

Black smoke rising: Under the influence of ...

Berni Searle's video 'Lull'

Sharlene Khan
9–11 minutes

In our regular series, “[Under the influence](#)”, we ask experts to share what they believe are the most influential works of art or artists in their field. Here academic and artist Sharlene Khan, explains why she finds Berni Searle’s video “Lull”, a hugely influential work.

The video “Lull” (2009), from the “[Black Smoke Rising](#)” series, opens up with a “garden scene”. In the middle of the frame, a person with her back to us – presumably the artist [Berni Searle](#), herself – quietly and gently swings on a cut tyre that has been strung up for such a purpose.

‘Lull’ from Berni Searle’s ‘Black Smoke Rising’ series.

She faces the trees and body of water in front of her, humming, lulling us into the serenity that is on offer to our gaze. Words such as “idyllic” and “picturesque” come to mind, as does [Jean-Honoré Fragonard](#)’s 1767 painting entitled “[The Swing](#)”, which exemplifies the frivolity of the [Rococo art movement](#).

In it we see a young rosy-cheeked maiden being pushed high into the air on a swing by an older gentleman. The setting is a beautiful garden with statues of cherubs. The woman’s excitement is uncontainable. It leads to an abandon of proper conduct as there is a suggestion that we could get a little peek under her ample dress and petticoat. As does the young gentleman lurking in the garden below, and we can perhaps guess that it is not so much the swing that has set her aflush as the little peekaboo game she and her lover are playing.



Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s ‘The Swing’, 1767.

Searle’s video, however, has none of this romance. A minute into the video the artist disappears from the swing, her humming eerily continues for a short while after she has gone, and reappears at the water’s edge to the left of the screen as if she is now part of the picturesque.

Moments later, her empty seat – what use is a swing if it’s not doing that? – fades away only to be replaced by the violent swinging into frame of a full tyre on fire. What was initially a scene of quiet contemplation, as we visually consumed both Searle and nature, has turned into a setting of seemingly unprovoked violence.

The buzz of insects, the call of geese and the endless noises we associate with the quiet of nature is overcome by the crackling of the fire emanating black smoke. The artist continues to stand apart from this violence, seemingly unaware, unaffected, back still to the threat behind her.

For the rest of the video, the tyre rests in the middle of frame being consumed by the flames. Curiously, even though the tyre eventually falls out of frame, clouds of black smoke emanate from somewhere outside the frame of our vision, the mechanised eye of the camera is shaken and we become aware that like Searle, there is a fire threatening us from behind while we've been watching this scene.

Landscape art as veneers of violence

The picturesque and the idyllic as represented in landscape art, as art historian [W.J.T. Mitchell](#) and cultural geographer [John Wylie](#) remind us, are veneers which hide scenes of grotesque violence and inequalities. Both theorists posit the concept that "landscape" is not just simply a physical entity "out there", but is a construction of gazing and consuming that human beings have developed in relation to "nature".

It is as an ideological construct of power which frames nature in very particular ways and for specific reasons. As people dependent for our survival on land, our cosmologies and spiritual practices teem with ways in which to appease the land to our favour. As we became industrialised, we could hide our anxieties of not being in complete control of nature by, in fact, seeming to control nature through borders we erect, through pretty gardens, through landscaping. Western fine art, as well as Chinese and Japanese landscape art, is filled with scenes in which "man" escapes from the hassles of his society back into nature, that one finds oneself in relation to/within nature.

As European nations developed their modern sense of nationalist pride, they did this against their colonial exploitation of lands in other spaces – scenes of a quiet pastoral England, Italy, Belgium or France were set against the primitive or exotic "elsewhere" where natives and nature were in harmony (and available for conquest). That is unless said natives were shown naughtily killing each other awaiting colonial rule to restore order to their chaos.

Nature was chaotic, as were those deemed closest to them: natives, women, homosexuals. When nature was unruly in Europe, it was only to fulfil the need for the sublime – the excess of Self – that always lurked within the reasoning man, that frightened and enchanted him and made his pulse run, so that he was always in search of it, even as he sought to dominate it.

Gardens have a long history in many cultures. They could be places of contemplation and self-reflection. Gardens could have streams which meant when one crossed over them, one was cleansed spiritually. They were sites of prestige in which the wild could be shown to be controllable; in smaller households they were a sign of stature, of a rising class level. Colonial gardens abroad were a sign of their administrative order and cultural values.

Hidden underneath painting codes are the violence and bloodshed of colonial exploitation done in the names of foreign kings and queens. Like a family album and photos of tourist trips, where everyone smiles and nobody can tell the irritations, abuse and pathologies that may lurk behind the photographic surface.

Why is Searle's work still relevant?

Searle's work is a daunting reminder of this. She violates the image through the burning tyre. For South Africans, the burning tyre is a strong reminder of a very recent past. A past that is always threatening to engulf the country: the burning tyre of the townships shown on the state broadcaster's, the SAUK's, news as South Africans were told their defence force was again trying to restore order to townships on fire.



‘Water’s Edge III’ (2009), a print from Berni Searle’s ‘Black Smoke Rising’ series. From <http://bernisearle.com/>

In more recent years, it is the SABC (what the SAUK has morphed into) telling the country how its police service is trying to bring peace to disgruntled township residents. Amid the pretty rhetoric that is South African tourism and former president Thabo Mbeki’s “African Renaissance” [speech](#) (“I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land”), there are tyres burning. Their black swirls reaching high into the sky right in front of Rhodes University’s Drama Department in Grahamstown.

Authoritarian backs straighten. The colonial imagination is invoked – if they could do that to a tyre, then they could do that to a white body. The tyre burns until only a ring of blackness marks a scene of signification, of seasons of discontent.

Arson attacks

Two weeks ago I arrive to invigilate an exam under stressful circumstances. In ensuring that exams continue regardless of student protests for free higher education, the Academic Registrar has decided that the building which seats 400 students will be locked and surrounded by private security and police in light of three different arson attacks. I make sure the fire exit doors are functioning only to discover that the alley into which both doors lead is closed off by high gates and locked from the outside.

In response to my disbelief against the blatant violation of fire regulations, I am told the guards posted outside the gates will hold keys. I leave the exam in protest and report the matter to the local Fire Chief. When he arrives he has the locks cut off the gates. Despite repeated emails to the university, the Registrar refuses to acknowledge emails calling for proper safety regulations.

I am reminded of the film [“The Reader”](#), where Kate Winslet portrays a Nazi official who is brought to trial many years later for her part in an event where Jews were locked in a building and it burnt down with all the occupants inside. When asked why she had not opened the doors when she realised that the place was burning, Winslet’s character uncomprehendingly answers that there would have been chaos. I am reminded of such Nazi reasoning and illusions of order and rationality when empathy no longer resides in us, when fear rules.

Rhodes is no exception though. It doesn’t take a philosopher to understand that as many liberal ears close to the cries of the majority of people unable to progress in post-apartheid South Africa, our country will burn physically and metaphorically. [“Hunger Games”](#) fictional character Katniss Everdeen’s words to dictator President Snow might be worth hearkening to: “Fire is catching! And if we burn, you burn with us.”