In 2006 Berni Searle completed Nightfall, an allegorical work that illuminates predicaments faced by wine farm labourers in the Western Cape. Six years later, farm workers in the Hex River Valley and in De Doorns protested in demand of higher wages as well as humane living and working conditions. Initiated by women farm workers, these protests were related to labour tenancy and illegal evictions. They led to the burning of vineyards, and the backlash that saw hundreds of workers arrested. While steering clear of simplistic identity politics, Searle’s penetrating work is ahead of its time as its shows how political commitments can be expressed without conclusive forms of identity.

In Nightfall, Berni collaborated with the musician Zolani Mahola to create a three-part video installation in which Searle lies at the peak of a grape skin mound beneath a funnel that decants the deep red and mauve grape residuum. Her foetal-positioned body is submerged in the cascade of grape skins but appears as though she is being exhumed. In another part of the work she walks down the mound and falls down the slope. Shot on a farm in Stellenbosch, this work artfully reveals the persistent crudely exploitative labour and power relations forged in the 19th century where farm workers were paid in wine by farm owners. Known as the tot or “dop” system, this led to inter-generational cultural and biological decay of “indigene” farm labourers in greater Cape Town. Searle’s descent on the grape mound does not only refer to falling but also to very complex genealogies.

Cape Town “indigenes” are descendants of the pastoralist Khoe, San and Xhosa. The arrival of English and Dutch settlers, French Huguenots in the seventeenth century, as well as slaves who were imported from Madagascar, West and East Africa, India, Indonesia, and German immigrants in the eighteenth century has generated an intricate socio-political history in Cape Town. The offspring of Europeans and slaves, who were then referred to as Afrikaners or more recently contested terms such as “Cape coloureds” and “Cape Malays”, were highly sought after slaves. They make up a majority of labourers on wine farms. Searle applies questions and rejects the term “coloured” since it is an Apartheid classification that constructs a hierarchy where “white” is superior and “black” is inferior. The unchanging segregated spatial design of Apartheid, by and large still in place, has kept “coloured” townships and “black” townships as distinctly separate. This is more evident in Cape Town than in other towns and cities in the country.

For Searle, these classifications are not only obsolete and divisive but also absurd. Using spices such as turmeric, paprika and ground cloves in her Colour Me (1998) photographic series, Searle transposes the racial classifications of 1948-1994 Apartheid South Africa with their latent colonial geneses. The spice trade and the finding of trade routes via the Cape of Good Hope established European economic ascendancy and domination. International trade of commodities such as spices and slave labour ushered colonial conquest. Searle cynically presents not only the spice but the body as commodity. In these works, the spice is like another layer of skin and parodies the concept of skin “colour”. The yellow of turmeric (light-skinned mixed-race or Chinese), red paprika (Amerindian), brown ground cloves (Malay or African) and white pea flour (Caucasian) is a satire of racial colour terminology and scientific racism. Encompassing expressions such as “people of colour” which refer to anyone who is not “white” reveal the weight of racial degradation. The spice that encrusts Searle’s mouth alludes to the use of language, derogatory words and naming to degrade.

Searle’s horizontal position in Colour Me (1998) recurs in her recent series, Into the Dark (2014). Here she again delves into that devastating blow to the South African body politic: Marikana. In one of the images in this series, Searle’s body is coated in coal dust while gold Kruger Rand coins seal her eyes, while in another image, called In wake of, the coins are held loosely in her hand, the position of the body alluding to a body lying in wake. The gold coins are a poignant metaphor for the inequities caused by the pursuit of mineral commodities, which has been at the epicentre of the migrant labour system and its attendant racial, gender and class segregations including the erasure of family and community structures for African workers. The obscene wealth generated by gold, diamond and platinum mining in South Africa is also symbolized in the dead bodies of workers. Again, it is not only gold or coal that

In wake of
PHOTOGRAPHY IN WAKE OF 2014 IMAGE FROM THE “INTO THE DARK” SERIES
is presented as a commodity but also the body as a unit of labour. Preceding the 2012 wine farm protests, platinum miners workers at Lonmin in the Marikana area went on a strike that resulted in the death of over thirty people. Almost all the miners were shot at close range by the police as they fled from the hilltop gathering place.

Searle’s linkage of the death of mine workers in protest with those who die underground also reminds us of the women who joined the predominantly male mine labour force. Women, who often endure atrocious working conditions in the mines, have organized effectively during the platinum protests. Led by Primrose Sonti of Sikhala Sonke, the women of Marikana, who are widows of miners and some are mineworkers themselves, have been significant in fighting for the rights of workers. The Marikana Commission of Inquiry led by Judge Ian Farlam was mandated to investigate the massacre. The recently released commission report was not well received by members of Sikhala Sonke who felt that many people who were complicit in the shootings, such as the Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, also a shareholder in Lonmin mines, were not held accountable.

