



JULIÃO SARMENTO. (photo: ©AL-&-K)

Considered the most international Portuguese artist of his generation, Julião Sarmiento (b. 1948, Lisbon) studied painting and architecture at the Lisbon School of Fine Arts. He began showing film, video, sound, painting, sculpture, installation and multimedia in the early 1970s, but has also developed several site-specific projects throughout his career. He has shown his work extensively around the world in solo and group shows, including an artist room showing at London's Tate Modern in 2010 and a major retrospective at the Serralves Museum in 2012/2013. Sarmiento represented Portugal at the Venice Biennial in 1997. His work is represented in several museums and private collections.

At an early stage of his career, in the first half of the 1970s, an anti-localist attitude and a desire for international dialogue led Julião Sarmiento to explore

a disparate range of interests and research vectors updated in relation to the neo-avant-garde tendencies (already present in a small but significant way in the Portuguese artistic context of those years). In an attempt to make the complexity of both human desire and the image of the female body the subject matter of conceptual approaches, his main concerns related to fetishism, absence and sparseness, deferral of touch, indexical traces of the body, contexts, objects, film montage and the interactions between the observer and the object of desire. Who is watching who? – *that will be the question*.

We must consider the revolutionary character of the explicitly erotic images produced by a young Julião Sarmiento against the backdrop of Portuguese Salazarism, which lasted forty-eight years and only ended with the so-called Carnation Revolution of April 1974. The

political repression of the New State (Estado Novo), the autocratic and nationalist regime that prevailed from 1933 to 1974, had imposed a stifling morality at the service of the most conservative sections of Portuguese society. Sarmiento's experimental films openly oppose state repression by confronting the mechanisms of cultural conservatism that repress sexuality and eroticism. In the light of his interest in perceptual and intellectual expressions of desire, voyeurism and fetishism, much of Sarmiento's work can be thought of as dissident in its integration of sexual pleasure and the desire for knowledge.

# WITH JULIÃO SARMENTO

---

CONDUCTED BY BRUNO MARQUES AND MIGUEL MESQUITA DUARTE

---

# Entrevista

**BM and MMD – Julião, you began your artistic activity in the late 1960s. Focusing on your personal experience, what was it like to live as a young artist in Portugal before the Carnation Revolution?**

JS – [laughs] I can't remember when I was a young artist. So, it's kind of a very difficult question. Anyway, it was virtually impossible. Virtually impossible because we couldn't survive as artists. Being a young artist is a contradiction in terms, because when you're very young you just *want to be*, rather than really being. But the reality is that before the revolution artistic practice was very scarce and artists had no possibility of surviving, except one or two or three that were very well-known, people that we all know. Someone like Pomar or artists that were really established and well-known. There were maybe half a dozen. Not even half a dozen! Two or three. Apart from that, artists had to keep secondary jobs. Basically jobs that enabled them to survive, to pay for rental and utilities. I myself did a bunch of jobs. So, it was very difficult to survive. But we did. But we prevailed. And here we are.

**BM and MMD – How did the constraints inherent to a dictatorship determine not only the type of work you created at that time, but also the work you would later create in the post-revolution period? Were you interested in confronting taboos and social inhibitions?**

JS – No, not at all, and yes. Yes and no. Yes, because I did do that. But no, because I didn't set that up as a goal. My work is extremely personal. I'm really worried about my world. My work is political just as any artist's work is political. Some more so than others. Some more evidently so than others. But I didn't use it as a flag or as a standard. I knew what I wanted to do. I had my own ideas of my work, all based on intimacy. It was a very intimate work. Totally based on my personal life, my personal feelings, and my personal thoughts; on my personal interests, rather than collective



Julião Sarmento, *Legs*, 1975, Super-8 film, colour, silent, 3' 45". Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (photo: courtesy of Julião Sarmento's studio)



Julião Sarmiento, *Untitled (strip)*, 1975/2002, ten b&w photographs mounted on PVC, each 29.3 x 19.8 cm, total size 29.3 x 233 cm. Collection of the artist, Estoril (photo: Divisão Documentação Fotográfica / IPM. Courtesy of Julião Sarmiento's studio)

interests. So, I had some problems, obviously, because I was... as I am still now, but at the time I was extremely interested in working within the barriers of gender, of eroticism, of sexuality. And, of course, before the revolution that was forbidden, totally forbidden. Anything that had to do with sex, or gender, or religion, or politics, was forbidden. Basically, almost everything was forbidden [laughs]. That was the only problem I had. Apart from that, everything else was cool.

