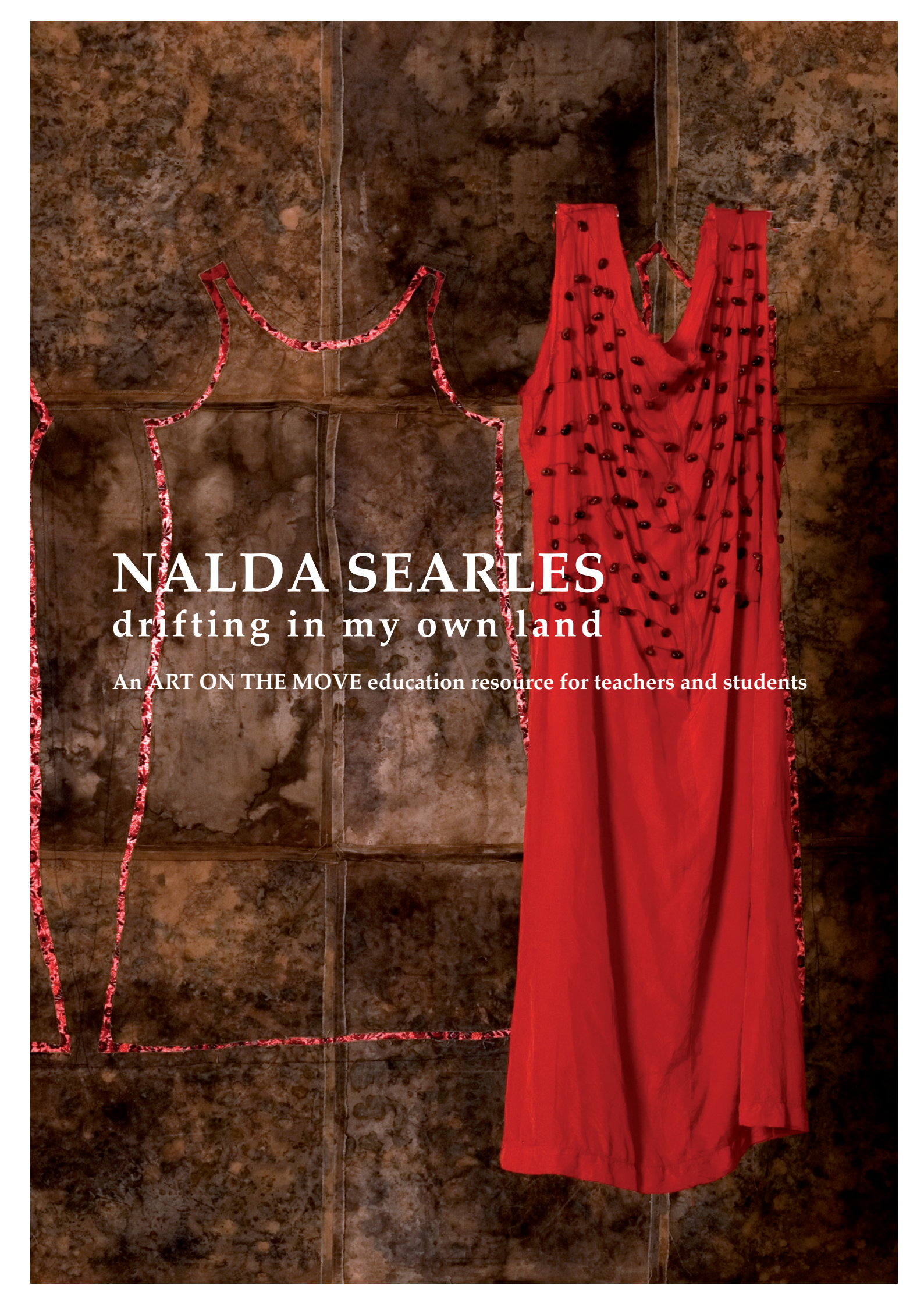


The background is a dark, textured surface with a grid of vertical and horizontal lines, resembling a stone or wood panel. On the right side, a red dress is hanging, covered in small black dots. On the left side, a red patterned outline of a dress is visible.

