

GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS

ARCHIVE PROJECT

BERNI SEARLE: Heritage & Cultural Identity

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Berni Searle, *Colour Me*, 1998, color photograph, © Berni Searle

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

Biography

The work of Berni Searle is a direct reflection of her life experiences. Born and raised in South Africa in 1964, much of Searle's adolescence was impacted by her experiences with Apartheid and systematic oppression. Throughout her work she utilizes her body as a means for challenging notions regarding conceptions of identity. Due to her own awareness of the sociopolitical implications of her own body, Searle attempts to form her own sense of identity by reclaiming it.

Searle's work corresponds to the complex issue of colonization and the implications it has on her African identity. Her artistic process frequently utilizes traditional spices that reflect the relationship between Africa and the spice trade. In fact, Apartheid was one of the resulting factors of the colonization of Africa. Searle speaks to the resulting impact that colonization has on her multiracial background and experiences with Apartheid. The artist speaks from a place of personal experience with identity but also frequently engages with cultural and political events that reflect notions of self-representation and history.

Though from a sculptural background, most of Searle's practice is lens-based. She frequently utilizes multi-channel videos that are performative in nature. Her photographs also reflect her unique experience with identity through her use of her body in relationship with nature. Searle often utilizes symbolism and the natural world as a means for tackling issues regarded to heritage and oppression. South Africa's complex history becomes a reflection of Searle's struggle with personal identity.

Heritage and Cultural Identity

South African born artist Berni Searle seeks to challenge limited perceptions of identity. Through her lens-based practice she advocates for the idea of self-conception: identity should be self-proclaimed rather than unwittingly accepted. This idea reflects many contemporary theorist's views on concepts of identity and heritage. In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall advocates for a more dynamic and constructed perception of identity. Much of Searle's earlier work retorts a similar claim through her use of symbolic socio-economic materials. Historian David Joselit is in conversation with these ideas due to his advocacy for a reclamation of cultural heritage. He suggests this as a method for combatting the destructive effects of colonialism. In essence, Berni Searle's artistic practice echoes contemporary theorists in its call for a self-constructed view of identity in order to confront the effects of colonization.

Much of the argument surrounding identity is related to its definition. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall defines identity as a, "'production' which is never complete, always in process." (Hall, 222). By this definition, identity is never a completely solidified form that is unable to be altered by an individual. Furthermore, Hall purports that identity should essentialize past and present experiences and heritage in order to fully establish a fuller sense of identity. His text specifically references colonialism when discussing the impact that past cultural history has on identities of the present. Hall uses the Black community as a relevant example of, "the

traumatic character of the colonial experience,” citing that, “black people, black experiences, were positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation were the effect of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization.” (Hall, 225). Essentially, colonization was used as a tool for “othering” any individual of non-European descent, specifically Black people. Therefore, the entirety of Black identity and culture has been reduced by colonization. In order to combat the effects of colonization, the idea of culture as a stagnant and immovable concept must evolve. Identity acknowledges and retains the cultural past but still advances towards the future. This advancement is propelled by the reclamation and reconstruction of one’s own identity.

Identity formation is a major thematic element to Searle’s artistic practice. In 2001 the artist exhibited a two-channel video installation entitled *Snow White*. The piece consisted of two nine minute DVD projections displaying two separate shots of Searle. In one video her naked body is being showered with flour. In the second, water pours over her head as she begins to knead the flour and water into a dough. This installation reflects much of Hall’s argument on self-construction. The flour pouring over Searle’s head becomes representative of an identity and series of perceptions that was placed upon her. At the same time, the artist utilizes the same material to make a secondary form on her own. This piece is representative of Searle’s own struggles with her experiences growing up in South Africa under Apartheid. Searle is challenging the

viewer to both deconstruct and reconstruct their notions regarding race, as evident through symbolism of her own experience.

Perceptions of race are largely based upon ideologies of colonization. David Joselit argues that European colonization suppressed traditional cultural ideologies of the peoples they conquered. In order to re-adjust the effects of colonization, Joselit states that, “the West ‘regains’ its heritage *as a particular* rather than universal set of traditions, while the Global South reasserts its dynamic traditions *as contemporary*.” (Joselit, 141). This would redefine perceptions of non-Western cultures that were often overlooked and demonized for their own traditional histories, beliefs, and shared values. Joselit argues that Eurocentric-Westernized culture should only be recognized as a particular region’s view of culture rather than *the* universal culture. As a result, contemporary artists should, “*re-temporalize* heritage in order to imagine new and more just futures.” (Joselit, 141).

Reconceptualizing the effects of colonization is a prominent tactic in Searle’s early work. In her 1998 photographic series *Colour Me*, Searle used material symbolic to African history and her heritage. Similar to *Snow White*, the series consisted of portraits of the artist covered in various spices. She uses these materials to reference the Dutch East India Trading Company which had a profound influence on the history of South Africa in relation to colonization. The spices hold reference to notions of race, which had a profound effect on the artist’s mixed-racial heritage. The same spices also reflect African ritual body painting, in an exploration of her own African heritage. The

materials themselves are relatively simple but provide a significant symbolic background for interpreting Searle's South African Identity and experience with reclamation.

Berni Searle's artistic practice becomes an exploration of the re-construction of identity. Much in tune with contemporary historians and theorists, like Hall and Joselit, the artist uses visual media to convey her views on identity and heritage. Colonization can only be confronted through a re-association of culture and a reformation of personal identity. Identity is built from the past but continually advances alongside culture; it is always being reconstructed.

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