

# BERNI SEARLE

Born Cape Town. 1964. Lives and works in Cape Town.

**Selected solo exhibitions:** 2004, City of London Festival invited artist, Royal Exchange Building, Museum of London, Docklands Museum, London; 2004, *Vapour*, Michael Stevenson Contemporary, Cape Town; 2003/4, *Float*, Standard Bank Young Artist Award, Monument Gallery, Grahamstown, and other venues (national touring exhibition); 2003, *A Matter of Time*, UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, USA; 2001, *Still*, Axis Gallery, New York.

**Selected group exhibitions:** 2004, *Hang In There, My Dear Geum-Sun*, Busan Biennale, Busan Metropolitan Art Museum, Seoul, Korea; 2004, *Artes Mundi*, National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff; 2004, *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, Cathedral of St John the Divine and Museum for African Art, New York; 2003, *NMAC Montenedio Arte Contemporaneo*, Vejer de la Frontera, Spain; 2001, *Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa in and out of Africa*, 49th Venice Biennale, Venice.

**Selected publications:** 2004, Liese van der Watt, 'Shifting the Self, Contesting the Body: The art of Berni Searle' in *Artes Mundi* award catalogue; 2003, Annie Coombes, 'New Subjectivities for the New Nation' in *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Duke University Press); 2003, Rory Bester, 'Floating Free' in Berni Searle, Standard Bank Young Artist Award catalogue; 2001, Desiree Lewis, 'The Conceptual work of Berni Searle' in *Agenda*, October; 2001, Barbara Pollock, 'The New Look of Feminism' in *ARTnews*, September.

To refer to Berni Searle's "body of work" over the past number of years is to mean it literally: because at the centre of most of what Searle produces is the presence and interrogation of her own body, which forms the basis of her work. From her *Colour Me* series (1998-9) through to *Vapour* (2004), her body, whether present or absent, naked or clothed, engaged in work or simply floating, is the subject. And whether in direct reference to herself, or as signifier of other histories, she engages the concept of identity as being often elusive and in flux.

Using her body as visual reference, Searle's earlier work explored various aspects of identity politics in South Africa: in her *Colour Me* series, interrogating the term "coloured" – she is of mixed racial heritage – by covering her body in variously coloured spices, visually morphing her status along an implied colour bar. In her *Discoloured* series (1999-2000) Searle used Egyptian henna to stain vulnerable zones of her body, invoking a sense of subcutaneous bruising; in *Snow White* (2001) she is seen involved in a type of ritual act, her body dusted white with flour which she combines progressively with water to make dough; and more recently, in *A Matter of Time* (2003), she appears battling what seems an invisible boundary, precariously trying to negotiate her way forward on a sheet of glass covered in olive oil. Although the use of domestic ingredients in each of these instances may be read as references to Searle's cultural heritage, they simultaneously challenge the notion that identity is solely determined by those interlinking factors of heritage and history. Also, to analyse only the racial aspects of Searle's work would be to overlook many a subtle nuance. For Searle's work is as much about individual agency as it is a reflection on historical circumstance, whether of race, gender or economics. There is nothing passive in what she portrays, or in how she chooses to have herself be viewed in these works.

