

Spicing South Africa: Exploring the Role of Food and Spices in Berni Searle's Conceptual Art

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Summary

This article examines the role of food and spices in the conceptual art of the South African artist Berni Searle. It focuses on the visual representation of food, spices and culinary traditions through the exploration of her series "Colour Me", which includes photographic installations: "Traces" (1999), "Looking Back" (1999), "Girl" (1999), along with her video installation "Snow White". All these pieces reference in differing ways food, spices or the traditions tied to them. Searle also uses gastronomic imagery to comment on topics such as slavery. As is evident from her work, food and spices are not necessarily associated with the preparation of food.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die rol van voedsel en speserye in die konsepsuele kunswerke van die Suid-Afrikaanse kunstenaar Berni Searle. Die klem val op die visuele voorstelling van voedsel, speserye en die kookkunstradisies deur middel van 'n verkenning van haar reeks "Colour Me", wat ook fotografiese installasies insluit: "Traces" (1999), "Looking Back" (1999), "Girl" (1999), en die video-installasie "Snow White". Al hierdie stukke verwys op verskillende wyses na voedsel, speserye of die tradisie wat daaraan gekoppel word. Searle maak ook gebruik van gastronomiese beelde om kommentaar te lewer op slawerny, en soos duidelik blyk uit haar werk word voedsel en speserye nie noodwendig geassosieer met die bereiding van voedsel nie.

Berni Searle, Cape Town-based conceptual artist, offers unique and thought-provoking insights into the complex arena of identity politics through her unique uses of, and reference to, food. Classified as "Coloured" during apartheid, Searle offers a sustained engagement with the implications of this imposed categorisation. Titles such as "Colour Me" and "Dis-coloured" flag this specific engagement with racial taxonomies, but this theme by no means overdetermines her oeuvre. The insertion of her naked body, the creative use of spices and the engagement with invisibility grant

her work a nuanced depth and semiotic richness. The use of spices ensures that her work has simultaneous synchronic as well as diachronic qualities, which allow her to explore the colonial history of South Africa. The insertion of her body allows her to look at the effect of grand narratives on the personal body. By working within the genre of conceptual art, Searle questions the means of representation and its historical implications as well as unsettling stagnant identity markers.

This article focuses on the visual representation of food, spices and culinary traditions through the exploration of her series “Colour Me” which includes photographic installations: “Traces” (1999), “Looking Back” (1999), “Girl” (1999), along with her video installation “Snow White”. All these pieces reference food, spices or the traditions tied to them and are subsequently discussed in detail.

Although originally a trained sculptor, Searle predominantly works with the contemporary medium of photography and video installations. She states that she shifted to photography because

[w]ant[ing] to work in a more immediate and less time-consuming way ... photography offered a wide range of options that could be generated in a relatively short space of time. The digital process also presented a number of options in terms of the range of media that the images could be printed on and how they could be displayed in installations.

(Searle in Bester 2003: 7)

The transition to a less fixed and time-consuming medium gives Searle’s art an interesting transitory and malleable nature. The importance of having options when having to exhibit her work seems to address a significant theme in her work as she notes:

I am very aware of not wanting to represent myself in a way that is static. I think that the work itself exists as a result of a creative process as well. And often my processes attempt to convey something about the intangibility or flexibility and a state of flux which is central to my view of occupying multiple identities which are constantly changing.

(Searle in Brodie, Enwezor, Murinik & van der Watt 2004: 20)

Photography allows her work to be exhibited on multiple platforms which render gallery walls porous, and allow art to become accessible to a wider audience. This mimics her insistence that the subject is not to be seen as fixed and immovable.

Searle does, however, make an effort to inform the viewer that although her pieces are performative as they evoke “movement and indeterminacy” they are not to be regarded as performance art. She chooses the lens as a means of mediating the performative aspect of her work in order to not be “directly consumed or exoticised” (Bester 2003: 1).

