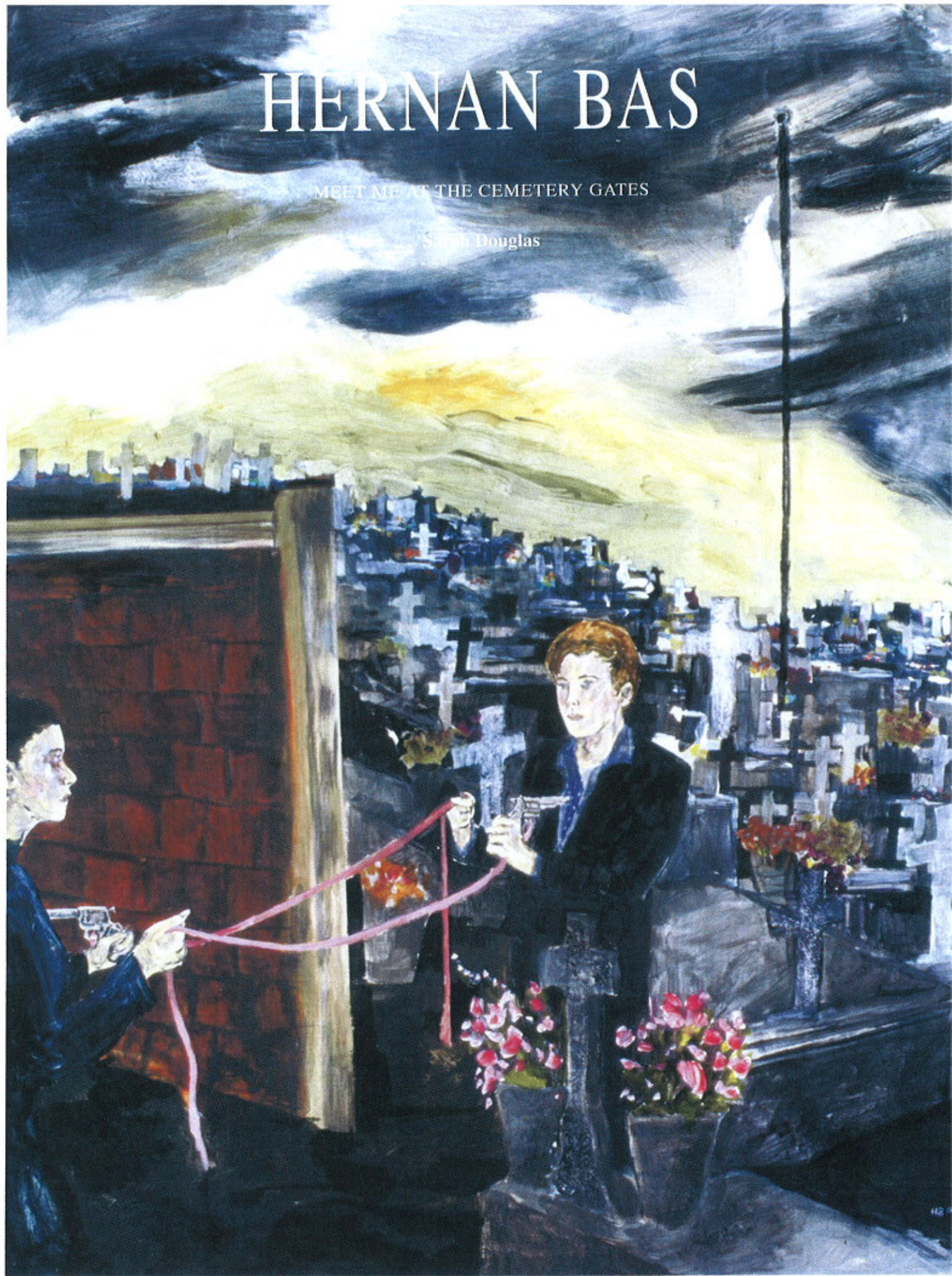


# HERNAN BAS

MEET ME AT THE CEMETERY GATES

Sarah Douglas





**SARAH DOUGLAS:** *Until recently you were making your paintings of waif-like young men (I think you once dubbed them "nouveau sissies") using Slim Fast diet drink. How did you decide to use this rather unconventional material? In another artist's work, there may have seemed to be some kind of critical purpose behind it — a critique of the diet drink industry or slamming America's obsession with body image, and with the idealized bodies in fashion advertisements, but I don't see that in your work.*

