

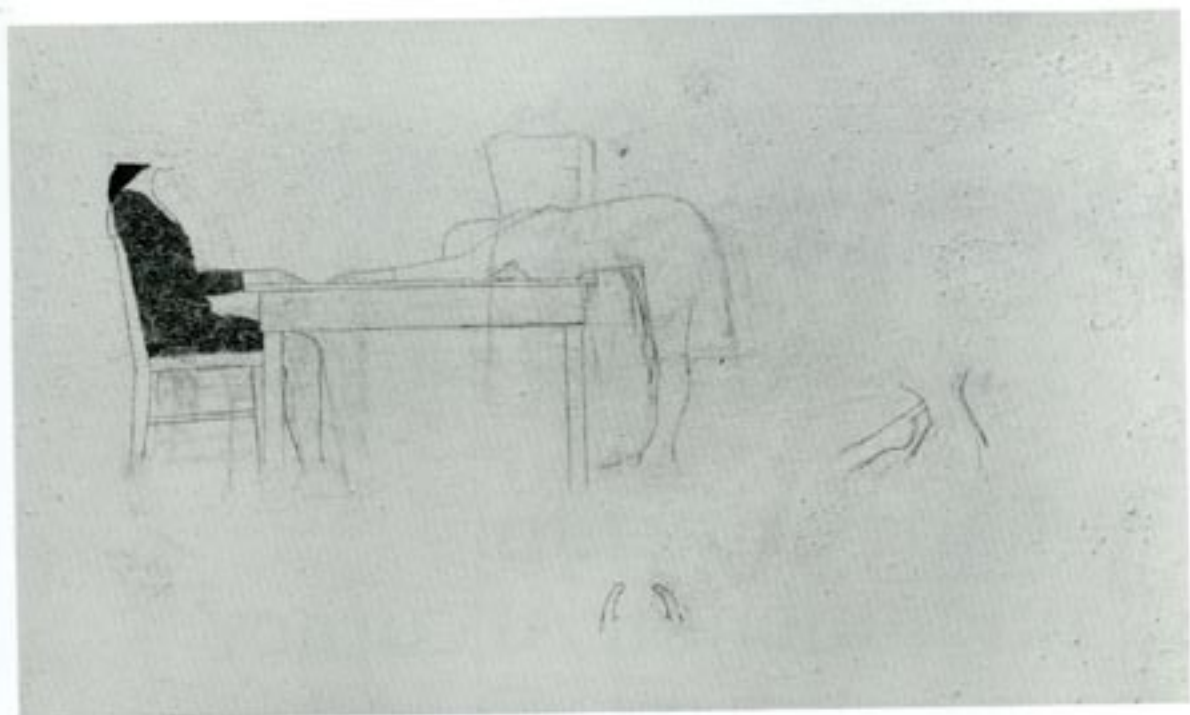
DIRECTIONS

Julião Sarmiento: Fundamental Accuracy

February 4 – June 20, 1999



Licking the Milk off Her Finger, 1998, fiberglass, resin, and fabric, and wood table; 43 1/2 x 103 1/4 x 55 in. (110.5 x 262.3 x 139.7 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



To Take Off the Lace and Blow the Flower, 1997, mixed media on canvas, 77 x 126⁷/₈ in. (195.4 x 332.1 cm). Collection Anthony T. Podesta, Washington, D.C.

"Fundamental accuracy of statement is the one sole morality of writing." Ezra Pound. How true! Are my statements really accurate? I seriously doubt it. But it is really what part of my work is all about. This ambiguity of meanings. ... It is all happening within the space between a truth and a lie.

Julião Sarmiento to the author,
November 26, 1998

THROUGHOUT A CAREER spanning twenty-five years, Portuguese artist Julião Sarmiento has concentrated on the human figure and the complex mechanisms that relate appearance, behavior, emotion, and thought. Shunning clarity in favor of "ambiguity of meanings," Sarmiento has addressed moments that are rich in implication but cannot easily be simplified, characterized, or explained. His is an art of equivocal gesture, fragmented conversation, and sudden absence, manifestations of the human

spirit that are the truest, if most vexing, expressions of life.

