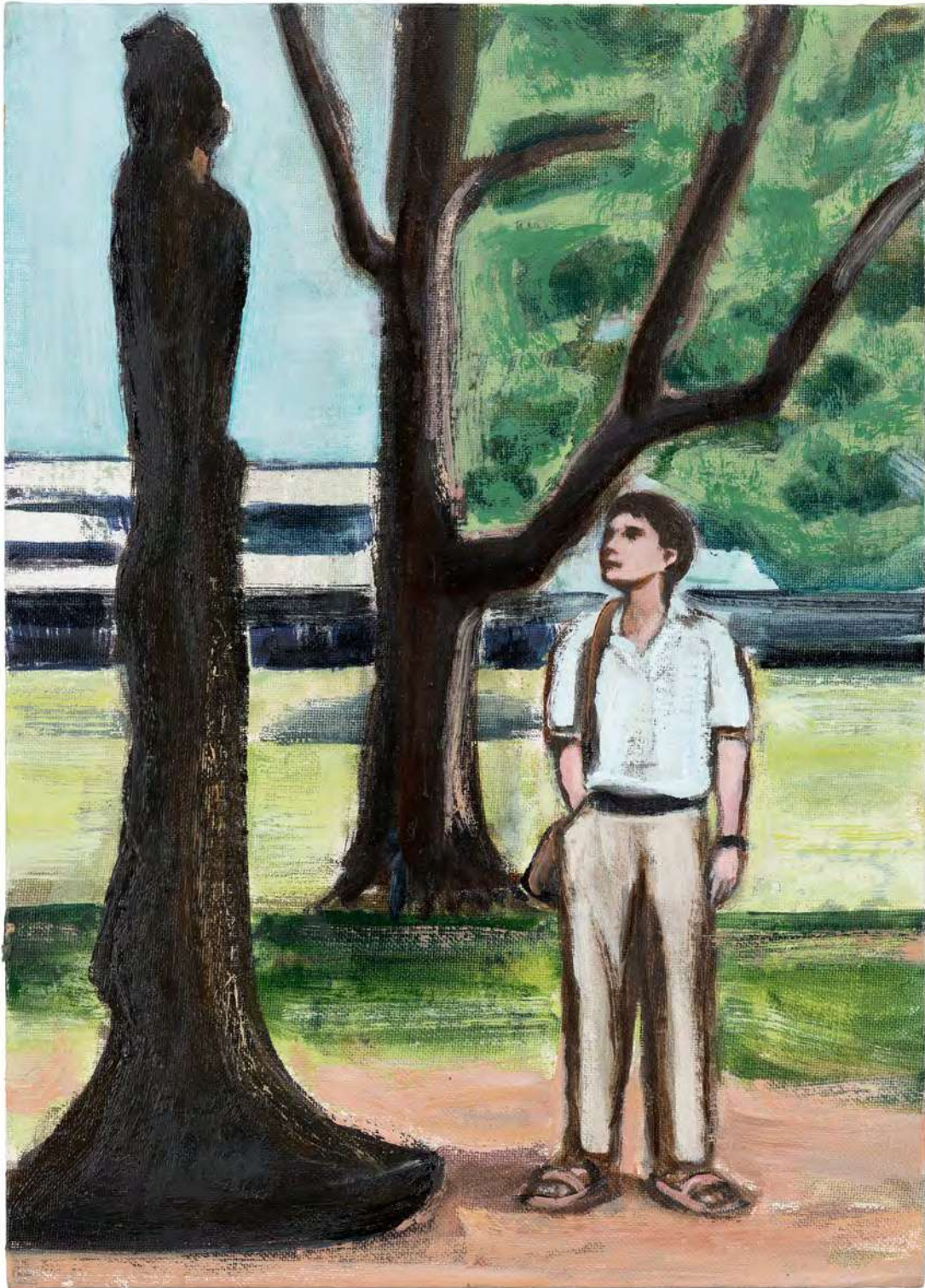
Boy in Dungarees, 2020
Oil on board
45 x 35 cm
17.7 x 13.7 in

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Boy in Yellow Shirt, 2020
Oil on board
45 x 35 cm
17.7 x 13.7 in

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Man and Sculpture (Santimiketan), 2023

Oil and acrylic on board

35 x 25 cm

13.7 x 9.8 in

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Agra Fort (View), 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
50 x 40 cm
19.6 x 15.7 in

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Agra (Water View), 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
45 x 60 cm
17.7 x 23.6 in