NALDA SEARLES

drifting in my own land

An ART ON THE MOVE education resource for teachers and students

Nalda Searles - Drifting...

Acknowledgements

Education notes development and production:

Writer: Lisa Young with assistance from Nalda Searles
Production: ART ON THE MOVE
Photographs: Eva Fernandez unless otherwise stated

ISBN

Print: 978-0-9805073-7-9
Online: 978-0-985073-8-6

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The *Nalda Searles - Drifting in My Own Land* project is coordinated by Christina McGuinness.

This exhibition is supported by Visions of Australia, an Australian Government program supporting touring exhibitions by providing funding assistance for the development and touring of Australian cultural material across Australia.

This exhibition has been supported by the National Exhibitions Touring Structure for Western Australia Inc. through the State Exhibition Development and Touring Funds.

The State of Western Australia has made an investment through the Department of Culture and the Arts in association with the Lotteries Commission in ART ON THE MOVE the National Exhibitions Touring Structure for Western Australia Inc.

ART ON THE MOVE is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. ART ON THE MOVE is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.

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Cover image L-R: *Her Own Skin*, 2004
dress lining, ininti beans, cotton thread
120 x 40 x 6 cm
Inland Boundaries, 1997-2007
canvas, broderie anglaise dress, cotton
thread
280.8 x 280 x 2 cm

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Use of this package

This education resource comprises an exhibition catalogue, the educational DVD entitled *Nalda Searles - A Stitching of Words. Interpretations of Making and Making Do*, an exhibition brochure and this 14-page Education Notes document. The resource has been developed to assist teachers to maximise the educational value and enjoyment of ART ON THE MOVE'S touring exhibition *Nalda Searles - Drifting in My Own Land*.

Photocopies are permitted for classroom use only.

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ART ON THE MOVE education services for primary and secondary schools:

- *Smarter than Smoking* ARTIST ON THE MOVE - An artist talk and tour through the exhibition
- *Smarter than Smoking* ARTBUS provides subsidised transport to the gallery to view the exhibition.
- Website subscription: Your school can sign up as members of Education at www.artonthemove.com.au

Contact the ART ON THE MOVE Education Officer for more information.

Nalda Searles - Drifting...

About the artist

Nalda Searles is a Western Australian fibre textiles artist whose work has been exhibited widely. Since the 1970s, she has been developing her craft of creating woven forms from natural fibres and found objects, having taught herself the world's basketry techniques from books.

Siphon, 2007
common fodder, wool blanket, cotton thread.
31 x 31 x 38 cm



Searles has exhibited and taught widely, conducting workshops and participating in forums to promote the woven form. Searles has influenced many Indigenous and non-indigenous artists in the field of fibre-textiles. She conducted workshops in Narrogin throughout the 1990s teaching tjanpi (fibre weaving) to local Nyoongah women. She also regularly participated in workshops organized by the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjarra Yankunytjatjara Women's Council in the Blackstone Community area at the edge of the Gibson Desert. Searles continues to run frequent workshops in fibre-textiles and speaks regularly at conferences across Australia.

Kevin Murray (in Nicholls (ed), 2009) describes the considerable influence Searles has had on the development of fibre textiles in Australia:

Searles was able to inspire a mixture of Indigenous and non-indigenous artists with ambitions to create a world of grass. Through workshops with Searles, the Nyoongah artist Joyce Winsley from Narrogin developed a technique for binding grass together into figures with narrative power... Taking basketry into the Western desert, Searles' inspired artists like Kantjupayi Benson who extrapolated this technique to monumental extremes... One of Searles' protégés, Kate Campbell-Pope, has been able to take this method into the reverse dimension by constructing an anatomical model of the human body out of grass. There seems no end to what can be done. (pp. 20, 21)

For a number of years, Searles ran the Edith Cowan University bush camps which began in 1988 and still take place. More recently she has been sensitively facilitating creative development workshops for makers who feel they want to be connected with something beyond the obvious.