Searle’s work spans across different experiences of dispossession, discrimination and trauma as witnessed by the Afrophobic violence that erupted in 2008 and the more recent spate of attacks on foreigners from other parts of Africa. Giving voice to the frustration and shame of these brutal attacks, Searle produced a double channel video work called Mute (2008), in which she filmed herself in relation to the remnants of an attack on the opposite screen. Events such as these often opportunistically rears its head in ongoing and escalating service delivery protests. The recent surge in these protests in South Africa is often met with police violence.

There is a rising sense of discontentment as people confined to townships face a barrage of problems from lack of housing and sanitation to constant power outages, non-existent roads, drainage systems, shack fires and pollution. The different forms of exhibiting anger about inequality, alienation and dispossession now threaten the ‘normality’ of bourgeois territorialisation such as private and public spaces. In anger and desperation, protesters burn down facilities (buses, libraries, houses of councillors, municipal offices, etc.). Fire is ever-present in South African protests.

Berni Searle’s Black Smoke Rising trilogy (2009, 2010) captures these stubborn social reproduction issues that result from Apartheid segregationist spatial design, post-Apartheid neoliberal policies and the ongoing efforts to segregate the rich from the poor. Lull (2009), Gateway (2010) and Moonlight (2010) make up the heart-rending trilogy in which fire is a powerful symbol of social imbalance and struggle.

In Lull (2009), Searle juxtaposes the burning tyre that epitomizes the “necklace” during apartheid as well as recent service delivery protests in township areas with tranquil rolling lush lawns and gardens that are typical of leafy suburbs. Similarly in Gateway (2010), Searle shows a typical Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) house burning as though it were cardboard. The Reconstruction and Development Programme is aimed at addressing economic imbalances created by apartheid. However, neoliberalism and various forms of clientilism lead to houses being built out of cheap materials and houses being illegally sold, which have often become a source of conflict. The N2 Gateway housing project was implemented in 2009 and has been criticised for destruction of shacks and evictions. In January 2005, a shack fire ravaged the Joe Slovo settlement. This was the land upon which new rental units, commonly referred to as RDP houses would be built. The demand for high rentals led to a rent boycott. In Searle’s work, the government RDP house, constructed with cheap materials, appears as precarious as a shack constructed with cardboard, corrugated iron and other found material. Moonlight (2010) is a mournful conclusion to the trilogy. The melancholy of a scorched landscape on which young men drag burning tyres dissolves into murky blue mountainscape from which black smoke rises. In this video, the loss of a place of belonging, of a sense of direction, a sense of community consumed by the fire is felt.

Very few artists, if any, have managed to capture the wide-ranging predicaments of the stalled transition of the post-1994 political settlement in South Africa. Searle’s oeuvre is both thought-provoking and unsettling. Her work necessitates looking beyond the surface. If the surface of skin obscures the depth of personhood, then we are left to ponder how it is inscribed with social imaginings. If the surface of the landscape yields and does not give stable ground, then the ways in which we conceptualise notions of home, foreignness, belonging and migration have depth as incomprehensible as the depth of the sea. Searle’s work reflects the inexplicable entanglements that make it hard to be complacent about the injustices and deep-rooted prejudices that keep re-surfacing.
LULL

VIDEO FROM THE 'BLACK SMOKE RISING' SERIES | 2009 | HD VIDEO PROJECTION, SINGLE CHANNEL | 7 MIN 33 SECS
GATEWAY

Video: From the "Black Smoke Rising" Series | 2010 | HD video projection, single channel | 4 min
MOONLIGHT

VIDEO FROM THE 'BLACK SMOKE RISING' SERIES | 2010 | HD VIDEO PROJECTION, SINGLE CHANNEL | 5 MIN 33 SECS
SEEKING REFUGE
2008 | SD DIGITAL VIDEO PROJECTION | SINGLE CHANNEL PROJECTION | 5 MIN 26 SECS
Engagement and dialogue between distinguished individuals who represent a wide set of perspectives, approaches to work, and disciplines has long been the hallmark of The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center resident experience. For decades, the Center has hosted a unique residency program for artists, scholars, scientists, composers, and writers to live in residence, produce new work, and benefit from rich cross-disciplinary exchange.

From 2009-2015, to increase the capacity for outreach to accomplished artists around the world, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center established the Creative Arts Fellows program. The program brought more than twenty acclaimed artists from across the globe to Bellagio, nominated by an advisory panel of leading international curators, for extended residencies to develop projects inspired by or related to social or global issues.

Having ended the Creative Arts Program, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center remains committed to bringing in renowned international artists, and now works with regional and international arts outreach partners to attract top artists to the program. For more information about the Bellagio Center, please visit [http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/bellagio-center](http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/bellagio-center).