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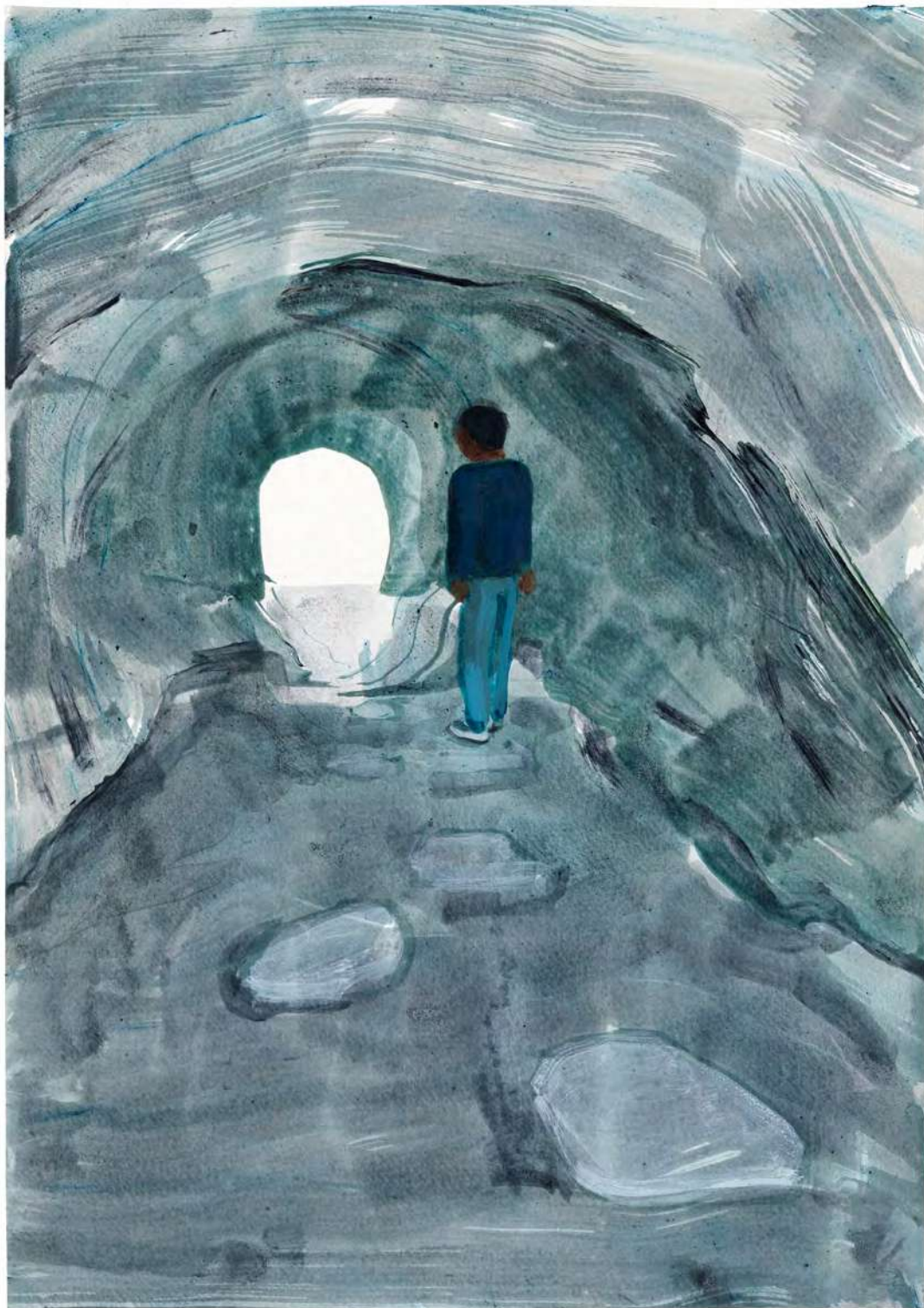
Agra (Water), 2023
Oil and acrylic on canvas
45 x 60 cm
17.7 x 23.6 in