Grass Skull 2, 2008
common fodder, silk fabric, polythread.
12 x 22 x 16 cm



The body of work in *Drifting in My Own Land* marks a shift in direction for Searles. She has always been concerned with her own relationship with the land and has made the majority of her work outside, in the Australian landscape. Andrew Nicholls (2008) comments on this shift:

While the artist herself has literally moved from the external environment into the domestic interior, her work has shifted thematically inside the body, into the stuff of the visceral and the raw. The work also moves into a starker and much more iconic, almost archetypal symbolic vocabulary, speaking of complex bodily and psychological experience - spirals, skulls, animal forms, dolls and various items of clothing (including the debutante gown, the military coat and the party dress), all laden with myth and meaning. (pp. 1, 2)

Searles is an advocate for recycling and re-using materials and makes this a central part of her practice. In *Nalda Searles - Drifting in My Own Land* the artist has translated personal imagery and conceptual experience into sculptural forms, using three-dimensional construction techniques such as weaving, binding, coiling and stitchery combined with natural dyes and recycled objects.



Dorothy's Wild Flowers, 1998-2008 (detail)
woollen overcoat, stones, thread, iron stand
164 x 600 x 8 cm



Kangaroo Couple, 1995-2008
woollen gown, plant dyed silk, Xanthorrhoea bracts, silk strings, common fodder, cotton mannequins .
190 x 66 x 39 cm (brown) 173 x 56 x 36 cm (white)

Nalda Searles - Drifting...

About the exhibition

Nalda Searles - Drifting in My Own Land is an exhibition of artwork begun by the artist in 2006. Although not strictly a retrospective, Searles has said that much of her work from the last 20 years or so has led to this body of work. Some pieces even started out as other artworks as long as 10 years ago and in *Drifting in My Own Land*, have been reborn - transformed into something new.

Re-inventing pieces as new works is a key aspect of the artworks in *Drifting in my Own Land* and an important concern central to Searles' practice. Every piece in the show is made from either found natural objects, recycled or salvaged objects or materials or a combination of all of these. Searles enjoys the process of taking objects imbued with histories and making something new from them, thereby giving them new lives and new stories.

The artworks in *Drifting* are also testament to Searles' fine craftsmanship, skills she has developed and honed over her artistic career. She bemoans the disappearance of crocheting, knitting and stitching and the widespread deterioration of craft skills in general.

All of the artworks in *Drifting* communicate ideas, some personal and some universal. Many of these ideas are linked to the original context of the objects and these objects may be symbolic of universal themes such as love, loss, loneliness and mortality. The exhibition also presents ideas about the artist's interconnectedness between her physical self and the landscape. This is communicated literally through a number of works that are made from natural materials such as fodder (meadow hay), gum leaves and Xanthorrhoea bracts and metaphorically through works such as *Inland Boundaries*, 1997-2007 .

Inland Boundaries, 1997-2007
cotton canvas, broderie anglaise dress,
cotton, plant dye, natural pigment dye
280.8 x 280 x 2 cm



Themes and concerns - Skills

One of Nalda Searles' main concerns underpinning her work is the notion of good craftsmanship and refined skills. All of the works in *Drifting in My Own Land* have been produced by Searles with the benefit of many years of knowledge and experience, enabling her to refine the skills of her craft. Searles stresses the importance of objects being well made and all of the works in *Drifting in My Own Land* have been carefully and skilfully produced thereby ensuring longevity.

Before the Plough, 2008, is evidence of the high skill level present in Searles' work. In this work, Searles has used her long practised basket weaving techniques to produce a coiled vessel made from fibres with tiny, delicate snake bones carefully stitched at regular intervals on the inside.



Before the Plough, 2008
common fodder, silk fabric, cotton
thread, found reptile bones.
50 x 50 x 9 cm

Many of the artworks in the exhibition have been meticulously laboured over. The works are all made by hand and Searles places value on the importance of patient, skilful handwork in the creation of her objects. Much of this approach can be traced back to the experiences Searles has had in being involved in making art with groups of women, both Indigenous and non-indigenous. The act of meeting and sitting together to share stories and make art is, for Searles, a productive one and has resulted in many of her works alluding to the feminine.

Nalda Searles - Drifting...