The phrasing is most suggestive in the context of this study as it registers the possibility of consumption through sight. The symbolic ingesting, digesting and assimilation of her figure is something that Searle actively works against. The gaze becomes something that objectifies. Concurrently she is cognisant of the history of the black female body and the extent to which it has been caught up in the discourse of the exotic. Thus the camera, although giving immediacy and movement to her work, mediates the experience so that she cannot be directly consumed. This concern highlights her awareness of the historical power of the gaze that can both colonise and objectify.

The “Colour Me” series comprises a collection of visually evocative pieces completed between 1997 and 2000. All these photographic installations foreground the artist’s body either covered in or traced by spices. This work ultimately signals the beginning of her sustained engagement with domestic/everyday materials such as spices, olive oil and dough. The selection, carrying the same title as the series, sees the artist lying naked on her back, her body covered in paprika, turmeric, ground cloves and pea flower respectively. These spices cover her face, neck and breasts unevenly with significant amounts gathered beside her face. The images are taken in profile and are cropped irregularly, sometimes including more of her torso, other times focusing solely on the face. This prone body is then set against a stark white backdrop, which creates a visually striking composition reminiscent of colonial-era anthropological representations. The composition and angle of the camera along with the supine position she adopts, allow for an intimate distance between viewer and object/subject giving the work a personal and vulnerable feel.

The title “Colour Me” implicitly references the apartheid era’s imposition of racial nomenclature, the word “colour” alluding to the “coloured” racial category. Searle reveals her unease around the pseudo-scientific racial classification of the group “coloured” when she notes:

I use the term with reservation, as a way of indicating a resistance to the imposed hierarchical racial classifications under apartheid. Interestingly enough, there are tendencies by various groupings in post-apartheid politics, particularly in the Western Cape, to claim the term coloured in reference to an ethnic minority which I find problematic. Apart from many concerns, one of the problems within this “ethnic minority” framework, is that identity is often viewed in static terms which reinforce stereotypes about who we are.

(Coombes 2003: 250)

This reluctance to be identified in static terms is a theme that manifests in a number of her works. She seems to be in favour of articulating a multitude of possible overlapping identities. This multiplicity of positioning is important since the colonial and apartheid systems both worked to reify categories such as “coloured” and “native”. These terms according to

Zimitri Erasmus are but signifiers that relate arbitrarily to an erroneously perceived homogenous entity/group/skin colour. She goes on to note that “once subaltern subjects were categorised according to the Population Registration Act under certain signifiers, the state treated its own signifiers as real – i.e unproblematically linked to an ‘essence’.... Soon enough the Apartheid social formation made it difficult to separate world from text” (Erasmus 2001: 73). Searle then attempts to rework these stagnant categories from a post-apartheid context, opting to see the subject as entangled in a multitude of subject positions.

The address in the title “Colour Me” could be read as Searle enticing someone other than herself to define and classify her, which in turn renders her passive in this process. This passivity of the subject in the process of naming/colouring someone emphasises its constructed nature, alerting one to the fact that this category is not something inherent but rather imposed. Thus she draws attention to the imposition of meaning onto one’s skin colour. This might lead one to read the spices covering her body as suffocating and oppressive as they, in some instances, completely cover her mouth. The spices could be read as overdetermining her, they pin her in a certain fixed position.

Simultaneously, these spices suggest multiple entanglements and trajectories that converge on the body. Paprika, which is made out of dried-out and pulverised chillies, has its origins in South American soil. Turmeric, viewed as the poor man’s saffron, was harvested mainly in South Asia along with ground cloves which has its origins in Indonesia. Pea flower is said to have originated in the Mediterranean basin. These spices covering her body could also suggest alternative allegiances and connections that go beyond the imposed national narrative. These thus trace familiar slave routes but also attest to the entangling of different places connected through historic oceanic passages.