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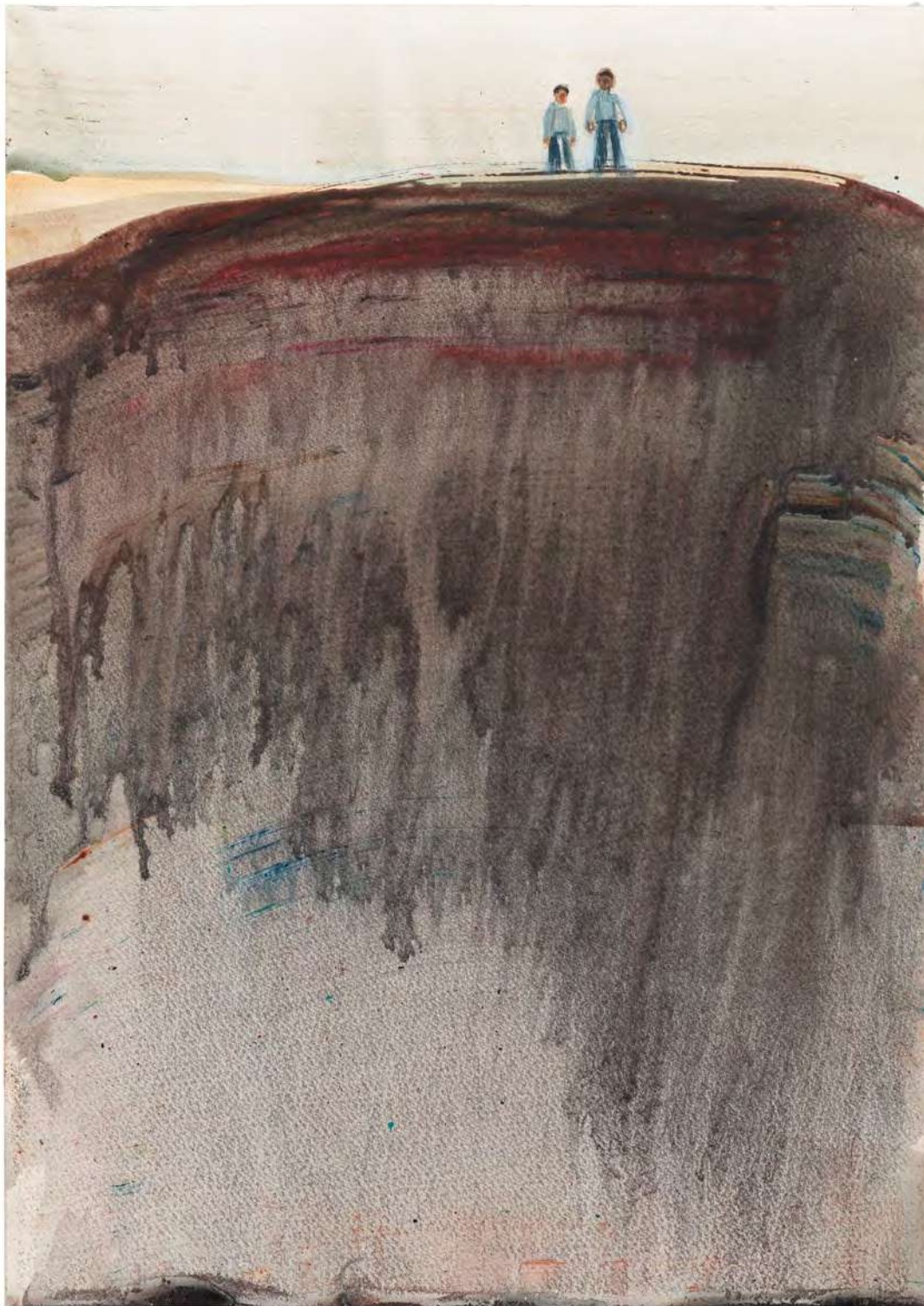
Boy in Tree, 2023
Acrylic on paper
42 x 29.7 cm
16.5 x 11.6 in

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Boy in Tunnel, 2023
Acrylic on paper
42 x 29.7 cm
16.5 x 11.6 in

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Two Boys on a Cliff, 2023
Acrylic on paper
42 x 29.7 cm
16.5 x 11.6 in

MATTHEW KRISHANU BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Krishanu (b.1980, Bradford. Lives and works in London) paints in series, creating chapters of works based on his personal experiences and childhood memories growing up in Bengal. Combining loose washes of colour with thick definite lines, the characters in his compositions—framed against natural landscapes and domestic interiors—allude to the complexity of early life in expatriate and missionary communities. In his poignant scenes Krishanu shows that childhood innocence is far from immune to historic and cultural facets or prejudice from the adult world.

Krishanu received his MA from Central Saint Martins, London, in 2009 and his BA from Exeter University, Devon, in 2001.

His work has been exhibited internationally, most recently at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi (2023); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2023); University of Leeds (2023); Dhaka Art Summit (2023); GRIMM, New York (2022); Mead Gallery, Warwicks Art Centre, Coventry (2022); LGDR, New York (2022); Tanya Leighton (2021); Hayward Gallery/Southbank Centre, London (2021, 2020); Ikon and Lahore Biennial 02, Lahore (2020); MAC, Birmingham (2019) and Huddersfield Art Gallery, Huddersfield (2018); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (2019); Compton Verney, Warwickshire (2019); Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (2018); East Gallery, Norwich (2018); Yantai Art Museum, Jiangsu Art Museum, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, China (2017-2018).

Public collections that hold Krishanu's work include: Arts Council Collection, London; Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Birmingham; Government Art Collection, UK; Huddersfield Art Gallery, Huddersfield; Ikon Gallery Birmingham; Jiangsu Art Museum, Nanjing; and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

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