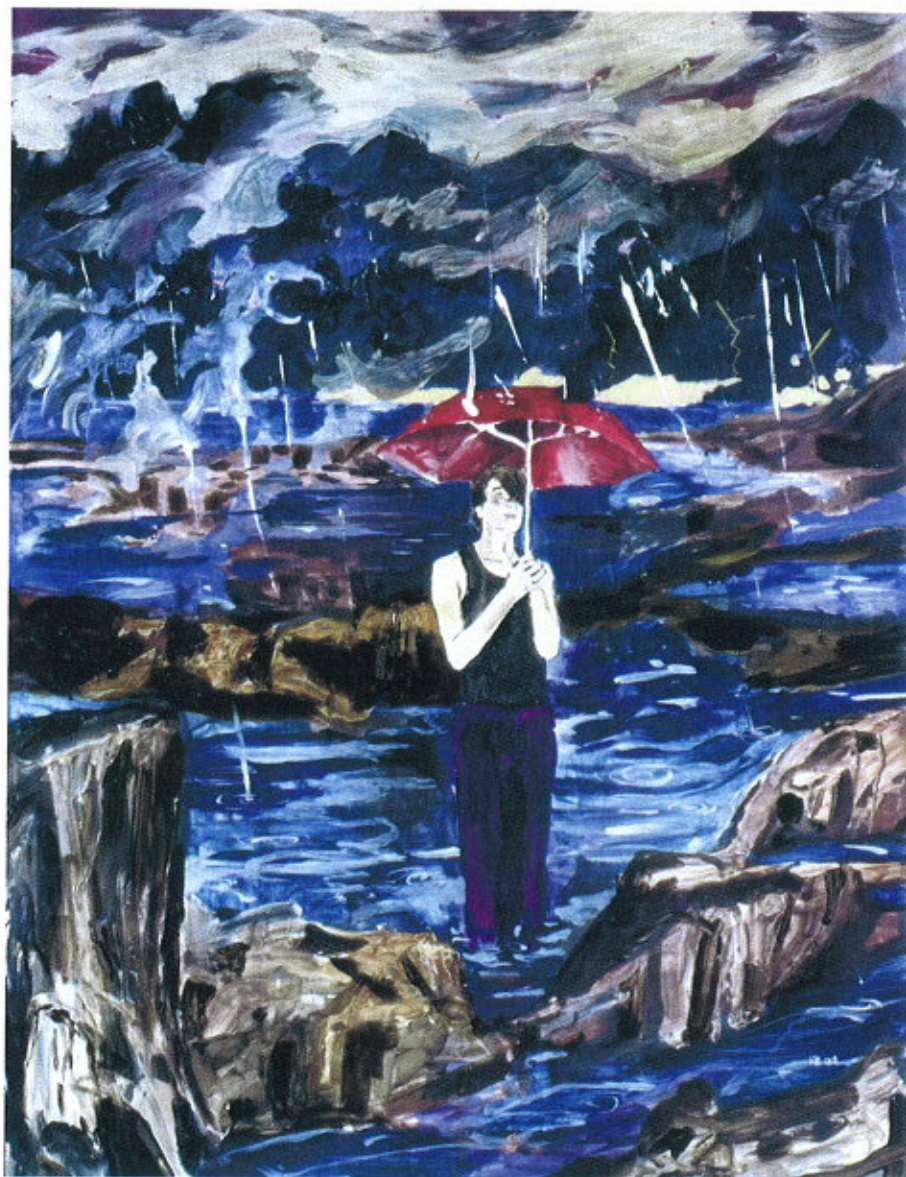
**Hernan Bas:** Slim Fast as an artist's material came about as a result of seeking out something equivalent to Joseph Beuys' use of fat. It was always a very simple idea: paint skinny boys with skinny paint. The critical response is something I was always well aware of, yet for me it was more about how the liquid sat and puddled and wrinkled the paper. I (still) draw skinny boys because I am one. There was a time when my work touched on notions of body image, but I've grown up some and now I paint what I know (and most of the time that's me).

**SD:** *Your paintings, especially the recent ones, hark back to 19th-century dandies. Have you ever read Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love*? It deals with the 19th-century classicist poet A.E. Housman's repressed homosexuality, his obsession with his athletic college friend, versus the purple velvet bedecked Oscar Wilde's unfettered embrace of the dandy persona. One critic wrote that you are exploring the 19th-century roots of "a certain queer vocabulary."*

**HB:** I have read *The Invention of Love*. My favorite line is from Wilde. As he's being taken across the River Styx, he says, "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others." My attraction to the era of the dandy is rooted in the hope that they (Wilde, [Joris-Karl] Huysmans, and Bosie even) might help shed light on why I find the pleasures they trumpeted to be as alluring to them decades ago as they are to me today. Do I like peacocks and porcelain because it's inherently gay, or do I find myself drawn to these things because it's part, or I should say the vocabulary of, the only 'gay history' I can locate. The fact that most of gay history is somewhat closeted has become rather important in how I layer my own work; I've always found secrets and suspicion to be hotter than putting it right 'out' there (no pun intended).

