



Berni Searle/MATRIX 202

A Matter of Time

February 2 – March 23, 2003

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

MATRIX

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“Issues of race are unavoidable, especially since the body was a primary site of identification in terms of racial classifications in the South African context and therefore cannot be overlooked. What interests me more, however, are ideas of ambiguity and mutability in relation to the concept of identity, and the various subject positions we occupy, which are always fluid.”

—Berni Searle¹

As a South African of native African and German-English descent, Berni Searle was categorized as “coloured” during the Apartheid era. Like other African conceptual artists, including Yinka Shonibare, Zineb Sedira, and María Magdalena Campos-Pon, Searle is motivated by the quest for self-representation, interrogation of her own existential circumstance, and the negotiation of her identity.² In much of her work she attempts to excavate the neglected history of South African women as a way of recovering from European colonialism and the challenges to race, class, and gender that it left behind. In contrast to much of the feminist work produced in the 1970s—in which, as art historian Kelly Jones asserts, the biological reality of the “female” was often conflated with the historical and cultural construct of the “woman”—in the 1990s, women artists were cognizant of the potential of these distinctions and proposed that it is the sexually/intellectually empowered body that is in control.³ Of major concern in Searle’s work is the mapping of visibility and invisibility, a struggle that has been at the forefront of feminist thought. Searle suggests that this is a daunting challenge, particularly when compounded by the scarcity of black women artists who—in Searle’s opinion—should be inserting themselves as strong and active voices into contemporary South African art practice and history.⁴

Along with the paucity of non-white female South African artists is a preponderance of work by artists who oversexualize and otherwise negatively portray the black, female body.⁵ By using her own body, often nude, Searle presents a complex position on this issue. “Using my body is a tricky thing to do because it can reinforce stereotypes,” she says, explaining that to ward off simple voyeurism she intentionally inserts an element of confrontation into her self-portraits.⁶ Searle’s insistent use of her own body could be understood to belong to a long tradition of women in many parts of Africa resorting to naked protest in the face of official reluctance to listen to their grievances and address their demands.⁷ In her work’s capacity to resist the facile consumption of the female body as commodity she reminds us of the confrontational power of that same body, in which so many myths, desires, and needs reside.⁸

Searle challenges reductivist readings of ethnicity. In her *Colour Me* series (1998-2000), the artist hangs enlarged digital images of her body covered in spices of various shades of red, brown, yellow, and white above piles of these same aromatic substances. In some of the installations in this series she includes the exposure number along the edge of the prints, thereby drawing attention to the role

COVER: (l to r) *Resting 1, Resting 2, Resting 3*; 2003; digital prints; 40 1/2 x 47 1/4 each in.; photo credit Jean Brundit, courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery, NY



of photography in ethnography to clinically identify and thereby justify perceived differences between people, in particular in relation to the racialized and gendered body.⁹ Searle often manipulates substances and pigments that are resonant with colonial referents.¹⁰ Here the choice of material references the profitable spice trade, dependent on black labor, that flourished in South Africa when it was a Cape Dutch colony in the seventeenth century; it reflects, as well, Searle’s own mixed heritage. In close-up images, the spices cover her face, leaving only the emotion-filled eyes of the artist revealed. Searle cites bell hooks’s statement: “By courageously looking (they) defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality.’ Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it opens up the possibility of agency.”¹¹ Searle returns the gaze of the viewer, yet her gaze communicates so much more than confrontation: need, fear, survival, existence.

