

TEMPLON

II

JULIÃO SARMENTO

ARTFORUM, 27 mai 2021

PASSAGES

JULIÃO SARMENTO (1948–2021)

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Julião Sarmiento. Photo: Paulo Pires.

IT COULD BE SAID that Julião Sarmiento's major theme was desire. In his work, we are repeatedly faced with opposing points of view—subject and object, voyeurism and blindness, dream and reality—that repudiate the male gaze by undoing the rote equivalencies between possession and existence. The Lisbon-born artist's evocations of bodies, often partially or completely erased, demonstrate nothing so much as the impossibility of reaching a final representation of anything; his unsettled forms cling to the illusion, nearly disintegrated today, of an unattainable, secret image.

Beginning in the 1960s, Sarmiento constructed an art that combined conceptual and thematic coherence with fluency both in a wide range of media (painting, film, installation, performance, sculpture, architecture) and in methods of production; his practice embraced active participation and dialogue with successive generations and cultural contexts. The consistency of his language, as sensual as it is unknowable, makes a Sarmiento work recognizable anywhere.

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Julião Sarmiento, *Três Grandes Variantes Amorosas*, 1997, polyvinyl acetate, pigment, acrylic gesso, and graphite on raw cotton canvas, 84 5/8 x 187 3/8". Photo: Guido Guidi/Pilar Corrias gallery.

I had a close relationship with Julião for almost forty years. Our friendship and intellectual and professional collaboration is linked to decisive moments in my life and work in the art world. In 1976, still a teenager, I saw in a small basement in the SNBA (Fine Arts Society, Lisbon) what I then did not know was Julião's first solo exhibition. His work evoked in me surprise and a sense of strangeness. At the time, knowledge of the Portuguese art milieu remained heavily dependent on French referents. Pop art was practically an extravagance, and the so-called vanguards of the late '60s and early '70s were marginalized and almost clandestine during Portugal's years of censorship and dictatorial rule. I recall jotting down my rough impressions of Julião's work: "relationship between text and photography, skin and animal hides, body and textures."

Seven years later, I met Julião and visited his studio in Estoril for the first time. I perceived how he had gone from post-Pop (already focusing on shadows and female bodies) to practices then known as post-Conceptual, making Super 8 films such as the still significant *Pernas (Legs)*, 1975, and *Faces*, 1976. I saw the work that had been in the 1982 Documenta: paintings on brown paper, fragmentary representations in which a lexicon of ambiguous recurring shapes shared space with textual citations and depictions of dismembered human bodies—these would become the dominant characteristics of Sarmiento's output in that decade.

Sarmiento's presence in Documenta, repeated in 1987, was a historic event for the Portuguese art world. For Julião, it marked the beginning of recognition from the European art scene, recognition that led to exhibitions in the galleries of Juana de Aizpuru, Bernd Kluser, Giorgio Persano, and Xavier Hufkens. Further validation resulted from exhibitions in museums such as the Tate Modern, which featured him in an artist room in 2010. This summer, Pilar Corrias in London will present a collection of new works.

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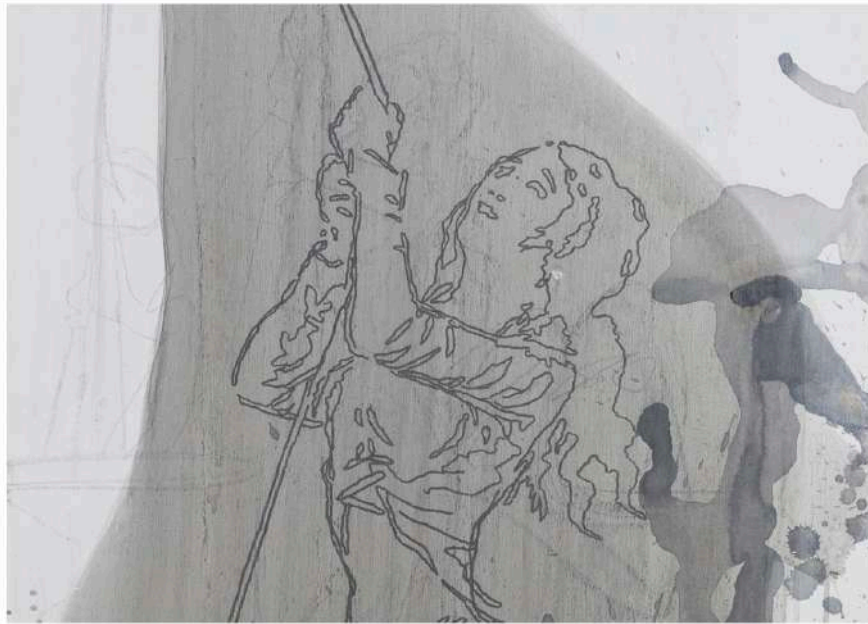


View of the Portuguese pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale.

In 1997, Sarmento represented Portugal at the Venice Biennale, which I curated. This was the period of the famous *pinturas brancas* (white paintings): spare, scarred surfaces inhabited by ghostly female figures and shadows. It was the first time that Portugal had a proper space and a serious chance at widespread notice, and the white paintings proved an international success. It remains one of the most rewarding memories in my experience as a curator. What's more, Sarmento's inclusion at Venice proved decisive in securing his reputation in North America, where many museums went on to show his work, notably the Hirshhorn in 1999, as well as Sean Kelly and his gallery, which continues to represent him today.

This American recognition is associated with one of my favorite travel memories: a 1999 stay in Los Angeles, where Julião did a series of paintings, and we shared our mutual enthusiasm for cinema, artistic aspirations, and California fantasies that (despite our ten-year age difference) both of us had nurtured in our youth. A lasting friendship with John Baldessari, one of his heroes from his student days, dates from that time. Another hero had been Lawrence Weiner. With both, he would create *Drift*, 2004, a 360-degree video installation that wraps the viewer in sand and sea.

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Julião Sarmento, *Tres lavanderas (Black)* (detail), 2020, acrylic gesso, graphite, water-based marker, silkscreen print and water-based enamel on linen canvas, 65 x 52 3/4".

The unique nature of Sarmento's career takes on an added dimension when seen from the perspective of Portugal, a country on the periphery of Europe that until 1974 lived under the yoke of a fascist and colonialist dictatorship that kept it removed from the major cultural dynamics of the postwar period. In an atmosphere marked by a feeling of distance vis-à-vis the great artistic centers, Sarmento was the first Portuguese artist who, without ever moving from the country, achieved a place in international art circles as a pioneer and ambassador. His importance remains decisive to the present time.

Last summer, in the brief months of the first European reopening, I spent a few weeks of vacation in the south of Portugal with Julião, his wife, Isabel, and their children Laura and Duarte. On long walks along the coast of the Algarve, we spoke of everything, as had always been our custom. We also spoke of his upcoming retrospective in the Belém Cultural Center (and at Madrid's Reina Sofía Museum of Art). From our rambling conversations emerged the idea of a group exhibition, now postponed, for which Julião created a new piece. The title of the exhibition is "School of Libertinage," but, despite this provocation, it could have simply been called "School of Freedom": the freedom to stroll and go on strolling through endless places of geography, art, feelings, and memories. The freedom to continue always to walk together, in the direction of places as yet unknown.

Translated from Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers.