



## Foreword

The Institute for Research in Art was first introduced to Berni Searle while she was in residence at USF through the Stuart S. Golding Endowed Chair, held by the School of Art and Art History, in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. Two of her installations, *Profile* and *Snow White* were included in the exhibition, *The Field's Edge: Africa, Diaspora, Lens*, guest curated for USFCAM by Rory Bester and Amanda Carlson in 2000. We have followed her artistic development and significant achievements since that time, and have commissioned Searle to produce a new work, *Alibama*, premiering in this USFCAM exhibition. She will be in residence with the Institute for Research in Art during 2006-2007 and will work at Graphicstudio, USF's innovative atelier for print and sculpture multiples, to create a series of prints that relate to the *Alibama* project.

I thank Mark Coetzee, Director of the Rubell Family Foundation for his continued support of Berni Searle and participation in the symposium and Laurie Ann Farrell, Curator at the Museum for African Art in New York for her willingness to write about Searle's most recent works. My thanks also to Sophie Perryer of the Michael Stevenson Gallery and to Michael Stevenson for their assistance and loan of the artworks.

When discussing plans for her USFCAM exhibition, Searle suggested a partnership with the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Michael Stevenson Gallery to jointly publish a catalogue as all three institutions are presenting solo shows of her work this fall. This arrangement has led to a successful institutional collaboration and a significant publication for the artist, in addition to this USFCAM brochure.

My thanks also to Margaret Miller, Director, for her support of my proposal to undertake this ambitious project on behalf of the Institute for Research in Art, and to the faculty and staff for their genuine involvement in the research and formulation of the exhibition and related colloquium: Victoria Billig, Lesley Brousseau, Amber Cobb, Denton Crawford, Peter Foe, Sarah Howard, Nicki Kruszka, Tom Pruitt, David Reutter, Noel Smith, Kristin Soderqvist, Jordan Starr-Bochicchio, David Waterman and Randall West. I am especially grateful to Don Fuller and David Stringfellow for their technical advice, and to Steve Hamilton, Mad Mad Judy, New York for his expertise and collaborative spirit that made *Alibama* possible. My thanks also to Tony Palms and James Rodger for their considered design and installation of the show.

It has been a most rewarding opportunity for me to work with Berni Searle on her first solo museum exhibition in the United States. I thank her for her ongoing enthusiasm and perseverance for the project and look forward to her upcoming residency.

Alexa Favata  
Associate Director  
USF Institute for Research in Art

Daar Kom Die Alibama  
Author Unknown

### AFRIKAANS

Daar kom die Alibama,  
Die Alibama, die kom oor die see,  
Daar kom die Alibama,  
Die Alibama, die kom oor die see.

Nooi, nooi, die rietkooi nooi,  
Die rietkooi is gemaak,  
Die rietkooi is vir my gemaak,  
Om daar op te slaap. (repeat verse)

Die Alibama, die Alibama,  
Die Alibama kom oor die see,  
Die Alibama, die Alibama,  
Die Alibama kom oor die see.

Januarie, Februarie, March, April, May, June, July  
(repeat verse)

August, September, October, November, December.

Januarie, Februarie, March, April, May, June, July

(repeat first 3 verses)

Hy kom oor die see,  
Hy kom oor die see.

### ENGLISH

There comes the Alabama,  
The Alabama comes over the sea,  
There comes the Alabama,  
The Alabama comes over the sea.

Young girl, young girl, the reed-bed girl,  
The reed-bed has been made,  
The reed-bed has been made for me  
To sleep on. (repeat)

The Alabama, the Alabama,  
The Alabama comes over the sea  
The Alabama, the Alabama,  
The Alabama comes over the sea.

January, February, March, April, May, June, July  
(repeat verse)

August, September, October, November, December.

January, February, March, April, May, June, July

(repeat first 3 verses)

He comes over the sea,  
He comes over the sea.

## October 27 – December 16, 2006

### Artist's Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the USF Institute for Research in Art for providing me with the opportunity to exhibit my work at the Contemporary Art Museum. In particular I would like to thank the Director, Margaret Miller, for our continued collaboration and the Associate Director, Alexa Favata, for her commitment to the exhibition, as well as her team of highly professional and committed staff members for their involvement in organizing and installing the exhibition *Approach*.

I would like to thank Laurie Ann Farrell for her thoughtful insights in writing the accompanying text for this brochure and the catalogue.

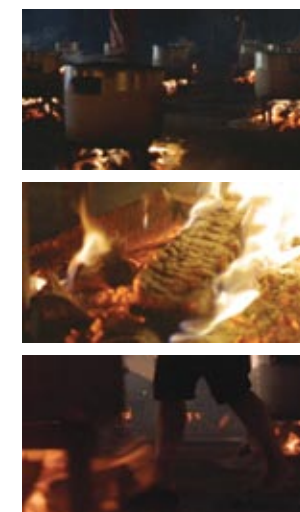
I am grateful for having met and worked with Steve Hamilton on the editing of the commissioned work, *Alibama*. Thank you for your generosity and willingness to assist.

I would also like to thank Michael Stevenson and the staff at Michael Stevenson Gallery for the numerous roles they have played in contributing to this exhibition and catalogue. I would especially like to thank Sophie Perryer for her attention to the details of both the catalogue and the logistics of the exhibition, and Andrew Da Conceicao for his responsiveness in attending to all the enquiries relating to the show.

### About the Artist

Berni Searle was born in Cape Town, South Africa. She graduated from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, with an M.F.A. Her first foray into the international arena came in 1998 when she received the UNESCO award for her work, *Red, Yellow, Brown* from the *Colour Me* series at the 7th International Cairo Biennale. In 2000 she was nominated for the NB Vita Award and received the Daimler-Chrysler Award for South African Contemporary Art. In 2001 she was awarded a Civitella Ranieri Fellowship and was named Standard Bank Young Artist for 2003.

Searle's work is included in a number of private collections as well as the permanent collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, the Buhl Foundation, New York, the South African National Gallery, Cape Town, and the Australian Parliament, Canberra. In 2005, Searle was selected to exhibit at the 51st Venice Biennale. In September 2006 she will exhibit a selection of video works at the BildMuseum in Umeå, Sweden, in addition to her solo shows at the Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa, and the USFCAM.



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*Berni Searle: Approach* is sponsored in part with the assistance of the Nimoy Foundation; the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency; the Arts Council of Hillsborough County and the Hillsborough County Board of Commissioners; the Florida Department of State, Florida Arts Council and the Division of Cultural Affairs; Audio Visual Innovations (AVI); and by the Members and Corporate Partners of the USF Institute for Research in Art.



Contemporary Art Museum



## BERNI SEARLE APPROACH





## A SOLOQUY ON STRENGTH AND SOLITUDE by Laurie Ann Farrell

### Night-fall /n. onset of night; end of daylight.

In Berni Searle's new video, *Night Fall*, wine is both metaphor and muse. Searle's use of wine as subject matter takes a highly nuanced and layered approach. Rather than playing to iconic interpretations or recreating scenes from known allegories, Searle's images feature Dionysian characteristics of abundance, excess and sensuality that draw the viewer into intimate recollections culled from personal memories while simultaneously hinting to broader human issues.

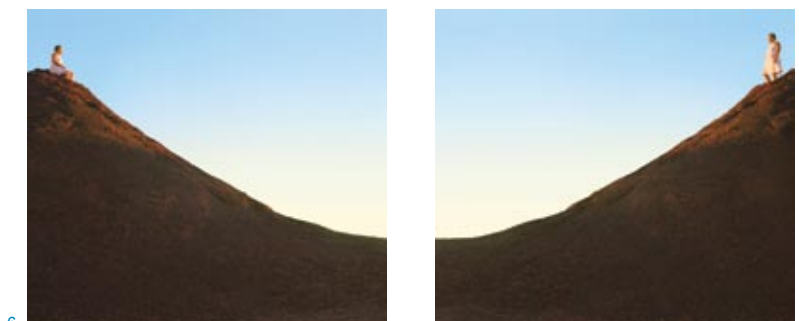
*Night Fall*, shown as a three-screen projection, presents a series of events chronicling the rise and fall of a heroine, which poetically meld together through the fusion of dreamy visual and audio components. The sequence of events begins to unfold on the cusp of late afternoon when the hours of light are beginning to give way to darkness. The gradation of light across the three projection panels makes subtle overtures to an Apollo-Dionysus dichotomy which suggests transitions from reason to oblivion, dream to intoxication, and life to death.