In another work, *Julle Moet Nou Trek (You must move away)*, ghosts of ecstatic female bodies rise out of red clay dust, the characteristic color of so much of South African soil.¹² The art historical antecedents of this work are clearly the outdoor “earth-body-sculptures” that Ana Mendieta created in Iowa in the 1970s. Using such primal materials as blood, earth, fire, and water, Mendieta first executed her performances, then documented them in photography or film in much the same way as Searle does. The artists also share certain feelings of alienation—Mendieta in her exile from Cuba and her marginalization as a Latin American woman, and Searle in her struggle against the legacy of the racialized classification system that formed the basis of apartheid. Each creates powerful, magical, and poetic work.¹³

In *Profile* (2002) Searle comments on the impact of heritage, religion, colonialism, and apartheid.¹⁴ She presses various objects into her cheeks so as to leave an embossed negative: a souvenir British spoon, a paperweight in the shape of a windmill, and an Arabic prayer. In some of the images, the trace of a previous pressing can be seen and suggests a layering of experiences, a reference to the inability of a single object or identity to comprehensively comprise meaning or value.

Searle creates performance video works that address not only race but gender by activating the viewer’s senses: touch and smell as well as sound and sight. In *Snow White* (2001), a dual-screen, mural-size video projection, the nude artist is barely distinguishable as she kneels, very still, on a black floor.¹⁵ Flour is poured

A Matter of Time (video still), 2003; DVD projection; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery, NY



on her from above, covering first her hair and head, then her entire body. Her form is now distinguishable yet obscured and, in another sense, invisible. As Olu Oguibe, a Nigerian-born curator and artist living in New York, explains, being “whited-out” as enacted in *Snow White* refers to colonial practices of “erasing” indigenous populations in places such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.¹⁶ The artist then begins to knead the flour in a series of actions associated with making food, here roti – a flat bread usually eaten with curry in Indian cuisine.¹⁷ While the use of flour references the visibility/invisibility issue of people of color living under apartheid and other racist regimes, it also recalls ritual practices in a number of cultures (including South Africa’s Zulu and Xhosa) where the body is whitened as a marker of transition or initiation.¹⁸ As Searle presses and folds the dough, her hands form a pattern of wings on the ground resembling snow angels made by children. The slapping sounds of Searle’s hands against the floor simultaneously have a rhythmic effect and serve as an aural jolt, perhaps punishing the viewer for staring at the naked body positioned—seemingly so available—in front of them.

During the filming of *A Matter of Time* (2003) the camera was positioned directly under a transparent box suspended eight meters in the air. A stationary camera, tight cropping of the frame, and minimal editing, create a sense that the camera simply records the event. But the resulting projection is altered in two ways. First, the proportions of the projection are changed from the standard 4:3 ratios to an elongated 16:9 ratio. Second, the projector is rotated ninety degrees so that the image appears sideways. The effect is that the artist appears to be walking up and then sliding or slipping back down the gallery wall.

The first glimpse of the artist is her feet, seen at the bottom of the wall. She stands still, upright, waiting. Olive oil is poured into the box and she begins to walk, cautiously yet with determination, across (or up) the frame. After successfully walking to the end, she slides backward. The downward movement is highly abstracted as her form mutates and refracts in the oil. This gesture is also accompanied by a high-pitched, dissonant sound, probably the result of a vibration when she slides along the glass. Prior to the next pour, Searle’s face peers into the frame, slightly blurred. Each pour of the oil creates a different shape around her feet. The overall lighting is theatrical, dramatic. The colors appear Mannerist, with the artist’s skin seeming to change color depending on where she is standing.

A Matter of Time (video still), 2003; DVD projection; dimensions variable; courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery, NY



Searle chose to work with olive oil for many reasons, including its consumption, flavor, color, and sensuous quality. As the primary material of her performance, the oil supplies a duality of beauty and danger. For Searle, there is an additional metaphorical significance: she wants control yet simultaneously plays with taboos—the attraction/revulsion relationship in self-representation, exoticization, and didacticism. The visual suggestion of tactility is extremely sensual in *A Matter of Time*. Searle uses her body and its inherent appeal to take a potent political stance. The artist asserts her right to use and present her own body. It is a defiant, feminist gesture that refuses the assignment of any meaning other than on her own terms.