**BM and MMD –** What strategies did you find to break through constraints and blockages at a time when the echoes of sexual liberation, and the revolution in customs taking place in other countries, were gradually being heard in Portugal?

**JS –** Well, I just did my work. [laughs] It's as simple as that. The thing is censors are stupid. Censorship is inherently stupid. Basically, if you don't put things in front of your face, and if you don't actually *hurt* people with reality so that they can feel it in their faces, they don't understand it. I cannot tell you if I've ever felt inhibited from doing something that I was not allowed to do. Everything I wanted to do I did. It would be very easy for me to say that "oh, I had all these problems in doing this or that". But I actually did it! Because you have just to think that repressed governments and censorship are inherently dumb, and stupid. Censors are inherently stupid. Basically, you can twist them, they are ignorant and stupid. So, basically, you can do whatever you want, and they won't understand it, they don't get it. So, I had no problem.

**BM and MMD –** Your work permanently expresses a tension between explicit sexuality and situations of deferral and irresolution. In a certain way, your projects expose licentiousness as an alternative politics of desire. Does your interest for licentiousness, for the perversion of desire, have to do with the desire for knowledge?



Julião Sarmento, *Faces*, 1976, Super-8 film, colour, silent, 44' 22". Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (photo: courtesy of Julião Sarmento's studio)

JS – Of course it does. It did then and it does now. It always did. They are totally connected. One cannot live without the other. I mean, it's not a dumb quest for sexuality and desire. It's just an intelligent way to deal with fundamental things that are part of our life. It is part of nature; it is part of us. Libido and sexual drive, everyone has it. Some more than others, and obviously in different directions, but it's here, it's part of our being animals and alive. So far!

BM and MMD – In a conversation we recently had in London you mentioned an episode in which a group of feminists protested against



Julião Sarmento, *Quatre mouvements de la peur*, 1978/1995, nine b&w photographs mounted on foamboard in artist's frames, each 186 x 125,5 cm, total size: variable dimensions. Collection of the artist (photo: courtesy of Julião Sarmento's studio)

the opening of an exhibition of some of your work. Can you tell us a little about that?

JS – There is not much to say. I think it was in 1989, at my solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, D.C. When I landed in Washington I was warned by the curator of the show [(Neal Benezra)], who was also actually the chief curator of the museum, that we had several problems with

the exhibition, because there was this extremist group of feminists that basically wanted to ban the exhibition – the same way as now the Gauguin exhibition was not allowed to go to the Metropolitan Museum of New York, which is a completely stupid situation. So anyway, I then asked: 'But why?'. And they said: 'Because they're just protesting against your exhibition'. And I thought: 'Well, they just don't get it. So let me talk to them'. So I asked to have a meeting with them. And I did have that meeting with them. They all came, 32 or 33 of them. Initially, they were enraged. They wanted to kill me [laughs]. But, then, after a good conversation with them, we all parted as friends and they all came to the show opening. So, I mean, because I'm not a woman-hater. And I'm not what they were accusing me to be. Like a male chauvinist pig. I'm not! I've never been! So, it was a complete misunderstanding.

(6) *Legs, Shadow and Faces* reflexively approach voyeurism in cinema. It seems that you want viewers to become aware of the fragility implicit in their role as voyeurs. Chrissie Iles even speaks of an



*A Ferida da Noite*, 1981  
Técnica mista sobre papel  
155 x 133 cm  
Coleção Galleria Lia Rumma, Napoli, Itália  
Foto: Julião Sarmiento's Studio

ambivalent and paradoxical situation where ‘desire, fascination and guilt’ coexist. Can we speak here, psychologically, of an attempt to deconstruct processes of censorship and self-censorship that have long been rooted in individual and collective terms?