Searle states that her concept for *Night Fall* dates back to the mid-to-late 1990s, when she was teaching in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Stellenbosch. Driving from Cape Town along the R310 to Stellenbosch every morning Searle was struck by the stench of rotting grape skins which

would create visually striking pyramids along the roadside during the autumn harvest.<sup>1</sup> It would be ten years before Searle's artistic practice would bring her back to work with this landscape. *Night Fall* was shot on location at a wine farm that still employs machinery to crush the grapes and shuttle the skins into these large mounds.

*Night Fall* showcases innovation and continuity in Searle's working method. Hallmark elements of earlier works appear including a multi-screen sculptural presentation, this time in a U-shape configuration which envelops the viewer; the insertion of Searle's body in a state of physical duress, or vulnerability; allusions to texture and scent; and the use of organic products – all in a semi-narrative format. The audio track, however, represents a significant point of departure. For *Night Fall*, Searle invited Zolani Mahola, lead singer from one of South Africa's most popular bands, Freshlyground, to collaborate on the soundtrack through an open brief. Leaving her band's European tour briefly to join Searle in Rome, Mahola went into a studio to record vocal responses to projections of *Night Fall*. Mahola's background in drama coupled with her soulful and eclectic interpretation of Searle's imagery brings a melancholic energy and somewhat hypnotic aura to the piece. Searle edited Mahola's tracks into an audio arrangement that brings visitors to the privacy and playfulness of her dreamscape dialogue. Searle has used her own voice to create ambient vocals in her earlier work *Home and Away* (2003); however Mahola's emotive vocal responses to *Night Fall* open up a new creative sphere for both artists. Moreover, the texture of Mahola's vocal incantations and sensual rumblings accentuates that the core voice of this work is intimate and feminine.

The film opens with a central projection of Searle lying prostrate on a mound of grape skins in a dark setting. Her body is being smothered by grape skins falling in slow motion. The ambiguity of Searle's pose as a fallen heroine or a sleeping figure provides



a static focal point for reflection as activity begins to unfold on the two flanking panels. Mahola's audio for this screen enhances this ambiguity and can be interpreted as the voice of Searle's subconscious during a dream. Searle's insertion of her body as the central image and the subsequent covering of her body with grapes visually reference earlier works where she modified the legibility of her physical appearance with spices in the *Colour Me* series (1998), black Egyptian henna in *Lifeline* (1999) and *Stain* (1999–2000) from the *Discoloured* series, flour in *Snow White* (2001), and olive oil in *A Matter of Time* (2003). Searle's use of organic matter to mask her body functions as a method to complicate notions of identity by blending elements of fantasy with reality. Art historian Liese van der Watt writes that Searle "literalizes the radical insufficiency of identity by devising a practice that visualizes simultaneous presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, as if she is never quite anywhere".<sup>2</sup>

The right-hand screen opens with a piercing blue sky. This pristine image begins to change as grape skins cascade into view from the top of the screen. Searle's performance on the mounds of skins evokes the practice of stomping on the grapes and emphasizes the sensuous quality and physical engagement of this process. Searle appears in the centre of the screen wearing a white sleeveless dress with arms raised and her body turning in a circle. Her victorious pose suggests that she is celebrating a triumph of some sort. Grapes continue to fall upon her and slowly begin to stain her dress. The image of Searle precariously perched at the apex of this mountain bears formal and conceptual links to Penny Siopis's *Patience on a Monument: A History Painting* (1988). Siopis's appropriation of photocopied images depicting "a global visual culture of enslavement" is conceptually alluded to in *Night Fall* by the mountain of grape skins which evokes the history of wine farm labourers in South Africa. During apartheid, many South African wine farmers paid workers a percentage of their wage in second-rate wine. This system of payment, known as the 'tot' or 'dop' system, while no longer legal

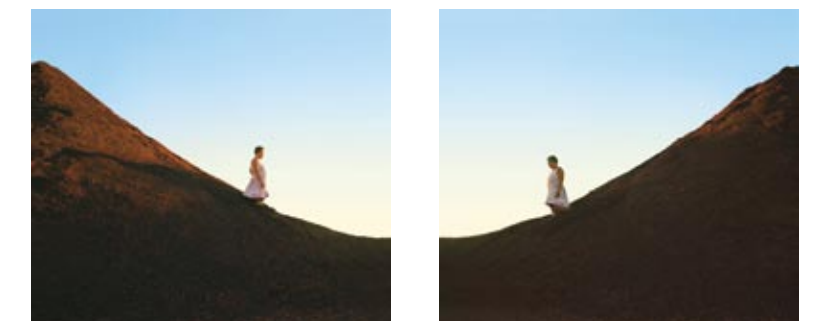


in South Africa, left behind a destructive legacy of alcohol abuse amongst wine farm labourers in the Western Cape. In *Night Fall*, a blue sky with cascading grapes serves as a pause or segue in the film. Searle then reappears climbing up the side of the mountain. Perhaps Searle's triumphant ascension to the top of this mountain can be read on one level as her way of obliquely redressing the deleterious history of wine production in the Western Cape. Searle proceeds to lie down and appears to fall asleep. Moments later she begins to dangerously tumble down the side of the mountain.