Born in 1948 in Lisbon, at the geographic periphery of Europe, Sarmiento matured as an artist during the late years of the ultraconservative regime led by Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. The isolation Sarmiento experienced was profound. Although he was drawn to science and literature as well as architecture, film, and the fine arts, Portugal's repressive, "inelegant fascism" (Sarmiento's phrase) made it difficult for him to pursue his interests. At the University of Fine Arts (Escola Superior da Belas Artes) in Lisbon in the late 1960s, Sarmiento found the atmosphere impossibly stagnant and the faculty completely lacking in awareness of international contemporary art. Leaving in 1970 without a degree, he fulfilled obligatory military service for four years, first in a clerical position in Lisbon and later as part of the colonial force in Mozambique, at that time a Portuguese colony.

Sarmiento's military service ended in March 1974, just one month before a peaceful revolution restored democracy to Portugal. He lived briefly in South Africa and Morocco but soon went back to Lisbon, where he immersed himself in the sudden, intoxicating influx of cultural information and ideas about contemporary art. Although he returned to the University of Fine Arts, the unabated conservatism of the academicians there, especially in contrast to his exposure to contemporary work elsewhere in Europe and the United States, compelled him to abandon painting, which he did for nearly a decade. He turned instead to film and photography, media that continue to intrigue him. The influence of Andy Warhol was particularly evident as he began to make sequential images of carefully cropped figures in photographic assemblages or Super 8 films. Although Sarmiento's work from 1974 to 1982 looks utterly different from his recent paintings, the approach to the figure that he developed at that time is evident to this day: images are still fragmented, gestures equivocal, narratives merely suggested, and settings unspecific.

By the early 1980s, Sarmiento felt stymied by conceptual work, which he had come to consider dry and intellectual. "It took me a hell of a long time to think about those works, little time to produce them and even less time to enjoy them. I decided that I was becoming too analytical and that these exercises in analysis were taking away, stealing, from the seduction of practice." But Sarmiento did not abandon photo-based imagery; rather, he began to use existing images culled from the print media, which he would enlarge in compositions of drawings and paintings on paper. He was interested in the disjunctions that could be created by conjoining disparate images.

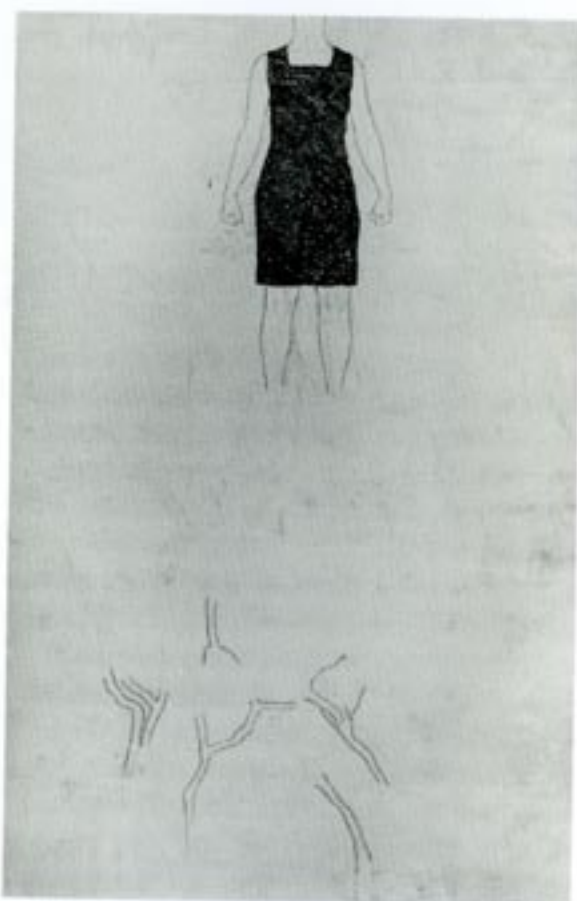
Sarmiento continued developing bold and aggressive compositions with strong colors and intentionally awkward juxtapositions through the mid-1980s, at which time his methods further evolved toward a gradual simplification of means and a corresponding subtlety. The cinematic scale and pacing of the former work yielded to works on canvas, a reduction of the palette to black, white, gray, or burnt sienna, and a focus on single gestures. Sarmiento recently noted, "Color is very descriptive. When you look at very colorful painting, the intensity of the sight is incredible. And the idea is immediately smashed by the intensity of the vision." As his words suggest, Sarmiento was ambivalent about the tradition and practice of painting, and he took pains not to be seduced by the pleasures of the paint. "I am not really a painter. ... Painting for me is just a tool and a way to express ideas."

