

# RUNE CHRISTENSEN

By Clayton Schuster

There is a certain, unsettling trajectory from the early to the most recent work of artist Rune Christensen. The early pieces are fairly uniform in presenting masked figures whose lives and troubles and dreams are communicated across their bodies by intricate tattoos. Their bodies sometimes intertwine, melting into each other at points of contact, at the toes or the palms, and though their faces often glow in revelry, their limbs are frequently contorted to protect and cover. Their eyes are visible, but their mouths are obscured by a balaclava or pandemic-era mask.

"The masks and the tattoos were present in my earlier, more personal, work and were representative of my inner struggle, a search for identity, and struggle to understand and decode the 'masks' that we all wear in different situations," says Christensen. "In my latest exhibition, *Wanderlust* at Kristin Hjellegjerde in London, I have shifted focus and with that shift the masks have disappeared. So for the time being both the masks and tattoos are gone but who knows if they will come back at a point."

The works in *Wanderlust* are a marked transformation of Christensen's long-established style. The figures stare as if through the veil of reality into some oneness beyond. Mesmerized, glamorized, petrified, awed.

If his characters once evoked to the viewer some inner drama and did plea to break free from the annul of daily life, his newer cadre of anonymized specters are suspended in an eternal now, celebrating the eschatological communion. Their regrets and their dreams are shunned to the potter's field.

"With my newer work I take a broader perspective and focus more on my observations of the world around me. I have chosen to work with 'anonymous' figures and instead focus on interactions between people and animals, shapes, color and time," he says. "The images are not meant to represent one specific place, person, or experience; hence the ambiguity and fluidity. In some ways they are dream-like, just like memories."

Color marks another distance between Christensen's then and now. Colors have become hyper-saturated and less representative.

Where skin tones and fabric were once kept separate but complementary, acid-trip spills of pastel psychedelia delineate shapes but bleed into each other so that nothing is sacred, and nothing is truly separated.

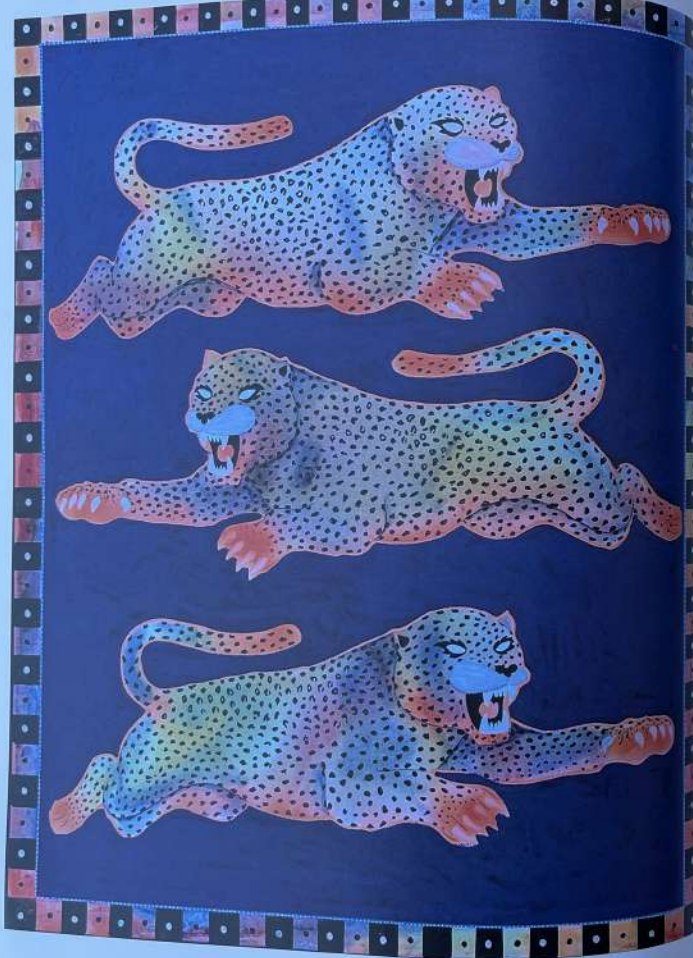
Many of these paintings could be portraits of extended families. "Bodinath," "Pushkar," "Labrang" and others pulse with the raw energy of the color washed over all the figures, while the absence of their eyes implies a foreboding.

OPPOSITE: "Last Leaf", acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and oil pastel on canvas, 27.5" x 19.6"

RIGHT: "Mothers and Sweet Mine", acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and oil pastel on canvas, 59" x 47.2"

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Christensen says, "This body of work is a collection of memories and feelings where reality and experiences are blurred and blended. My memories are mostly visual and often come to me as shapes, colors, and forms. Nothing I have painted exists in reality. These images are rather a conglomeration of my thoughts and impressions, expressed in a new way. For me bright colors underline the intense and 'unreal' or 'otherworldly' quality of my memories and experiences."