**SD:** *Women don't figure largely in your paintings—they seem in fact to be entirely absent. You've done series based on an all-male version of Stephen King's *Carrie*, the *Hardy Boys* mysteries, *Boy Scout* manuals, and *Moby Dick*.*

**HB:** Oddly enough, in the past few months I have included a few women in my paintings, and nobody noticed. I think it comes from the fact that my cast of boys resemble waif/model-type girls so much that when I include a girl everyone thinks it's a long-haired boy. But yes, in the past it has been an all boys world. I don't aspire to live in an all gay boy utopia; it would



Above: *Right Place Wrong Time*, 2004. Water-based oil, gouache, and acrylic on maple panel, 79 x 61 cm. Opposite: *The Lovers of Lyons*, 2004. Water-based oil, gouache, and acrylic on maple panel, 79 x 61 cm. Courtesy Daniel Reich Gallery, New York.

get boring very quickly. I'm trying to make work about very universal themes. If love is one of them I don't really think much of it when the image consists of two boys. I don't think I question it. It's something people assume they'll see regardless of whether I actually do paint a girl or not.

**SD:** *A blurb in the New York Times about your work in the Whitney Biennial included the observation, "His work, less interested in declaring a sexual identity than in revealing all gender roles to be unstable, helps to define queer, as opposed to gay, art." Do you agree with this?*

**HB:** That quote is one of my favorite things ever said about my work. I love the idea that 'gay art' is a really dated way of describing work made by young gay artists at this point in history. I much prefer 'queer' art to gay art; it's a whole lot more open ended. 'Queer' is more

like a John Waters universe where the Teletubbies live in harmony with the puppets from Peter Jackson's *Meet the Feebles*. That's a world worth living in.

**SD:** *Certain of your paintings—for instance *The Lovers of Lyons*, in which two youngsters are about to commit suicide in a cemetery—remind me of the kind of urgent earnestness in *The Smiths'* lyrics ("To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die"). On the one hand these lyrics are so melodramatic, it's easy to pass them off as humorous or satirical. On the other hand, well, who hasn't felt these kinds of über-Romantic emotions?*

**HB:** I really think you get the work. I love playing with *drama* to the point where it becomes comedy. I get a little thrill out of someone looking at one of my paintings and sort of smiling and saying, "Oh that's really sweet," and then I tell them the title or point out





From top: *The Patient Boy (helping hands)*, 2004. Water-based oil, gouache, and acrylic on maple panel, 79 x 61 cm; *A Little Romeo and Juliet in All of Us*, 2004. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy Daniel Reich Gallery, New York.

that the dresser the boy is leaning on is actually a coffin and the drawing is called *He's Not Coming Back*. ...I'm a huge fan of soap operas. My favorite is "Passions," a show that couldn't take itself seriously if it tried. In a seaside town called Harmony, of all things, a cast of characters that include a 300-year-old witch and an orangutan nursemaid stumble through plots that ride a very loose line into what is considered 'campy.'

**SD:** *Your work is literary and narrative — there seems to have been a resurgence of narrative painting lately. What drew you to work in this mode?*

**HB:** I've always been intensely 'moved,' for lack of a better term, by the written word. If I could ever do in a painting what one good line in a [Walt] Whitman poem or Magnetic Fields song does to me, I'd be very pleased. I'm thinking maybe the images I make are just trying to recreate a moment I'd find myself underlining in a good novel.

**SD:** *Can you tell me about the installation at Daniel Reich, A little Romeo and Juliet in all of us? There are gravestone rubbings, cameo pins, comedy and tragedy theater masks, silk flowers, a tusk chalice, a 'haunted' umbrella purchased on eBay... How do you know the umbrella is really haunted?*

**HB:** The installation is really meant as an exercise in my willingness to go 'over the top' with my thinking. It goes back to what I mentioned earlier about melodrama and my love of it. I attended arts-oriented schools from the sixth grade through high school. Comedy and tragedy masks represent, among other things, the über-emotional theater students I shared hallways with. As a result of those experiences, this icon of great drama has become somewhat tacky and (again) campy. ...I came across a whole world of 'haunted' objects for sale on eBay and instantly fell in love with them. A good majority of the sellers offer up photo evidence surrounding the object (usually poorly Photoshop-ed 'orbs') or written testimonials. I'm not all that concerned with the validity of their claims. If I go by my own definition of "haunted," everything on eBay carries that weight.... The one object in the installation I can personally vouch for in terms of potential 'ghostly' authenticity would be the silk flowers. I, shall we say, 'lifted' those from a cemetery in New Orleans. I'm really shocked by the idea of relatives leaving fake flowers at a grave. It says, "We love you, but not enough to keep coming back to replace fresh lilies."

*Sarah Douglas is an editor at Flash Art.*

*Hernan Bas was born in 1978 in Miami, where he currently lives and works.*

*Selected solo exhibitions 2004: Daniel Reich Gallery, New York. 2002: Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami; Sandroni Rey, Venice, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami.*

*Selected group exhibitions 2004: "Whitney Biennial," Whitney Museum, New York; "Painting 2004," Victoria Miro Gallery, London.*