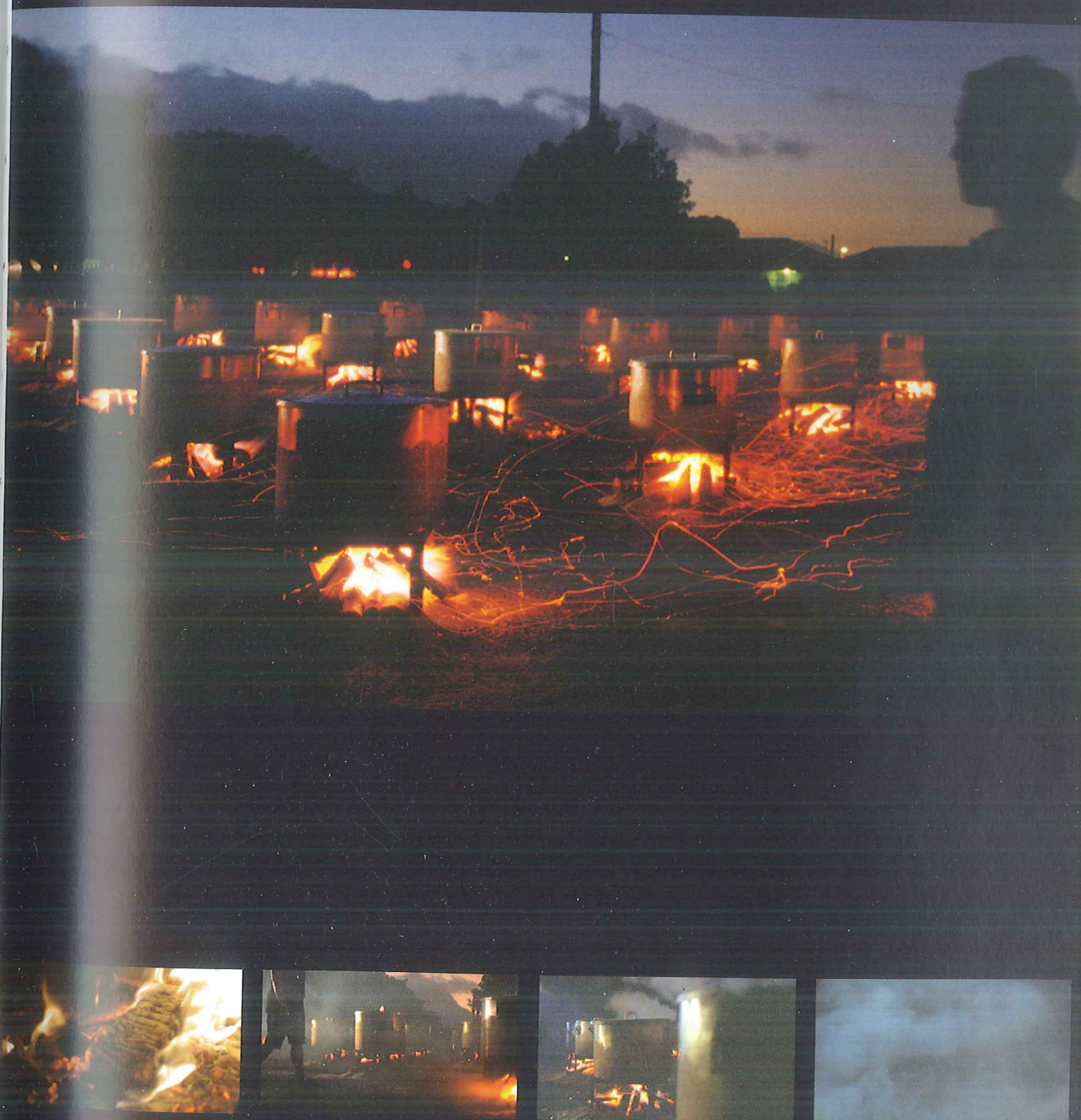
Searle's most recent video and photographic works are a lot more open-ended in their declarations. In *Home and Away* (2003), Searle is filmed floating in the expanse and flux of the Mediterranean sea near the Straits of Gibraltar, invoking centuries of movement between Morocco and Spain, including the dangerous journey made by African emigrants in search of a better life on European shores. Dressed in layers of flowing black, red and white cloth, she casts an uneasy Ophelia-like image: first seemingly passive, heavy with fabric, the tension shifts as a gradual stream of ominous black substance in the water – a reference to the ink that squids eject when sensing danger – has her struggle to move away to safety, a sustained physical exertion that echoes *A Matter of Time*'s vulnerable movement forward in the face of possible defeat.

*Vapour* (2004), Searle's most recent work, proceeds by referencing the Muslim celebration of Eid in which large pots of food are used to feed masses of people. Her re-enactment of the scene, however, at night, with pots full of boiling water rather than food, placed over individual fires, with shadowy figures (including her own) occasionally weaving between them, resists the identification of the ritual with a specific social context. There is an underlying agitation that runs through this work: the night setting, the burning fires, the pressure of steam building in the pots that threaten to blow – all adding a surrealistic quality to the video and photographs, and seemingly contradicting the symbolic nourishment that the ritual would customarily depict.

The subject matter of Searle's production is not a static domain. Her work might well pose pointed questions around a number of themes, but the ambiguities and contradictions that she insists upon repeatedly disrupt any sense of certainty and assumption that a viewer might have of who she is and what she's purporting to tell us. This fluidity ensures that her work resists categorisation and in so doing suggests a more complicated understanding of reality than anything we can capture and seek to represent.