The figures in his latest work are accompanied by a panoply of cats. Large cats, house cats. The heads of lions make a formidable border to punctuate the bottom of "Labrang." Cats appear together and as duos, as triplets, as suffering polycephaly. Their heads are emblazoned on vases in his series of four "The Last Leaf" still lifes focused on flower arrangements. The tigers on the vases snarl wildly while the flowers are already succumbing to their unavoidable fate; but as we see in each that a single leaf has fallen to the tabletop, the snarl loses its sinister gleam and becomes pitiable.

Repetition extends to the human figures in "Chant #1" and "Chant #2," where disembodied and androgynous heads float over a zig zag background. Despite the implication of the title, their mouths are closed and tight-lipped. The chant has yet to begin, is already finished, or was so successful that the Sturm und Drang continues even when the chanters have retired.

For Christensen, these twinings and symmetries are related to his interest and exploration of mythologies and esoteric beliefs.

"Repetition of the same figures throughout my work is meant to highlight the vagueness of memory and how we tend to blend time and space," he says. The cats, like-

wise, are related to Christensen's interest in combining his aesthetics with mythology. "Humans have integrated cats into our belief systems, customs, traditions, and art dating back to the Egyptians. We, even in modern times, bring cats into our homes as pets. I use cats in my work to emphasize humans' universal need for something more than ourselves."

Symmetry and identity are powerful symbols in cultures throughout the world, and throughout history. French philosopher René Girard noted at length the power of twins and symmetry in his studies on the history and purpose of ritual sacrifice.

For Girard, violence breaks down the barriers of our society and leads to a cycle of perpetuation and escalation. The "scandalous effacement of distinctions" can be noted in forms as diverse as ancient Greek tragedy, Mardi Gras, and the Synoptic Gospels.

These moments become a crisis of violence resolved only when all the players can agree to let their anger and hostilities be satisfied with the death of one, an outsider, an innocent, someone who can restore the hierarchies. Girard, in his *Violence and the Sacred*, cites the ritual murder of the god Soma as recounted in the Sanskrit text, the *Yajur Veda*. Girard writes, "Mithra at first refuses to join his divine companions in the [sacrifice], but he is finally persuaded to do so by the argument that the sacrifice will be totally ineffective if not performed by all. This myth offers a prescription for the correct performance of a sacrifice. Unanimity is a formal requirement; the abstinence of a single participant renders the sacrifice even worse than useless—it makes it dangerous." (René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 1972.)

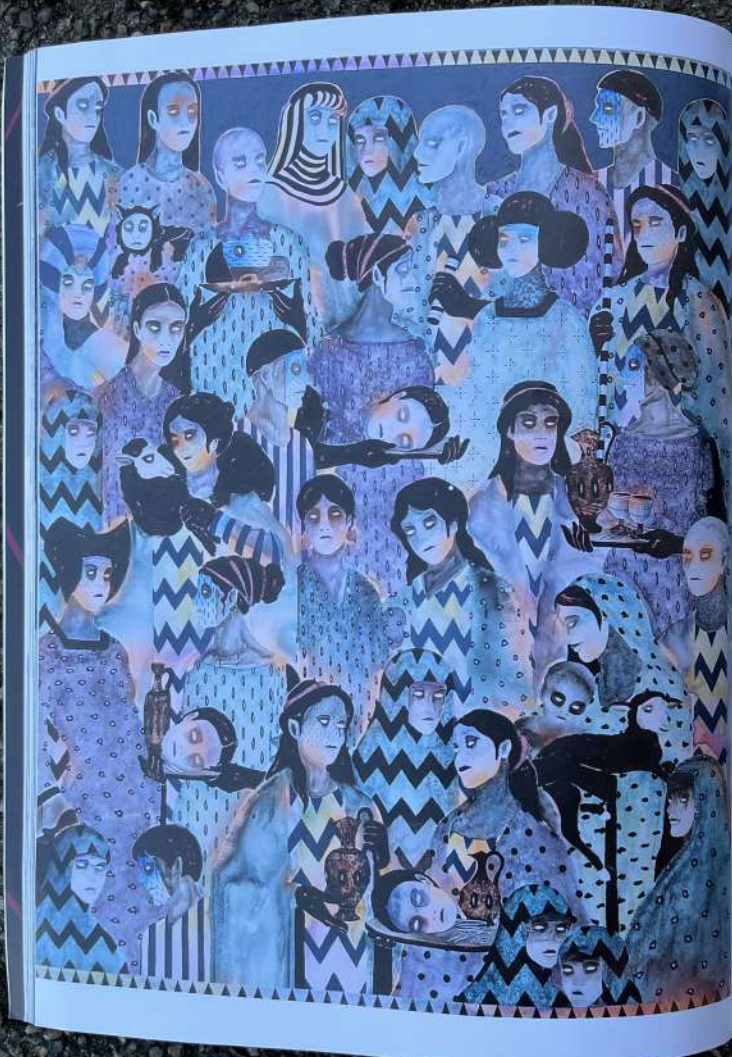
This pervades the mythology which Christensen creates