The historical trajectory of “Colour Me”, therefore, seems to reach back further than the apartheid era. The use of spices indexes South Africa’s position as a significant node in the networks of the 16th- to 17th-century spice trade. The spice trade and the subsequent establishment of a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope irrevocably influenced life at the Cape. Along with the spice trade the slave trade developed, and “between 1652 and 1808, when the slave trade stopped, approximately 63 000 slaves were imported. In all, 26.4% of the colony’s slaves were from Africa, 25.1% from Madagascar and 25.9% were brought from India and 22.7% from Indonesia” (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 53). These slaves influenced not only the demographics of the Cape but also the language, architecture and ultimately the cuisine. According to Baderoon, “[c]ooking and other domestic work was the most common reason for keeping slaves; in the 1820’s and 1830’s two thirds of the approximately six thousand slaves in the Cape performed domestic work” (Baderoon 2009: 101). Thus the

proximity of Searle's body to the spices seems to play on the historical proximity of the slave body to spice, as well as the production of food. The spice-covered body thus plays with the historical commodification of the "othered" body through the act of slavery.

The evocative images included in the series "Colour Me" on one level become meditations on the literal and figurative processes of consumption through slavery. Francois Vergés elaborates on the stereotypes of slavery and consumption by referring to an anecdote:

A European travelling in Mozambique asked a group of slaves waiting to be taken aboard a slave ship what they thought awaited them. The slave said: "They bought us and they are taking us to the ship so they can eat us." The European asked them why they thought the whites would eat them and they answered: "Why would they hide us below the deck? This is where they cook us" Being a slave was to be eaten as a human being below the deck and to be rejected as a thing on the shore of the colony.

(Vergés 2006: 251)

Thus the gastronomic metaphors used to explain slavery seem to manifest in Searle's work through the convergence of spices on the body. The immediate proximity of the commodity, in the form of spice, to the body becomes suggestive of the female body historically seen as something which could be bartered with: its value fixed by someone other than the self.

These spices register history on a large scale, but also references Searle's personal ancestry:

[My] great-grandfather from Mauritius was a cook and I have indirectly experienced his expertise through the food that my mother cooks, pointing to food as cultural signifier. Apart from my physical features very little connects me to this heritage, one of the tentative aspects being food.

(Gqola 2005: 128)

Searle manages to map both broader historical narratives intermingled with her personal history and ancestry on her body. The personal and the public seem to seep into each other. The body becomes the site upon which these narratives play themselves out.

These spices in conjunction with referencing the slave trade seem to be meditations on the structures that govern visibility of the black female body. The colourful spices make of her a visual hyperbole of sorts. Her visibility is exaggerated and emphasised, even to a certain degree obscured through the medium of spices. Thus this visibility becomes ambiguous and mediated, much in the same way as the picturesque dictated the visibility of the "Malay" figure. Baderoon astutely notes that "[r]epeating the trope of abundant spices famously associated with Muslim cooking by Leipoldt, the silent object of the gaze insistently renders observable the mechanisms of visibility and its connection to the past" (Baderoon 2006: 101). Searle lays bare

the way in which stereotypes around food and the use of spices have formed a visual lexicon around the figure of the “Malay”. Thus rather poetically the spices simultaneously register the outline of her body but also erase parts of it. The cracks and crevices of her skin, personal pigmentation, scars and wrinkles are smoothed over and disguised by the invasive, powdery substance. In some of the images her mouth is also completely covered by the spices. Concurrently, the hues of the spices mark her and make her visible. Searle seems to be aware of the dangers of representation, and the ways in which visibility seems to arrest meaning.

The installation, “Girl”, broadly follows the same composition as “Colour Me”, except that we now see the artist’s whole body, which is spliced into different frames. The title, “Girl”, seems contradictory as the images are clearly of an adult female. The term, however, could denote the way in which during apartheid black men or women were often infantilised in order to emphasise their inferiority. The frames do not split Searle’s body evenly; some parts spill over into other frames haphazardly. Each frame contains a collection of vials, filled with differing amounts of spices, arranged on the top frame of the photograph. “Girl” addresses Searle’s continuous interrogation of imposed stagnant categories/ideologies/discourses, which seem to mediate and impede one’s understanding of oneself and the other. Her body cannot be contained by the frames; she spills unevenly over the borders of the image.

These excesses seem to signify the spilling over of identity and subjectivity over these conceptual categories. These different uncontainable parts of the body become suggestive visual metaphors. They point to what Gqola describes as “the multiplicities of positioning” (Gqola 2005: 126), and emphasise the fluid nature of her identity, which resists any sort of imposed categorisation. Searle resists being overdetermined by her history, present in the allusion implicit in the spice, by her gender or race. When one reads this meaning alongside the panels, she seems to be resisting containment by apartheid’s ideologies.