Techniques

The following is a list of techniques Nalda Searles has used in the creation of the works in *Drifting in My Own Land*.

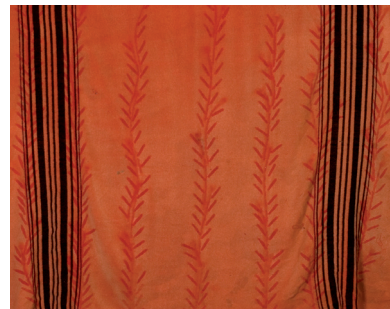
Natural dyes - *Plant dyes, natural elements*

Through years of experience, Searles has built a detailed knowledge of the dying properties of many native plants. She uses natural dyes extensively in her work.

Some of her dying processes rely on chance and experimentation. For example, in *Inland Boundaries*, 1997-2007, the exquisitely dyed canvas upon which the red broderie anglaise dress has been stitched, was dyed with earth, mud and other materials. Searles even buried it in the ground for a period of time, adding to the earth-like, weathered appearance of the canvas.



Inland Boundaries, 1997-2007 (detail)
cotton canvas, broderie anglaise dress,
cotton, plant dye, natural pigment dye
280.8 x 280 x 2 cm



Red Comforter, 2001-2008 (detail)
wool blanket, cotton mattress cover,
wool thread, stitching, solar resist
195 x 222 x 2 cm

Searles has used the natural resource of light to serendipitously create a solar print in *Red Comforter*, 2001-2008. After stitching Xanthorrhoea bracts onto a blanket gifted to her by a friend, Searles hung the blanket for a number of years on her back verandah. Upon removing the bracts from the blanket she discovered a solar print caused by the blanket fading in the light.

Fibre - *Weaving, stitching, knotting, gathering, binding, coiling, twisting*

Searles has been working with fibre for many years, developing her craft and perfecting her methods of building forms.

In recent times she has been using meadow hay (fodder) to create forms due to its fine nature and ease of manipulation. In her own words:

Any fibrous material which is abundant can be used to make fibre shapes. The finer any material is prepared helps it to be manipulated into shapes. This is why meadow hay (fodder) is so good.

Other materials which work well when shredded are any sorts of grasses, corn husks, banana palm, nasturtiums, palm leaves amongst many others.

Let us look at fodder in detail. It's a pasture grass, rye grass, often mixed with some clover. At summers start the grass is mowed and baled, bound up with heavy string. It is then intended to be stored as a stock food for the coming year.

If there has been low rainfall then fodder is not so abundant. So early summer is the best time to find some bales and then store them in a very dry place, off the ground.

From Nalda Searles' blogsite: <http://australia-grass-weaving-freeee.blogspot.com>

Searles describes the method used to construct the work *Courting Cushions*:

A bundle of meadow hay, or animal fodder has been kneaded into a bun like structure, round and round. Once the shape was more or less holding together then a long needle and a strong stitching thread was used to place many stitches through the bundle.

Dry flowers were also scattered in with the hay and these became fastened into the cushion surface through the stitching. As more stitching was done back and forth through the cushion so the hay became quite firm.

Finally when grass was no longer falling off the surface then the cushion was sufficiently stitched. This is not a cushion for sitting on as such but if it was strong enough it could be used for such a purpose.

From Nalda Searles' blogsite: <http://australia-grass-weaving-freeee.blogspot.com>



Courting Cushions, 2007
common fodder, dried *Verticordia*
Grandis flowers, linen thread
50 x 50 x 9 cm



Nalda Searles - Drifting...

Found objects - *Natural objects, salvaged, recycled objects*

Nalda Searles recycles, salvages and re-uses materials and objects in her artwork. Most of the works in *Drifting in My Own Land* have been borne out of finding, recycling, salvaging and re-using. Apart from the obvious environmental advantages associated with this practice, Searles enjoys giving new life to old things. She is adept at recognising the potential of objects and very rarely throws anything out.

In addition, many of the artworks in *Drifting in My Own Land* have been made from objects that have been gifted to the artist, thereby infusing the final artworks with personal associations. By placing objects together in different ways, Searles makes new stories from them and this is a key to the meanings behind much of her work.

