

INDIAN ART

## Freaks and geeks: Everyone finds a place in Siji Krishnan's family portraits

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*In her latest exhibition, the artist takes a look at the myriad assortments of people that make up a family.*



Image credit: Siji Krishnan

Siji Krishnan's concept of family goes beyond the nuclear, or a shared last name.

In *The Family Portrait*, Krishnan explores the family get-togethers of her childhood from Kerala, capturing generations within a single frame. Drawn with watercolours on rice paper, each family portrait is inspired by Mavelikkara in Kerala's Alappuzha district, where Krishnan drew imaginary worlds in her head while listening to her grandmother's stories.

"As a person who was born and brought up in the countryside, the imageries of village life were deeply embedded inside me," said Krishnan. "Memories of my early life is filled with smells of village life and fragrance of flowers. When the deepest layer of my mind resurfaced, they gave way to a wide range of images, like children playing under a house made of coconut leaves. And even though these images are culture-specific, I believe they share a universal pattern."

Krishnan believes that the human race is bound by a web of interdependence. "There is no existence for the individual outside the pattern of relationship, a pattern that connects everything," she said.



Moustache Family, by Siji Krishnan.

Every image is made up of multiple individual portraits, each painstakingly drawn and coloured by Krishnan. But squeezed together in a family portrait, their individual details merge. Looking at the group, it is hard to tell where one person begins and the other ends – exactly like a family.



Father's Portrait, by Siji Krishnan.

Krishnan has used rice paper for her art, for nearly a decade. She layers sheets of rice paper of different textures to build a thickness that can absorb numerous coats of paint, likening the brittle surface obtained by the process to that of "stretched skin or dried leaves".



Farmer's Family, by Siji Krishnan.

From a distance, Krishnan's families could be from anywhere in the world – a father and mother tending to their baby, a farmer with his wife, an Asian couple in traditional garb. But look closer, and you begin to see the misfits, or "freaks" as she calls them, mingling with Krishnan's "universal" family.

"The Freak Family" includes a pregnant, naked woman kissing a tiger, a woman with three breasts, men and women with missing limbs (or limbs that stick out from odd places).



Freak Family, by Siji Krishnan.

"The film *Freaks* came out in 1932," Krishnan said. "It tells the story of deformed circus artists. The beautiful narration trapped me in a world of differently talented folks and inspired these visuals. I became more curious about them, felt more interest to do their portraits than that of 'normal' people. My early works were more close to my personal life whereas breaking those old obsessions are these new works, opening up the road for new things."



Unknown Family, by Siji Krishnan.

Trees play a strong role in Krishnan's paintings too. Each family in the portraits appears held together by a thing, like a circus tent or a car – but in most cases, they gather around a tree, standing tall in the middle of the frame.

"I personally know each tree that I have included in my series," Krishnan said. When she isn't drawing families, she loves painting trees.

"It's like portraying a close friend. When I was a kid, I used to talk to these trees. When you grow up, you tend to forget these childish things you did and the objects themselves lose significance over time."

In each frame, the tree differs: banyan, mango, jackfruit. In one, a barren tree stands on parched earth, surrounded by villagers and farmers for whom the dead tree symbolises a lack of rain – and death.



Family portrait, by Siji Krishnan.

The people in Krishnan's portraits are often the ones she has met in real life. She tries hard to capture the story of every person in her paintings.

"In *Family Portraits*, I'm transforming images from a distant continent to that of my village, the world I am familiar with, the world in which I have lived and the world which lives within me," she said.

*Family Portraits* is on display at *Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, till October 29.*