In the moments between the passes that the artist makes across the glass surface, the projected image is black, though hardly monochromatic. Streaks of colors appear in the blackness, subtle variations of shade and hue. Small bubbles in the oil catch light. As in the “black” paintings of Ad Reinhardt, the viewer’s perception of what is there alters upon close inspection. The black fields of color are metaphors for the inherent failings in assigning one color or identity to any individual or group.

In describing the process of making *A Matter of Time*, Searle relates the difficulty of taking the first, untried step out onto the glass box. Subsequently, she says, an incredible suction occurred and it became difficult to pull away from. Searle explains that the slipperiness of the oil references the changing nature of identity.

Part of the impetus for *A Matter of Time* was something that Searle’s grandmother told her when she was a child: that one day she would travel to places where people would appreciate the olive color of her skin. She believes that her grandmother was telling her that there are places other than South Africa, where the color of her skin would not matter, where it would be considered beautiful, even exotic. These words were intended not only to expand the young Searle’s world perspective, but also to promise hope. Searle states, “What I am drawn to, and what I appreciate, is the sentiment. It has nothing to do with reality.”¹⁹ The issues Searle confronts—racial and gender inequity—are now widespread in visual and news media. Artists such as Adrian Piper, Janine Antoni, Hannah Wilke, and Lorna

Profile (detail), 2002; lambda prints; 47 1/4 x 38 2/3 in.; photo credit Jean Brundit



Simpson have also addressed them. Nevertheless, equality has yet to be achieved. It is essential to keep reminding the world that there is still more to be done, as well as to ask others and ourselves why. Why does the notion that a place where the color of one’s skin does not matter have nothing to do with reality? And when will it? One hopes, perhaps unrealistically, that it is only a matter of time.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ Berni Searle in conversation with the author, via e-mail, December 29, 2002. ² Salah M. Hassan, “<Insertions>: Self and Other in Contemporary African Art,” *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (Ithaca, NY: Forum for African Arts, 2001), p. 26. ³ Kellie Jones, “Life’s Little Necessities: Installations by Women in the 1990s,” *Trade Routes: History and Geography. 2nd. Johannesburg Biennale* (Johannesburg: AICA: Africus Institute for Contemporary Art, a project of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997), pp. 286-287. ⁴ Hassan, p. 31. ⁵ See Okwui Enwezor, “Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in South African Representation,” *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (Boston: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 376-399 for a more extensive analysis on this subject. ⁶ Barbara Pollack, “Feminism’s New Look,” *ARTnews*, September 2001, vol. 100, no. 8, p. 136. ⁷ Annie E. Coombes, “Skin Deep/Bodies of Evidence: The Work of Berni Searle,” *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, p. 198. ⁸ Ibid. ⁹ Rory Bester, “Interview with Berni Searle,” *The Field’s Edge: Africa, Diaspora, Lens* (Tampa: Contemporary Art Museum, University of South Florida, 2002), n/p. ¹⁰ Coombes, p. 188. ¹¹ Hassan, p. 31. ¹² Coombes, p. 188. ¹³ Susan S. Weinger, “Ana Mendieta,” *GroveArt.com* (Macmillan Publishers, Ltd. 1998-2002). ¹⁴ Bester, n/p. ¹⁵ The work was commissioned for the *Authentic/Ex-centric* exhibition presented in conjunction with the 49th Venice Biennale (2001) and was intended by the curators to counter the absence of African conceptual artists in large-scale international survey exhibitions. ¹⁶ Pollack, p. 136. ¹⁷ Searle notes that this tradition was passed down to her from her Mauritian great-grandfather, who was a cook. ¹⁸ Coombes, p. 197. ¹⁹ Berni Searle, unpublished artist statement, 2002.