Vixen, 2008, is made from a fur stole gifted to Searles by one of the Sisters at Heathcote Hospital whilst she nursed there in the 1960s. Searles found the inside more interesting than the outside as it contained a daintily crafted silk pocket. Seeing the expressive potential of this, she created 5 more pocket-like rosettes from the pink satin edging of an old blanket and attached them to the lining inside the stole. The rosettes allude to breasts and feeding, leading Searles to title the work *Vixen* - the female fox. The work speaks of feminine issues on a number of levels.



Vixen, 2008
animal fur, satin binding (blanket edging), silk thread
59 x 48 x 5 cm
Photograph courtesy of the Artist

Throughout her career Searles has continued to build her knowledge of the Australian landscape and environment and what it can provide for the creation of artworks. Much of this knowledge has come about through her associations with Indigenous women, particularly her friend and colleague Pantjiti Mary Mclean.

Project Ideas

Collecting

In your classroom, build up a collection of objects available for students to undertake projects involving the use of recycled, salvaged, found objects. You can build up this collection by visiting charity shops, re-use centres such as REmida (Perth) and rubbish/refuse centres. You can send out wish-lists to parents, friends and the school community and provide a convenient 'drop-off' point for them to donate.

Project Idea for Primary School

GRRRR, 2000
found objects,
Xanthorrhoea bracts,
acrylic medium
16 x 11 x 11 cm



CRAZY CREATURES

Using Nalda Searles' 3D object Ggrrrr, 2000, as inspiration, create a fierce or crazy creature made from found, recycled, natural objects.

Arts Ideas - collect junk and make sketches in journal of possible creatures from the items collected. Try at least 4 different possibilities.

Arts Skills and Processes - Make sculptural piece using items selected, referring to design in journal. Use a variety of methods to construct piece including glue guns, glue, tape etc. Use different techniques to decorate surface e.g. paint, attaching fabric, old buttons, beads etc.

Arts Responses - Respond to Nalda Searles' artwork *Ggrrrr*, 2000, through class discussion and written response sheet.

Arts in Society - Discuss recycling and the benefits of making artwork from recycled materials. Look at other works by Nalda Searles and the work of other artists who have used recycled, salvaged materials e.g. John Dahlsen and Rosalie Gascoigne.

Project Idea for Middle School

REWORKED UNWEARABLE 'ME' GARMENT

Using Nalda Searles' artworks Vixen, 2008, Hybrid Stole for a Wayward Woman, 2008, Her Own Skin, 2004, and Dorothy's Wild Flowers 1998-2008, as inspiration, rework a salvaged garment to create something new and unwearable that communicates something about yourself.

Arts Ideas - find an item of clothing to be reworked e.g. hat, boots, stole, coat, veil. Look in charity shops and parents' and grandparents' closets for something unusual. Collect other materials for reworking and embellishing object e.g. items from personal collections, bottle lids, buttons, pill blister packs, bread clips, paper clips, nuts and bolts, washers, pieces of fabric, wool, string, small toys etc. Make sketches in journal, exploring possibilities for garment.

Arts Skills and Processes - Create garment using a variety of different materials and construction techniques.

Arts Responses - Respond to Nalda Searles' artworks listed above through class discussion and written response sheet. Complete written self evaluation of completed artwork.

Arts in Society - Discuss recycling and the benefits of making artwork from salvaged materials. Examine the work of other textile artists who use this practice in their artwork. Visit the exhibition *Nalda Searles - Drifting in My Own Land*.

Nalda Searles - Drifting...

Themes and concerns - Ideas/stories

Nalda Searles is interested in expressing and experimenting with ideas through her work. In *Drifting in My Own Land* many of these ideas are closely bound with the history of the objects she uses to construct her artworks. The resulting artworks communicate ideas, some personal and some universal.

Searles enjoys the process of what she calls 'crafting ideas' whereby old things are given new lives, new meanings and new stories through juxtaposition and creative manipulation of materials. Searles has made many of the works in *Drifting in My Own Land* from objects of personal significance e.g. clothing belonging to her parents and items gifted to her from significant people in her life. They are imbued with memories and meaning and Searles skilfully and thoughtfully transforms them into objects that communicate ideas and new stories.