Although Sarmiento exhibited widely in Europe throughout the 1980s, a breakthrough in 1990 led to his signature works, the "White Paintings," the title being something of a misnomer since the works are neither white nor paintings in the accustomed sense of either word. Rather, they are usually large charcoal drawings on rough off-white grounds containing such impure materials as sand and unmixed pigment. Sarmiento's charcoal drawing is most often intentionally coarse and, like a grade-school chalkboard, his surfaces are littered with false starts and changes of mind. While in the literature of art history such remnants are called "pentimenti," the term is far too polite to apply to Sarmiento's methods. In a wonderful turn of phrase, Nancy Spector has described his paintings as being "tortured into existence," for Sarmiento self-consciously defies the conventions of the painter's craft. Reference to white in the context of

modern art inevitably calls forth the spiritual purity of Kasimir Malevich's art or the formal refinement of Robert Ryman's—yet Sarmiento's recent works have nothing to do with either of those artists. For Sarmiento, white connotes a type of austerity and a shift away from his aggressive imagery and cinematic compositions of the 1980s toward subtle gestures and quiet surfaces. Whereas the titles of previous canvases referred to such favored filmmakers as Luis Buñuel and Federico Fellini, the "White Paintings"—with titles based on Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the letters of James Joyce, or the legend of Casanova—show a greater reliance on literary sources. Sarmiento has also noted his interest in contemporary writers, including Raymond Carver and Richard Ford, who construct understated, even deadpan, narratives.

It would be a mistake, however, to simply ascribe literary motives or interpretations to the "White Paintings"—the works are too fragmented in their imagery, too indirect in their mode of representation. By eliminating heads and feet and situating the figures in a floating painted void, Sarmiento has replaced content with veiled implication. Literature operates as a trigger, both to the artist's imagination and to the viewer's reading of the work, suggesting relationships between the partial female figures that inhabit the paintings and their gestures, which are rich with ambiguity. In the "White Paintings" the touch of a hand may be compassionate or violent, lips upon the skin of another may be a kiss or perhaps a bite. Thus, while an undercurrent of sexuality and violence runs through much of the work, one leaves each painting impressed by the quality and power of its understatement. If a narrative underpins a Sarmiento painting, it is one written deep in the imagination of the viewer.

The Hirshhorn presentation includes a new body of work based on a single painting, *To Take Off the Lace and Blow the Flower*, 1997, included in Sarmiento's 1997 Venice Biennale exhibition. In this characteristically large canvas, the principal image involves two or perhaps three women. One is authoritative in rendering and stance; she wears a dark dress and is seated with hands resting on a table. The second is more mysteriously delineated; folded over the table with arms outstretched, she is posed in a gesture of submission. Behind her is perhaps a third figure, a vaporous presence who seems to hover in witness. The crucial moment in the painting exists on the surface of the table in the small space separating the



An Involved Story, 1998, mixed media on canvas, 116 3/8 x 75 1/8 in. (295.6 x 190.6 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



Anything to Fill In the Long Silences, 1998, mixed media on canvas, 75 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 86 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (190.8 x 220.7 cm). Collection of the artist, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

hands through which the two women approach each other but do not touch.