In contrast to the clarity afforded by daylight in the right-hand screen, the left screen is much darker and more suggestive. The piece opens at the edge of nightfall. A dark blue sky turns to black and the ever present cascading grapes begin to resemble flowing wine, or blood. Searle enters from the left, walks through the stream of grapes and lies down on her side. Her stained white dress is luminous in this view. Slowly, she begins to tumble down the mountain as the screen fades to black.

### Yield / v. 1. produce or return as a fruit, profit, or result. 2. give up; surrender.

A related series of prints and stills provide additional engagements with the landscape. In *Yield I* and *Yield II*, Searle appears in a dress stained and mottled by grape juice on the side of the mountain of grape skins. The clarity of the photographic prints provides sustained moments for reflection that cannot be gleaned through the fluid motion in the film. The *Yield* series highlights Searle as simultaneously strong and vulnerable as she leans into the side of the mountain. She gazes outside of the frame as if something or someone is approaching. The viewer is left to wonder if she is yielding to something, perhaps in the aftermath of ecstatic revelry, or merely taking a moment to rest. The insertion of Searle into the landscape as a solitary figure accentuates that she has embarked on some type of mythic



pilgrimage. In addition, the closely cropped images of her sinking into the mound of grape skins playfully allude to her previous interventions and work with skin.

### Ap-proach / v. 1. tr. Come near or nearer to (a place or time). 2. way of dealing with a person or thing.

*Approach* presents Searle on a panoramic journey through a series of peaks and valleys of grape skin mounds which extends seven metres across the gallery wall. Searle commented on the intentional "ambiguity of the idea of approach, in that [she is] either approaching [herself], or walking further away from [herself], depending on which pair of figures you look at". There is also the eventual approach of day and night. Her body sinks into the mound of grape skins as she climbs and descends. Searle's repeated presence across this landscape challenges a linear reading of this work. The journey is depicted as ongoing – without a beginning, or an end. Searle's journey also bears an uncanny relationship to the nocturnal Dionysiac ritual for women known as *Oreibasia* ("mountain treading") which took place during the mid-winter months at Delphi. However, in contrast to the Bacchanalian motivations behind the *Oreibasia*, the tone of Searle's journey is contemplative; a solitary trek in which she continuously returns to herself. The image presents a strong woman whose endurance and perseverance will carry her through.

Aesthetically, *Night Fall*, the *Yield* series and *Approach* are built on an enormous mound of grape skins which have an amazing texture and palette of saturated purples, reds and browns with hints of yellow and green. The setting of the piece in a public place which Searle has known for a long time creates the sense that the work is both private and public, about her history and the history of the Western Cape. The use of slow motion in *Night Fall* accentuates the dreamscape quality while the imagery in the prints suggests an awareness of a determined journey. Searle's construction of an open-ended work ultimately allows viewers to enter the atmosphere of the work and make their own connections and associations.

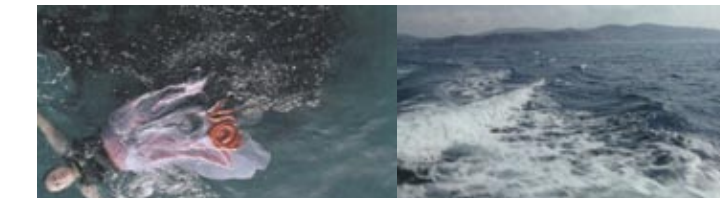
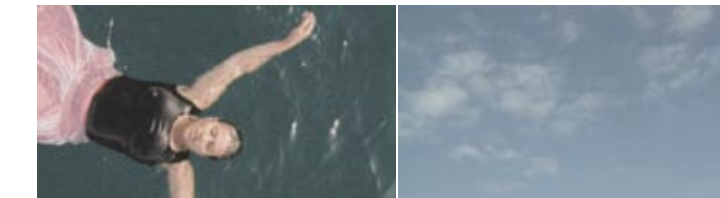
Searle's newest work, *Alibama* (2006), produced for her solo exhibition at the University of South Florida's Contemporary

