

art | southafrica

VOLO 7 | ISSUE 02 | SUMMER 2008

Bring Me My Machine Gun!



z is for ZUMA

B
DELL ROBERTS

ZAR 80 VAT INCLUSIVE



Berni Searle

MICHAEL STEVENSON | *Cape Town*



The four video projections and the series of photographic prints that made up Berni Searle's solo exhibition at Michael Stevenson explore the theme of emotional and unstable geographies, both in terms of the environment and the geopolitics of global wandering. Poetic and enigmatic, yet with haunting propinquity, the works link very local histories to global experiences of movement through representations of swirling or inhospitable landscapes and beautiful seascapes that hint at the underbelly of marine travel: slavery and conquest. In the beautifully subtle single-channel video projection *Alibama* (2008), the viewer hears the well-known Cape Malay choir song "Daar Kom Die Alibama" as the camera pans across Table Bay and Signal Hill. The artist is shown tenderly teaching her young son the lyrics to this song, but the view of Robben Island and the black streamers that blow in the wind are foreboding, suggesting a darkness that is also registered in a change of music. In a dream-like sequence, the streamers – usually associated with celebration – fall into the water, and the black dye bleeds into the ocean, staining the pristine seascape. A small, red paper boat, suggestive of childhood innocence, drifts in murky, ominous waters. The song "Daar Kom Die Alibama" is believed to have been

composed by members of the Cape Malay community who witnessed the docking of the American Confederate ship, the *Alabama*, in 1863. Although this caused local excitement (for purportedly Captain Semmes threw a large party on the beach), the *Alabama* was linked to commercial raiding and the sinking of over sixty ships. While the sighting of the ship was celebrated in song, the American *Alabama* and the British colony's sympathy towards the Confederate cause allude to the Cape's own history of invasion and incarceration. Visually, the video *Alibama* aptly captures the stark contradiction of Cape Town – a place of breathtaking beauty with a grim past. Similarly, *Seeking Refuge* (2008) subtly references a geography that is metaphorically marked by conquest. This video was filmed on Lanzarote Island, which is part of the Spanish archipelago known as the Canary Islands and was inhabited by people thought to share a common origin with North African Berbers. The Castilian invasion of the islands was, in many ways, a precursor to the conquest of the "New World" and this history of destruction appears to be inscribed on the landscape, which consists of barren expanses of volcanic rock. Searle walks across this lonely landscape with blood red stains on her feet, her only protection being a black headscarf that she either wraps around her or holds up to the wind like a sail. In the print titled *Flight* (from the *Seeking Refuge* series) the scarf flaps in the wind, but it is unclear whether the title suggests a desperate flight away from harm, or a liberating flight to a new home. In the print *Voyage*, Searle curls up in a grounded boat and in *Enclose* she finds sanctuary under her scarf that forms a tent-like structure, alluding to the makeshift shelter of a refugee camp. The harshness of the environment emphasises the fragility of her protection and the pervasiveness of unstable geographies. Such unsteadiness is pushed further in the video installation *Day for Night*, which runs across four screens that completely surround the viewer. The work was filmed at the Obrestad lighthouse in Norway as part of the *On the Edge* project, which commissioned a number of artists to engage with the gap between what lighthouses used to be and what they may yet become. (Some lighthouses, for example, are decommissioned and serve as museums or heritage sites). Caught, as it were, in the middle of the lighthouse bulb, the landscape swirls around the viewer rather than the light – a symbol of safety and protection – circling around to signify the meeting point of land and water. With dizzying effect the spinning landscape turns upside down from time to time, destabilising cardinal notions of up and down, day and night, or right and left, confusing important differentiations between safety and danger. In all of these works the artist poignantly places the viewer at a precipice, where the potential danger of slipping from a state of security into a state of harm is ever-present. The formal beauty and sophistication of these works highlight the subtlety with which harm can sneak up on one, pushing stability over the edge.

Ruth Simbao is Senior Lecturer in African art history and visual culture at Rhodes University

top – bottom
Berni Searle, *Alibama*,
2008, single-channel
video projection, shot on
HD, duration 6 mins 20
secs, colour, sound
Berni Searle, *Looking
Back from the Seeking
Refuge* series, 2008,
archival pigment ink on
cotton rag paper,
102 x 144cm
Photographer:
Tony Meintjes
Courtesy artist and
Michael Stevenson