“Girl”, along with the rest of her oeuvre, foregrounds the importance of Searle’s inclusion of her significantly gendered body. She emphasises the importance of not reducing her work solely to explorations of racial politics when she notes: “When I use my body I am a particular, gendered individual, and in that sense there is a multiplicity of identities that’s being explored within the work” (Lewis 2001: 30). Inserting her gendered body into the frame evinces the intersectional nature of identity that her work addresses.

Through the use of her own naked body and the adoption of certain postures she interrogates the history of the objectification and exploitation of the female body. Desiree Lewis asserts that the artist’s naked body

signals the extent to which the social category “black woman” has automatically connoted corporeality, with stereotypes about this group’s

sexuality or closeness to nature allowing dominant groups to define themselves in terms of everything that black women are not.

(Lewis 2001: 50)

Thus Searle's body performs this historic othering of the black female body. This group has been "the object of the gaze of colonial explorers, voyeurs at the metropolises ... [and subsequently] black South African women have borne the burden of what Laura Mulvey terms „to-be-looked-at-ness”" (Lewis 2001: 109). The imperial gaze and its obsession with taxonomically ordering the world rendering it visible, compartmentalised and understandably fixed the black female body as perpetual other.

Searle's images, however, disrupt this power relationship because they seem to invite the gaze, rather than being a passive victim of it. In the series "Looking Back", she overtly plays with this idea by, instead of turning her gaze away from the viewer, she returns the gaze by tilting her face toward the camera. In so doing, she makes the viewer aware of the act of looking. Searle cunningly makes one aware of the observer's gaze that is implicitly part of the "production of the exotic non-western" other (Schildkrout 2004: 328). Searle cites bell hooks on the agency gained in the act of looking back:

[B]y courageously looking (they) defiantly declared: Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality. Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it opens up the possibility of agency.

(hooks in Hassan 2001: 31)

This act of looking back gives the subject some sense of agency, and her unwavering stare unsettles the viewer by showing the extent to which the viewer is implicit in this act of objectification.

The insertion of her own body in her work similarly disrupts the relationship between artist and object/subject. Searle becomes object, subject and creator all at once. Gqola proposes that this insertion of the artist's body into the work

[c]hallen[ges] the dynamics of power and highlight[s] her agency, corporeality, as well as the many ways she has been written on, coloured by processes which she evokes from the past.

(Gqola 2005: 127)

Therefore she does not only become the subject of the gaze, but directs the gaze through the lens of the camera. She refuses to give up the right to self-representation, she occupies the area within the frame while simultaneously hovering outside it. In so doing she moves beyond the bounds of the frame – she refuses to be fully contained. This becomes a powerful reclamation of

the means of representing the self and significantly plays with the politics of representation.

The pitfalls and possibilities/advantages of representation resurface in her installation “Traces”. Here the partially invisible body is juxtaposed with the visible one. There are three of the prints that contain her naked body, seen from an aerial shot, covered in spices and the other three include only the outline of her figure left in the spices. These images are arranged in six vertically installed photo-based digital prints. Each of these images hovers above a defective scale filled with spices. The scale, even though filled with a larger quantity of spices because of the absent body, registers the same weight as the visibly smaller amount of spices. The scales visually represent the language of science designed to make the truth visible (Coombes 2003: 247), but in this instance the scale seems to obscure rather than reveal the truth. Searle is thus drawing attention to the “spurious ‘visibility’ and ‘transparency’ (objectivity) of scientific investigation” (p. 247). The trace of her body in the spices does, contrastingly, register her absence. These erased bodies, leaving faint imprints in the everyday domestic substance, could then suggest that food and culinary traditions and specifically recipes could be explored as an alternative archive, which although faint do register a human imprint. They register something which the scales, symbolic of objective/official/scientific means of measuring substances, do not register.