Snow White (video still), 2001; 2 DVD projections; dimensions variable



Berni Searle was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1964. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Art from the University of Cape Town in 1987 and a Master of Arts in Fine Art in 1995. Searle lives and works in Cape Town.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2002** “Berni Searle,” Seippel Gallery, Cologne, Germany
- 2001** “Still,” Axis Gallery, New York, NY
“Colour Matters,” Kunsthalle Stadtgalerie, Osnabrück, Germany
- 1999** “Colour Me,” Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet, Cape Town, South Africa

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2002** “The Spice Route,” Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (IFA), Stuttgart, Germany
“The Field’s Edge: Africa, Diaspora, Lens,” USF Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, FL
“Watching Ocean and Sky Together,” Liverpool Biennale, Liverpool, U.K.
“Tracing the Rainbow,” Kunst-Raum Sylt-Quelle, Rantum, Germany; Kulturverein Zehntscheuer, Rottenburg/NeckarRottenburg, Germany
“Fronteras,” Espacio C, Santander, Spain
- 2001** “Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa In and Out of Africa,” 49th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
“Encounters with the Contemporary,” Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
“Dis-Locations,” PHOTOESPANA2001, Madrid, Spain; Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, Spain; Centro Cultural De Maia, Oporto, Portugal
- 2000** “A.r.e.a. 2000,” Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland
“L’Art dans le Monde,” Culée du pont Alexandre III, Paris, France
“FNB Vita 2000,” Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
“DAK’ART 2000,” National Museum, Dakar, Senegal
“Insertion,” Apex Art, New York, NY
“Kwere Kwere: Journeys into Strangeness,” The Castle, Cape Town; Gertrude Posel Gallery, Johannesburg; and NSA, Durban, South Africa
“Afrika Porträt,” House of World Cultures, Berlin, Germany
- 1999** “Towards-Transit: New Visual Languages in South Africa,” De Blaue Saal, Zurich, Switzerland
“Lines of Sight: Perspectives on South African Photography,” South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
“Bloodlines/Bloedlyn,” Klein Karoo Kunste Fees, Oudtshoorn, Western Cape, South Africa
- 1998** “7th International Cairo Biennale,” Cairo, Egypt
- 1997** “Life’s Little Necessities,” 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, The Castle, Cape Town, South Africa

Snow White (video still), 2001; 2 DVD projections; dimensions variable



Selected Catalogues, Books, and Periodicals
Bedford, Emma. “What’s It Mean? The Cairo Biennale.” *Co@Artsnews*, February 1999, p. 19.
Coombes, Annie. “Skin Deep/Bodies of Evidence: The Work of Berni Searle,” in *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, Edited by S. Hassan and O. Oguiibe. Ithaca, NY: Forum for African Arts, 2001, pp. 178-201.
Lewis, Desiree. “The Conceptual Work of Berni Searle.” *Agenda*, October 2001, pp. 108-117.
Murinik, Tracy. “Berni Searle.” *NKA Journal of Contemporary Art*, Spring/Summer 2001, pp. 74-79.
Pollock, Barbara. “The New Look of Feminism.” *ARTnews*, September 2001, pp. 132-136.
Vetrocq, Marcia. “Biennale Babylon.” *Art in America*, September 2001, pp. 104-115.
Williamson, Sue. “Staking Claims: Confronting Cape Town.” *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Fall/Winter 2000, pp. 92-95.

Work in MATRIX

A Matter of Time, 2003
DVD projection
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery, New York

Berni Searle
Resting 1, 2, and 3
Digital prints
47 1/4 x 40 1/2 inches (120 x 102.8 cm) each
Courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery, New York

Please Note:

MATRIX Curator Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will lead a walkthrough of **Berni Searle/MATRIX 202 A Matter of Time** on Thursday, February 20, at 12:15 p.m.

On Thursday, March 13, at 7 p.m., Daughters of Yam (devorah major and Opal Palmer Adisa) will perform poetry complementing Searle’s installation.

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Girl (detail), 1999, from the ‘Colour Me’ series; blockmounted photographs, glass tubes, spices; 12 prints, 16 1/2 x 19 3/4 in. each; photo credit Jean Brundit