/ SHARLENE KHAN

Facing page, top *Half Light*, 2004, lambda print, 173 x 360cm, edition 3 + 1A/P. Photo: Jean Brundrit; bottom series *Vapour*, 2004, video stills, single DVD projection shot on S16mm film, 4 min 9 sec, edition 5 + 1A/P



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*undi*, National Museum  
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or African Art, New York;  
*medio Arte*  
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*ntric: Africa in and out of*  
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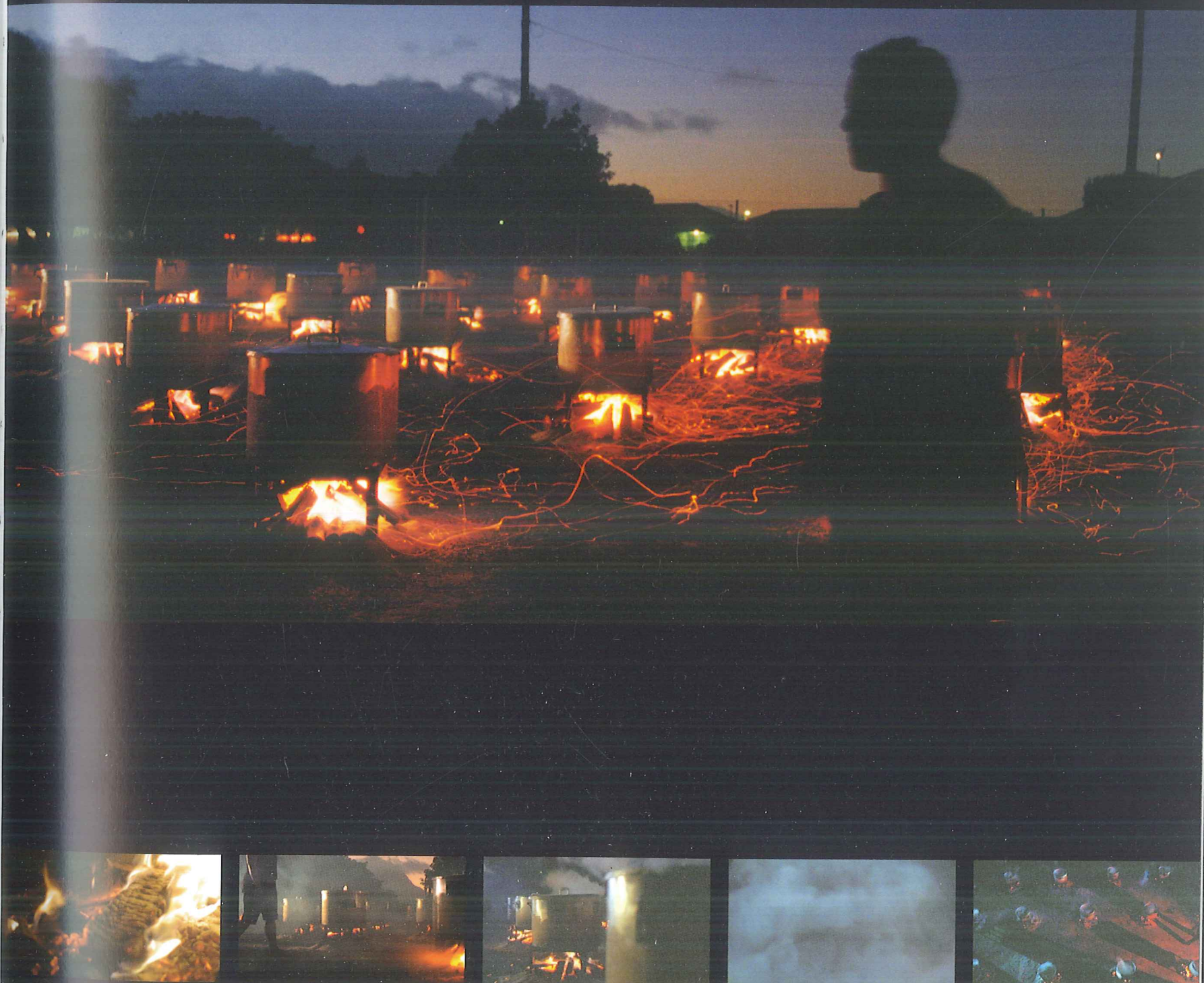
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