The play with visibility and invisibility but also deliberate erasure forms a definite leitmotif, within “Traces” specifically, but also in “Julle moet nou trek”. In “Traces” the visibility of her body in the first three panels is juxtaposed with the absence of her body in the last three. The visible body is marked by the spice and contrastingly only registers her outline in the last three panels. This play with visibility/invisibility becomes suggestive on different levels. Searle seems to ultimately harbour a sceptical attitude toward the visible body. Phelan elaborates on this:

[V]isibility is a trap ... it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal ... while there is a deeply ethical appeal in the desire for a more inclusive representational landscape and certainly under-represented communities can be empowered by an enhanced visibility, the terms of this visibility often enervate the putative power of these identities. A much more nuanced relationship to the power of visibility needs to be pursued

(Phelan 1993: 7)

Searle’s visibility is continually played off against her invisibility, allowing her to slip out of and evade the multiple trappings and entanglements of visibility. This evasion moves toward representing a subject that is mutable, never fully fixed and always in a process of “becoming rather than being” (Hall 2003: 14).

Up to this point Searle's oeuvre references food and spices but does not engage with the process of preparing food. The video installation "Snow White" is her first attempt at incorporating the gestures, rituals and techniques of making food into art. In this piece we see Searle's naked kneeling body initially from a bird's eye view, which then shifts to an eye-level shot. Her figure is isolated by a spotlight which renders the rest of the stage indistinguishable and ominous. Gradually a thin veil of a white powdery substance falls from the sky and systematically covers her body and immediate surrounds giving the body a statuesque quality. She eventually gathers the excess substance into a heap in front of her and starts kneading it into a dough ball. She continues in this meditative state, systematically collecting flour in a semicircle around her body and kneading it until the film concludes.

At the centre of this installation is the repetitive action of making bread: a uniquely domestic activity. Searle asserts that she is in fact preparing a roti, "a flat bread that is usually eaten with curry. This tradition has been passed down to me from my Mauritian great-grandfather who was a cook". She also stipulates that the process of making a roti is similar to the process of making bread, thus should not be limited to a certain context/culture. The emphasis is rather on the ritual-like repetition enacted when kneading the dough and how this serves as a tentative connection to her Mauritian heritage. Rita Felski chooses to read repetition specifically in relation to everyday activities as "provid[ing] a connection to ancestry and tradition ... situat[ing] the individual in an imagined community that spans historical time. It is thus not opposed to transcendence, but is the means of transcending one's historically limited existence" (Felski 2000: 20). This symbol of female domesticity (the woman kneading) can thus be read as means of constructing and reconstructing subjectivity through repetition and not simply as female subordination.

Felski reiterates this by noting that "repetition is not simply a sign of human subordination to external forces but also one of the ways in which individuals engage with and respond to their environment" (Felski 2000: 21). This repetitive act of kneading thus moves toward articulating everyday actions, which are usually gendered, as having the potential to harbour alternative meanings.

Concurrently Searle evokes fantasy, through the title of the piece, mingled with the confronting reality of her naked body. The title "Snow White" references the brothers Grimm story that goes by the same name. The primary character in this story is a domestic goddess who is both nurturing and caring and an adept cook (as she has to care for seven dwarfs). This European fairy tale comes to represent the ideal image of white femininity.

The insertion of Searle's naked body, however, brings the construction of white femininity in dialogue with colonial constructions of black femininity. The falling white flour on the black female body references the irony

implicit in black women historically performing the domestic labour which enables the construction of a coherent white female identity. This ultimately enables the white female subject to maintain the domestic ideal of an ordered, nurturing body, kitchen and home.

It could be concluded that Searle attempts to find a lexicon with which to represent the figure of the black female – a lexicon that attempts to move away from stagnant, stereotypical means of representation towards an emphasis on the mutability of subjectivity. Playing the marked-off against the unmarked, the visible against the invisible, emphasises her suspicion around representation and its central role in reifying identity. Ultimately most of these themes are explored through the medium of everyday domestic items such as spices, flour and olive oil. These domestic items allow her to exhibit and explore the layered and often problematical domestic sphere. Alongside this, these domestic items are used as a means of subverting and destabilising dominant narratives around race, gender and identity.

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