Although Sarmiento has made relatively few sculptures in his career, during the last year he has made several, each a partial female figure, cast in polyester resin and garbed in extremely plain, handmade clothing. His work created for this exhibition develops a dialog between sculpture and painting, and features relationships between figures and a table. The theme of dance also underpins the new work, recalling his series of three paintings from 1991 called "Pina," inspired by a performance choreographed by Pina Bausch. While it might be premature to speculate extensively about Sarmiento's

new direction, his interest in the theme of dance, expressed in paintings and in sculpted figures bearing actual clothing, unavoidably recalls the ballet dancers of Edgar Degas and, perhaps more to the point, the choreographers Bausch and Bill T. Jones, in whose work Sarmiento is keenly interested. Regardless of their source, the new work makes clear that Julião Sarmiento is again breaking with the solutions of the past and that his restless search continues.

Neal Benezra
Assistant Director for Art
and Public Programs

Author's Note

Quotations by the artist are from two sources: "Interview with Julião Sarmento," in *Julião Sarmento* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1991); and Germano Celant, "Julião Sarmento: A Sensual Revelation," in *Julião Sarmento* ([Milan]: Electa, 1997).

This publication was printed before the works in the exhibition were selected, so a checklist is not available. Works created for the exhibition were made in 1998 and are from the collection of the artist, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

The author wishes to acknowledge the artist for his generosity and hospitality during visits to Portugal in 1992 and 1998, and Sarmento's representative in New York, Sean Kelly. Hirshhorn intern Jeffrey Rugh provided research support and compiled the documentation for this publication. The artist wishes to thank Helder Ferreira, Paulo Oliveira, Sandra Chaves, and especially Sofia Aparício for their assistance.

BIOGRAPHY

Born 1948 in Lisbon, Portugal. Attended Escola Superior da Belas Artes (University of Fine Arts), Lisbon, 1967-70 and 1974-76. Lives in Estoril and works in Sintra, Portugal.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1978 Centro de Arte Contemporânea, Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis, Porto. Exhibition catalog.
- 1979 Galerie Erika + Otto Friedrich, Bern (and 1982, 1984, 1988, 1992).
- 1984 Galeria Juana de Aizpuru, Madrid; Galeria Cómicos, Lisbon (and 1985, 1989).
- 1986 Galerie Heinrich Ehrhardt, Frankfurt; Galleria Marilena Bonomo, Bari, Italy; Museo de Bellas Artes de Malaga, Spain; Exhibition catalog: Galerie Bernd Klüser, Munich (and 1988, 1990, 1994, 1998). Exhibition catalog.
- 1987 Galería Marga Paz, Madrid (and 1989).
- 1989 Xavier Hufkens, Brussels (and 1992, 1995).
- 1990 Galeria Pedro Oliveira, Porto (and 1995, 1998). Exhibition catalog.
- 1992 Fundação de Serralves, Porto. Exhibition catalog; Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo.

- 1993 Centro de Arte Moderna, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon. Exhibition catalog.
- 1994 Centre des Arts Saidye Bronfman, Montreal. Exhibition catalog; Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM) Centre del Carme, Valencia. Exhibition catalog.
- 1995 Palácio Nacional de Sintra, Portugal. Exhibition catalog.
- 1996 Sean Kelly Gallery, New York (and 1997, 1998); Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands. Exhibition catalog.
- 1997 XLVII Venice Biennale. Exhibition catalog; Center for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu-Project Gallery, Kitakyushu, Japan; Haus der Kunst, Munich, and traveled. Exhibition catalog.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1977 "Alternativa Zero," Galeria Nacional de Arte Moderna, Lisbon. Exhibition catalog.
- 1980 "Xle Biennale de Paris," Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Exhibition catalog; "La Biennale di Venezia (Il Tempo del Museo Venezia)," Magazzini del Sale, Venice. Exhibition catalog.
- 1982 "Documenta 7," Neue Galerie, Kassel, Germany. Exhibition catalog.
- 1987 "Documenta 8," Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Exhibition catalog.
- 1991 "Metropolis," Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin. Exhibition catalog.
- 1998 "Años 80/The Eighties," Culturgest/Caixa Geral de Depósitos. Exhibition catalog.

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