

JULIÃO SARMENTO
Reel Time

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The voyeuristic gaze is the subject of much of Julião Sarmiento's work. Desire, sexuality, control, and violence—emotional and physical—performed via female bodies, reappears in myriad forms in his work. The exhibition *Reel Time* includes a number of films, videos and performances, created at different points during a forty year period, from 1976 to 2011. Sarmiento's moving image and performance works are rooted in a history of performance and conceptual art from the mid to late twentieth century, that uses the body as both a site of action and a tool—by the likes of Marina Abramović, Bruce Nauman, and Carolee Schneemann. Yet Sarmiento's protagonists, and their performative gestures, are also restrained by a kind of stylistic formalism that recalls late Nineteenth century impressionist figuration—Edgar Degas *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* c.1880 comes to mind—which is present in his three dimensional works, in particular his sculptures of female body parts. Yet this formalism is subverted by a highly staged form of sexuality, akin to that performed by the female protagonists of Pedro Almodóvar's cinematic world.

The subject-hood and object-hood of Sarmiento's female protagonists is blurry. Sometimes they perform a powerful psychological agency. Other times they are reduced to the signifiers of their femininity. The film *Faces*, 1976, is a triptych of sorts. Two heads of hair, a blonde and a brunette, rub against one another at the bottom of the screen. This is followed by a close-up shot of two women kissing. The camera focuses on their mouths and tongues—licking, sucking, and moving in and around one another. At first glance it might seem erotic. But as time passes, and the kiss goes on and on and on, the tongues become chunks of wet flesh, the movements less sensual, or erotic, and more grotesque, becoming rudimentary in the abstraction of the close-up. Eventually, although beautifully shot, it becomes almost dull to watch. The final section depicts the two women sitting, nude, but with heavily made up faces, one leaning her head on the other's shoulder—a tender epilogue to the intensity of their performance.

Faces was made in Portugal just after the country had reached the end of a 41 year dictatorship—decades in which expressions of art, sex, religion and politics were censored and forbidden. Read through this lens, the film has much wider connotations of freedom, privacy, and complicity. The kiss has, of course, been the subject of numerous studies by artists, from Auguste Rodin and Gustav Klimt, to recent contemporary performances by Tino Sehgal. Yet, when viewing *Faces* through the lens of the Internet revolution—the fuzzy intimacy of its kiss, and the fact it is performed by two women (particularly when considered in the context of works that directly explore queer and lesbian identity)—it reads as a historical artefact, as the digital world is filled with videos of women performing with other women for men. Yet this actually serves to emphasise what Sarmiento confronts: the desire—and all the cultural and social influences that surround this—of the viewer.

Doppelgänger, 2001, plays with clichés of communication in heterosexual relationships. Two women, one dressed in black, one in white, one inside, one outside, perform an almost identical script. As the woman in black cleans her face in a hotel bathroom, the other walks along the seafront. Both answer calls from men whom they seem to be in romantic relationships with. The calls begin cordially, then digress into an argument of sorts. The two men state similar phrases: "Sometimes I get so wrapped up in my thoughts, I start staring at things...". The woman empathises, then explains that she feels sick with a fever. The men reply: "Bloody hell, you're such a bore, always on about your illnesses and problems!" The two women swap positions, the woman in white washes her face in the bathroom, the woman in black walks. The title of the film eludes to the idea of the doppelgänger, or doubling. The two women are experiencing identical situations, enacting a humorous, yet sad, performance of gender roles in heteronormative relationships. Sarmiento has often worked with diptychs of female bodies in his paintings and sculptures. However, these two characters, and their actions and narrative, are closer to the idioms, and the clichés inherent in these, of cinema, than to the archetypes of painting. Clichés become clichés because they are circumstances that occur frequently. We know of their existence, because we have experienced them. The cliché is not "bad", rather it is a cultural short hand for a collective, sometimes unconscious, truth.

Sarmiento addresses considerations of colour and form, and the affect of the language used to describe these things—which, in turn, alters our perception—in the video *R.O.C. (40 plus one)*, 2011. A woman slowly strips as she reads Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, 1950. This text considers how the perception of colour manifests in the language used to describe it. Wittgenstein touches upon ideas that originated in Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, 1810, which addresses the psychological ideas at play in our experience and understanding of colour. Wittgenstein focuses on the perception of whiteness, lightness, transparency, and opacity, and the impact other colours have on the way we perceive these states. In Sarmiento's video, as the text becomes more elaborate, the woman stumbles over the pronunciation of certain words and phrases, whilst painstakingly folding each item of clothing after its removal, to place it on a chair. What would normally be considered an arousing act—the striptease—becomes mundane. Three systems play out simultaneously—colour, language and the body—the semiotics of one, relates directly to the other two, in this conceptual triangle. However, *R.O.C. (40 plus one)* also recalls Andrea Fraser's performance *Official Welcome*, 2001, in which Fraser reads a pastiche of a welcome speech—created from a collage of quotes taken from art world protagonists—whilst stripping naked, in a feminist critique of the position of women in art history. In this context, the male artist, directing the female performer to strip as a conceptual act, is complex.

I have not seen the performance *Cometa*, 2009, in real life. I have only watched video documentation and listened to Sarmiento's description of the work. As such, I can only relay what I imagine the experience of it might be like. A lone person enters a room. Inside they find a man and a woman seated on two chairs in a space that is painted entirely green. Bright, almost luminous, forest green. When the door closes behind them, the woman stands and puts on music. She begins dancing alone. Soon the man rises and joins her. The dance becomes heated, more sexual. As they reach a kind of climax, the music stops, and they sit down again. Sarmiento described the experience as violent. And that viewers feel as if they are somewhere they shouldn't be. That they are too close to the performer's intimacy to be a voyeur. As such, the viewer seems to enter into a kind of unspoken psychological threesome.

Art historian John Berger famously wrote: "A woman is always accompanied, except when quite alone, and perhaps even then, by her own image of herself. While she is walking across a room or weeping at the death of her father, she cannot avoid envisioning herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she is taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does, because how she appears to others—and particularly how she appears to men—is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life." Indeed, women are socially conditioned to be aware of their image at a young age. Yet surely we have moved past this binary consideration of female object-hood and subject-hood.

In the Internet age, these conditions apply to everyone, as we perform our lives in public. Yet the emphasis Berger places on how a woman must appear to men, and how this is of crucial importance for the success of her life is, sadly, still dominant. It implies a woman's personal and public value is derived via her sexuality. And although feminism and civil rights movements advanced the cause for women's status via their achievements, the latent subtext that a woman must remain sexually alluring, attractive by society's normative standards, is stronger than ever. Sarmiento's women in "Reel Time" are not alone, as each addresses a different form of relationship: between two women, a woman and a man, a woman and an audience and a woman, a man, and one viewer. The contradictory states of intimacy, performed persona, and the joy and violence that occurs in the act of looking—both voyeuristically and objectively—is highlighted in Sarmiento's work.

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