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The Taut Dance of Word and Image

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Art and literature used to be linked more closely than they are today. Poets and novelists wrote art criticism; artists painted, sculptured and photographed writers. Now, artists are more likely to depict media celebrities, and younger critics are often the product of art history departments. So it's as if one steps back in time when visiting "[Julião Sarmiento: Artists and Writers/House and Home,](#)" a cross-media show at the [Parrish Art Museum](#) in Southampton.

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Jose Manuel Costa Alves

"Behind Your Eyelids (With Table)" (2004).

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Jose Manuel Costa Alves

PAINTER, AUTHOR "Heavy Load" (2009), right, among the works by Julião Sarmiento on view.



VARIED "House, Plant, Black and Cream" (2008-9), a mixed-media work.

But only a little bit back in time. Mr. Sarmiento, a Portuguese artist, devours the work of contemporary authors, and their books and words are featured prominently in his work. The current show also makes a point of connecting him to one of his favorite American authors, [James Salter](#), who lives nearby in Bridgehampton.

Mr. Salter even contributed a short story to the exhibition catalog, a tale about a man and a woman having an affair in Paris, although "she was meant to be in Basel at the Art Fair" — words you see frequently in art contexts, but not so often in contemporary fiction.

Mr. Sarmiento was quoting Mr. Salter in his paintings even before the two were introduced by the

exhibition's curator, Terrie Sultan, who is also the director of the Parrish. "Heavy Load," from 2009, takes the cover of Mr. Salter's best-known novel, ["A Sport and a Pastime,"](#) from 1967, reproducing it three times, underneath a simple outline drawing of a woman, shown below the neck and with her arms crossed.

Other paintings find Mr. Sarmiento reproducing book covers by American authors like [Paul Auster](#), [Richard Ford](#) and [Don DeLillo](#). "Ford," from 2008, is a canvas with markings, like a dirty stucco wall, and a snippet of text silkscreened on the upper right-hand corner that reads: "He wasn't a fool. He wasn't stupid enough to lose his sense of proportion. He was a survivor, he thought, and survivors always knew which direction the ground was."

The painting includes just the right amount of text to be forceful and evocative. (How much viewers will actually read while standing in a gallery is a perennial question of debate.) Moreover, the words "proportion" and "ground" are like painting puns, highlighting the concerns of the artist as he locates markings and text in the "ground" of the canvas and tries to find the right "sense of proportion." And, of course, both artists and writers are survivors, riding the inevitable tides of rejection and success.

In addition to being an artist, Mr. Sarmiento also trained as an architect, and several paintings show his sensitivity to the built environment, with photographs of unnamed modern buildings, or outlines of floor plans, silkscreened or collaged on their surfaces. "Seven Houses & Six Flats," from 2006, is a series of 13 photographs that documents the facade of every building in which Mr. Sarmiento has lived during his lifetime — for the most part in Lisbon, or the nearby town of Estoril.

The series of photographs, like Mr. Sarmiento's paintings, is very much in the tradition of Conceptual and post-Conceptual art. The photographs recall projects like [Ed Ruscha's "Every Building on the Sunset Strip"](#) in Los Angeles, from 1966; [Sophie Calle's](#) photographs of buildings and interiors; and the works of Germans like [Gerhard Richter](#) and [Sigmar Polke](#).

Mr. Sarmiento's paintings are also very much in keeping with those of American painters like [David Salle](#) and [Eric Fischl](#), who came to prominence in the 1980s, and whose work relies on the photographic image. (Mr. Fischl and Mr. Sarmiento were born the same year, 1948.)

If there is a quibble with Mr. Sarmiento's oeuvre, it's his masculinist version of postmodernism. The authors he cites are virtually always men, and women in his paintings usually appear headless, or as body parts. A couple of canvases feature disembodied breasts poking out of a rudely snipped garment.

Mr. Fischl and especially Mr. Salle, who has utilized images taken from pornography, have often been accused of the same thing. It's a question that resonates with this critic, trained in an art history partially informed by 1970s feminist film theory, which asserted that pictures in the Western canon were orchestrated to afford maximum viewing pleasure for men, with women arranged, as one famous essay by the British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey described it, for their "to-be-looked-at-ness."

It's never fun to wield the political-correctness whip — particularly toward an artist like Mr. Sarmiento, whose work is suffused, for the most part, with a poetic gentleness. And yet, his paintings, photographs and video rely very much on the strategies of what has come to be called "critical" postmodernism: the appropriation and mixing of text and images that alert us to how we view bodies and the world.

The authors Mr. Sarmiento cites also grapple with many of the same issues, of how to be a man — and an artist — in a world that has changed dramatically in recent decades, with women and formerly disenfranchised people claiming new roles and powers. (The [J. M. Coetzee](#) novel "Disgrace," whose cover is reproduced in one of Mr. Sarmiento's paintings and which won the [Booker Prize](#) in 1999, deals with these exact subjects in post-apartheid South Africa.)

That virtually all of the authors mentioned here are English-speakers is another issue — one that reveals how, to succeed in today's art world, one must address an Anglophone public. And so, while Mr. Sarmiento's show seems at first like a sleepy European version of postmodern pastiche, it contains the seeds of many recent debates. It reaches back to older models in which literature and art were more closely aligned and painting ruled the art world. But it also pushes a number of buttons, which means that, by contemporary standards, it must be succeeding on some terms.

"Julião Sarmiento: Artists and Writers/House and Home" is at the Parrish Art Museum, 25 Jobs Lane, Southampton, through June 11; parrishart.org or (631) 283-2118.