Art Museum, grapples with a new set of historical, cultural, and personal referents. The *Alabama* was an American Confederate ship that sailed into Cape Town in the late nineteenth century. The legacy of this ship spawned a traditional South African song *Daar Kom die Alabama* in Afrikaans ("There Comes the Alabama") which is sung by a range of groups including Cape Malay choirs, Boy Scouts and white Afrikaans singers. Searle is busy conducting research on the contradicting origins of the music, images and pop culture manifestations which keep the story of the *Alabama*, which is ironically not well known in America, alive in South Africa. The outcome will surely be an experience-oriented narrative which brings history forward through a compelling visual encounter. Searle's creative vision will likely insert viewers into a spirited journey – one in which she is the catalyst for deep reflection and personal introspection.

*Night Fall* and *Alibama* continue Searle's working method of choosing a personal point of departure and then building a highly aesthetic and emotional atmosphere around it. Her art is simultaneously tender and powerful, uniting seductive formal elements and socially relevant messages. The spare stylization and intimacy of this new body of work invite visitors to bear witness to Searle's soliloquy on strength and solitude. As viewers there are moments where we are made to question if we are intruding on a highly personal moment. Is it real, or is it fantasy? Searle's artistic intention surely lies in the tension of these two possibilities. Viewers do not need to know that Searle is a South African woman to understand her conceptual vernacular as she continues to perform personal and public narratives that make profound contributions to a global feminist discourse. Searle has created a body of work that resonates with each individual's spirit; she has taken us on a journey into the possibility and promise of change found at nightfall.

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Berni Searle, August 2006.  
<sup>2</sup> Liese van der Watt, *Tracing Berni Searle, African Arts*, Volume XXXVII, Number 4, (Winter 2004): 79.  
<sup>3</sup> Colin Richards, *Prima Facie: Surface as Depth in the Work of Penny Siopis in Penny Siopis*, (Goodman Gallery Editions: Johannesburg, 2005), p. 9.

*I would like to thank Berni Searle for her generous assistance with this text. Thank you also to Michael Stevenson, Sophie Perryer, and Thomas Barry for their edits, comments and critiques.*



### Exhibition Checklist

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| 1. <i>Untitled</i> from the <i>Colour Me</i> series<br>1998<br>4 handprinted colour photographs<br>16 1/2 x 19 3/4 inches each<br>Photo credit: Jean Brundrit  | 5. <i>Night Fall</i><br>2006<br>Three-channel video projection<br>DVD format, shot on S16mm film<br>Duration 5 mins 52 secs, sound<br>Camera: Alberto Iannuzzi<br>Assistant camera: Francesco Biagini<br>Sound: Zolani Mahola<br>Co-produced by the Michael Stevenson Gallery                  |
| 2. <i>Lifeline</i> from the <i>Discoloured</i> series<br>1999<br>Installation, 6 digital prints on tracing paper<br>118 1/4 x 36 inches each<br>Photo credit: Jean Brundrit  | 6. <i>Approach</i><br>2006<br>7 Lambda prints<br>34 7/8 x 39 3/8 inches each<br>Photo credit: Jean Brundrit  |
| 3. <i>Home and Away</i><br>2003<br>Two-channel video projection<br>DVD format, shot on S16mm film<br>Duration 6 mins, sound<br>Camera: Alberto Iannuzzi<br>Assistant camera: Emiliano Fiore<br>Commissioned by NMAC<br>Montenmedio Arte Contemporaneo, Vejer de la Frontera, Spain | 7. <i>Alibama</i><br>2006<br>One-channel video projection<br>DVD format, shot on S16mm film<br>Camera: Alberto Iannuzzi<br>Assistant camera: Francesco Biagini<br>Sound: Cape Malay Board's demonstration choir<br>Commissioned by USF Contemporary Art Museum 1 Institute for Research in Art |
| 4. <i>Vapour</i><br>2004<br>One-channel video projection<br>DVD format, shot on S16mm film<br>Duration 4 mins 9 secs, sound<br>Camera: Alberto Iannuzzi<br>Camera assistant: Eran Tahor<br>Co-produced by the Michael Stevenson Gallery  | All works courtesy of the Artist and Michael Stevenson   |