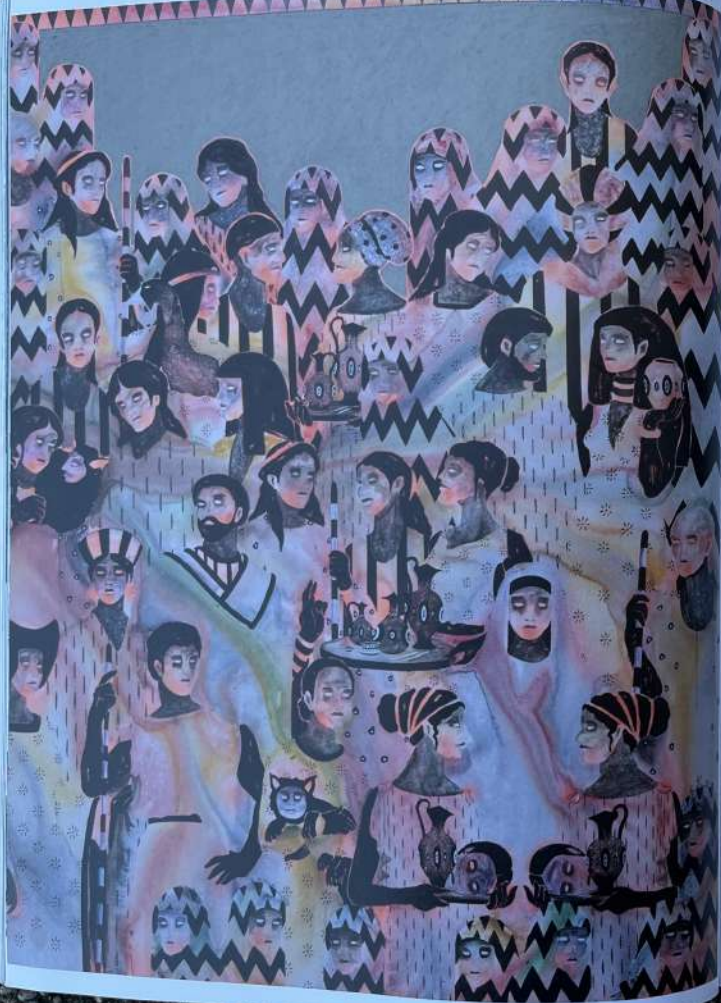
ABOVE: Rune Christensen in the studio, photo courtesy of the artist

OPPOSITE: "Seshat," acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and oil pastel on canvas, 39.3" x 31.4"

NEXT SPREAD, LEFT: "Tomorrow Belongs to Those Who Hear It Coming #2," acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and oil pastel on canvas, 20.8" x 50"

NEXT SPREAD, RIGHT: "Based on a True Story," acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and oil pastel on canvas, 50" x 39.3"





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across his newest works. Each piece forms a community where the traditional hierarchy has broken down and been replaced with the devastating realization of some space in the Great Beyond. In "Madurai," there is even a head on a plate—a John the Baptist. Elsewhere in this piece, animals are given human faces. These Sphinx-like creatures are the lamb carried on a woman's shoulders in the middle of the work and a housecat just above them.

And so distinctions break down even between humankind and beasts. The power of the animal and human are merged and maybe this is what allows his figures the power of second sight.

"We all bring with us a unique history, experience, and way of seeing the world and exploring these similarities and differences is what I find interesting and invigorating," says Christensen.

Travel is one of Christensen's biggest inspirations. The titles for many of his works allude to holy sites around the Indian subcontinent, or mythical creatures from cultures around the

world. "Naga," which shows a two-headed cobra fighting a two-headed weasel, can be taken as the generalized word in Sanskrit for snake, as well as treasure-loving deities from the underworld. Christensen titles his painting of a three-headed leopard "Waghoba," which is also the name of a tiger or leopard deity worshipped by peoples around India.

Christensen describes himself as "haunted" by travel, and that he has an unyielding desire to roam. He's constantly seeking ways to broaden his horizons and reinvigorate that part of his brain, his creativity that seeks and is sparked by newness.

"I think it has to do with being freed from the 'daily routine,'" he says. "There is something about being in an environment that is unfamiliar and that I don't have control over that is really appealing to me. It doesn't necessarily need to be physical travel; it can also be moving into a new environment in my city, meeting a new person, or going on a journey through music or art. Traveling allows me to 'start from scratch' and the possibilities are endless. When I travel I'm not

'looking' for anything in particular. I am just in the present, taking things in. My inspiration comes from the feelings I get, the music I hear, the colors I see, the conversations I have. Every meeting with any human, anywhere is a meeting of 'cultures.'"

The pandemic hampered Christensen's ability to travel over the last few years. However, easing travel restrictions have allowed him to visit the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London to see *Wanderlust* live and in person. If all goes according to plan his next trips will be to Seoul, South Korea for the opening of KIAF Seoul where he will be showing work with Eligera Gallery, and then a month in Canada to while away the summer.

He says, "My work is fueled by curiosity of myself and the world around me and is ultimately filtered through the lens with which I view the world. My work is a product of an increasingly globalized world. Just as it is impossible for me not to be Danish, it is also impossible for me not to be a citizen of the world."+

OPPOSITE: "Tomorrow Belongs to Those Who Hear it Coming #5", acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and oil pastel on canvas, 70.8" x 59"

ABOVE: "Waghoba", acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and oil pastel on canvas, 51" x 78"