JS – But you want to do a treatise on sexuality! You sure have a canny approach to all this! [laughs] We can talk about that. We can talk about anything you want. Chrissie has her point of view which I think quite interesting and I agree with her almost 90%. And yes! You know what? What is great about an artwork is that... It’s like Eco would say about the open work. I mean, any explanation will portray the artwork’s capacity for being an artwork. So, I mean, this frailty we have... When an artist is doing a work, when he is presenting and exhibiting a work, he is exhibiting himself, in a way. Because the work is himself, it is part of him. So, it’s like a child that comes from the womb of a woman. For the artist who produces it, an artwork like giving birth. It is an intrinsic part of the artist. So, along with all the frailties that the artist has, with all the intellectual capacity that the artist has, there are also the infinite possibilities of the artwork’s interpretation. So, to answer your question, yes, it’s a possibility. [laughs]

BM and MMD – How important were Andy Warhol’s films to you? And what is your perspective on the connection between underground film and a search for sexual freedom?

JS – No, the relation does not exist. I was having my own sexual freedom. The films only portray the sexual freedom that I’ve had. I was not interested in conveying nothing like that. I was not interested in waving a banner of sexual freedom. I was interested in making films about me, about my life, about what I was interested in. So, strangely enough, we can say that those films are me. They are what I was at the time. And, of course, Andy Warhol’s presence is overwhelming. It could not *not be!* But it’s not just Andy Warhol. There are also some early experiments in German film, people like Bernd Schroeder. Or, for instance, the cases of Jonas Mekas and Michael Snow. All these directors were important for me, not only Andy Warhol. Of course, we tend to connect those films immediately to Warhol’s influence, but the fact is that there’s a certain romanticism in my work, which is closer to the German experimental film, for instance, just to give you an idea.

BM and MMD – The controversy surrounding Robert Mapplethorpe’s exhibition in Serralves corresponds only to one of the several examples of sexually explicit works that, in recent years, have been subject to restrictions in the museum space. In your opinion, does it make sense to speak of a return to a more puritanical and conservative environment? Do you consider that new forms of censorship are emerging? Has your work been censored in any way?





JS – Oh, yeah! We're going back into the dark ages! This is horrible, it's terrible! I just mentioned to you that the Gauguin exhibition was banned in New York! Can you imagine Gauguin's retrospective being banned from the Metropolitan Museum? This is ridiculous; it makes no sense at all! So, yes, we are coming very rapidly and dangerously into a new era of censorship. And I hate that. Because all my life I fought against it and I'm not going to stop now.

*Returning Good for Evil*  
(London-Dublin 1909), 1996  
Técnica mista sobre tela  
220 x 380 cm  
Coleção particular, Chicago, Illinois, E.U.A.  
Foto: Orcutt & Van Der Putten

**BM and MMD –** We often talk about the existence of a mainstream 'pornification of culture', taking place in the neo-liberal context, in which sex is consumed as a mere commodity. We would like to know your position on the subject and how you understand the role of art in affirming the poetic, political and subjective values of sexuality and desire.

JS – But art is not only about sex! That's a wrong premise. I mean, it's not just about sex, not necessarily. Art is art. Sex is sex. Food is food. It's part of our life. I see it as naturally as possible. I mean, it's part of life! What I do not understand, or rather, understand but don't acknowledge, is all the discussions that are lately taking place about it, because it makes absolutely no sense. It's total rubbish. Look, I'm completely in agreement with this need to have equality in terms of gender relations. Look, Artemisia Gentileschi, Aurélia de Sousa in Portugal and a couple of others... I mean, how many women artists do we know from the *Seicento*, for

instance? Do you think they didn't exist? Of course, they existed! Except that there was a predominant male culture, so that they were totally driven away. But that's one thing. I understand that if you have the [balance] scale going like this [(unbalanced pans)], you can't suddenly put the scale like this [(balanced pans)]. I mean, the movement has to be like this, and this, and this [(several unbalanced stages in which the scale is tilted at different angles)]. Until it gets to the right position [(balanced)]. So, it's understandable that now it falls to one side in a completely stupid and idiotic way. But it's part of it. And then you tend to the other side, and the other side, until it gets to a balance. Now we are on one side [of the balance, it leans towards male dominance]. But we have to understand it and level it.