



Siji Krishnan. Unknown Family Portrait.  
Watercolour on rice paper. 113.5 cms x 298 cms. 2016.  
Image courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

## THE TREE OF LIFE

Men, women, animals and freaks constitute Siji Krishnan's family, notes Lajja Shah.

Two simultaneous impulses take over the moment one encounters Siji Krishnan's watercolours: the compelling need to zoom in up close to observe the minute details and the urge to pull back and absorb their panoramic scale. These photographic/cinematographic motions continue to be at play as one views *The Family Portrait*, the Kochi-based artist's solo at Mumbai's Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke from the 12<sup>th</sup> of August to the 29<sup>th</sup> of October.

Largely autobiographical, Krishnan's early works are imbued with a profound melancholy as she attempts, through her art, to come to terms with the irrevocable loss experienced in the wake of her father's demise. Her previous solo in 2012 at the same gallery, titled *0 + 0 = 0 (my father's mathematics)*, comprised works that could be read as visual chronicles of grief as well as cathartic expressions that borrowed from the wellsprings of memory and metaphor as a means of overcoming it.

*The Family Portrait* marks a perceptible shift in the artist's oeuvre where the recurring leitmotif of loss appears to be replaced by its acceptance. The works encompass within their vast, crinkled folds, the family as a life-affirming source from which one draws strength and succour. Krishnan expands on the unit of family to include a web of interdependent relationships. Some share genealogical ties, some are bound by affinities of occupation and education, while others are linked by virtue of their unusual physical appearance and

deformities. Trees and animals also form an integral part of this unusual ménage.

A distinguishing aspect of Krishnan's practice is her intuitive handling of rice paper as a medium. By layering sheets of varied texture to the desired thickness and the application of tea or watercolour washes, she achieves an eloquently tactile surface reminiscent of dried leaves, wrinkled skin and creases that linger on well-worn garments. The fragile materiality of the works lends the impression of parchment pages from an old illustrated journal that have been unbound and pinned onto the gallery walls.

A sensitive observer of the human condition, Krishnan lends depth to the portrayal of figures, relying only on the barest of props, costumes and gestures to convey their stories. Telling details abound to make the multiple narratives embedded within each work resonate universally though they may, at times, emerge from her repertoire of personal experiences and memories.

In many of the works, the finely delineated figures are posed in a manner that gestures towards the theatrical. Men, women and children spanning generations are seen clustered under the sheltering arch of a tree, standing transfixed with a distant look in their eyes, as evinced in *Family Portrait*. A pervading sense of otherworldliness and ephemerality mark the figures that appear

to emerge on the surface of the paper from a space wedged between the real and the imaginary. Krishnan mediates that space, allowing the audience to perceive them through a wispy, gauzy translucency that she renders with remarkable effect.

In *Unknown Family Portrait*, we come across members of a large family that include an assortment of domestic and pet animals, engaged in quotidian activities. There is an organic link between the human and the animal world. Among the numerous actions, we see a monkey riding on the shoulders of a man clad in a white mundu while elsewhere a woman is breastfeeding a child as well as a piglet together.

*Father's Portrait* is a poetic work that recalls and carries forward the imagery that Krishnan had previously explored in her 2010 solo, *Paternal Instinct*. By depicting the father figures with pronounced breasts to indicate their nurturing maternality, she assembles a series of vignettes that capture candid moments of interaction between fathers and daughters. The dreamlike vision portrayed in this tableau is conveyed through magic realist elements.

In another set of works, Krishnan forays beyond the familiar context of her cultural milieu and turns an empathetic gaze towards those that inhabit the fringes of society. Two works, *Freaks* and *Freak Family* showcase, quite literally, characters that are connected by "the shared burden of disability."

Conjoined twins, the obese, the dwarves, the limbless, the claw-footed, the web-footed, the three-legged, among others, make up the motley bunch of marginalized figures that seem to have acquired an aura of legitimacy. Evoking a whiff of nostalgia underlined by pathos is *Circus Family*, with its myriad performers huddled together in front of the diaphanous tent as the perennial outsiders.

The panoramic scale of the larger works is offset by a series of five small works. These delicately rendered, individual portraits of trees seem to suggest their significance as sheltering, bountiful havens but also as sites of danger and decay. *Portrait of a Mango Tree* is a poignant vision of father and daughter enmeshed in the gossamery folds of its trunk, while lurking underneath are creatures who may potentially violate the sanctity of the moment.

The choice of *Island of Birds* seems somewhat at odds within the scope of this show. It is a take on one of Krishnan's earlier works titled, *Ophelia*, where she appropriated British artist John Everett Millais' representation and reconfigured it. The present version depicts an ominously stark and barren landscape. The figure, laid out in a murky pool, is surrounded by thousands of tiny, fluttering birds while furry animals and snakes crawl over and around her. An overwhelming sense of melancholy resurfaces and one wonders if, perhaps, the work has been included as a kind of memento mori for the viewers.