The exhibition also presents ideas about the artist's interconnectedness between her physical self and the landscape. This is communicated literally through a number of works that are made from natural materials such as fodder (meadow hay), gum leaves and Xanthorrhoea bracts. An example of this is *Balga Blanket*, 1995-2008, where Searles has meticulously stitched many Xanthorrhoea bracts onto a blanket, a symbol of warmth, comfort and shelter for the body. In *Hybrid Stole for a Wayward Woman*, 2008, mallee leaves have been attached to an old fur stole, found and worn by Searles in the 1960s. This piece speaks about connections between the bush, animals and women.

This interconnectedness between Searles' physical self and the landscape is communicated metaphorically through works such as *Inland Boundaries*, 1997-2007. In this work, a dress belonging to the artist has been stitched to a piece of earth coloured, almost weathered canvas, suggesting "the intermeshing of body, identity and landscape" (Nicholls in 2009, p.).



Hybrid Stole for a Wayward Woman, 2008
animal fur, mallee leaves, silk thread.
58 x 28 x 16 cm



Balga Blanket, 1995-2008
wool blanket, Xanthorrhoea bracts, cotton thread.
182 x 216 x 4 cm

Project Ideas

Project Idea for Upper Secondary School

PRECIOUS OBJECT

UNIT 2BVAR - Identities

Using Nalda Searles' artworks When They Danced He Was Transformed, Sweet Desire and Loitering at the Dance Hall as inspiration, create a textile/mixed media body of artwork that communicates a mood/idea/sense of place, time or identity, starting with recycled object(s) of personal significance.

This project could be built around an item of clothing or household object that has personal significance (e.g. relates to a person, a time, an event). For example Mother's wedding dress (get permission to use it!), grandfather's old hat, little brother's first tricycle or old toys. This object could be drawn, manipulated, embellished, stitched into, cut up, added on to, preserved, dyed etc.

Unit Learning Context: Purposes - social/ personal expression, place and identity, self-image.

Art Making (Production)

- Use your journal to explore ideas. Use observational, conceptual, imaginative and expressive drawing approaches to explore concepts and ideas. Document thinking and working practices.
- Use appropriate visual language to develop ideas for body of work.
- Explore, combine and manipulate materials and techniques to develop and produce artwork. Refine use of media and materials to communicate meaning effectively.
- Investigate and refine skills to produce artwork which shows discernment in the application of materials and processes.
- Consider display of body of work and reflect on and evaluate the creative process.
- Provide a personal artist statement.



Loitering at the Dance Hall, 2008
plant dyed linen canvas, salvaged
satin gown and blanket, wool,
silk thread.
263 x 198 x 4 cm

Art Interpretation (Critical analysis and investigation)

- Respond to, analyse and evaluate Nalda Searles' three artworks listed above, using the Frames as a critical analysis framework.
- Complete a case study of Nalda Searles artwork, focusing on her exhibition *Nalda Searles - Drifting in My Own Land*. Examine Searles' visual arts practice and theories, considering historical, cultural and contextual factors influencing the production and interpretation of her work.

Nalda Searles - Drifting...

References

Fibres West conference 2008:

<http://www.fibreswest.com.au/index.php?page=naldas>

FORM Contemporary Craft and Design, (2007) *Clever with our hands*. [Brochure]. Perth, Western Australia: Nalda Searles.

Nalda Searles' blogsites:

<http://australia-grass-weaving-freeeee.blogspot.com>

<http://searles-art-adrift.blogspot.com/>

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Nicholls, A. (2008). *From the Outside, In*. Unpublished paper. Perth, Western Australia.

Further Reading

Endangered, Drawing the Line, 2008:

<http://www.endangered-drawingtheline.com/nalda-searles.html>

Nalda Searles' blogsite:

<http://fodder-for-making.blogspot.com/>

Artists who influence Nalda Searles:

Kiki Smith:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiki_Smith

Louise Bourgeois

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Bourgeois