

**FINDERS KEEPERS**

NALDA SEARLES







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*Seed gatherer's jacket*, c 1998, small doll's jacket made in Narrogin, melaleuca seeds hand-stitched onto surface, 20 x 40 x 3.5 cm. On loan from the Christina McGuinness Collection.

## FOREWORD

MELISSA MCGRATH

Finders! Keepers! This familiar saying rings out across the park, across memories, across generations.

It is playful, but also speaks to a sense of knowing. Knowing what to do with whatever it is that has been found. But also, of knowing what to be looking for in the first place. Two things which typify the practice of senior artist and Western Australian Living Treasure Nalda Searles.

Mundaring Arts Centre Inc. (MAC Inc.) is honoured to present *Finders Keepers*, a survey exhibition of past and new works by Nalda Searles, curated by Sandra Murray. Reflecting on her vast and influential career, *Finders Keepers* considers locations, materials and relationships which have fuelled Nalda's artistic practice for over four decades.

Nalda has maintained a strong relationship with MAC Inc. for many years, her engagement with environment and

community mirroring concerns that remain constant for our organisation. Taking her first course in macramé at Midland TAFE (now Midland Junction Arts Centre, managed by MAC Inc.) in 1979, initiated an industrious engagement with fibre as a medium, which holds great technical and poetic potential. This is where Nalda's role of keeper comes to the fore, as she becomes the caretaker of the histories, meanings and stories that are entwined in her works.

Presenting this show within the context of the inaugural Indian Ocean Craft Triennial aligns with MAC Inc.'s intent to celebrate the significant and unique practices of Western Australian artists. Within the context of international craft practices, Nalda's works are well placed to engage conversations around specificity of location, collaboration with people and material, and a form of storytelling that takes place through our hands.

Melissa McGrath is curator for Mundaring Arts Centre Inc.

# FINDERS KEEPERS

## INTRODUCTION

SANDRA MURRAY

Nalda Searles is one of Western Australia's most highly respected sculptors. In a career spanning some 40 years she has exhibited extensively, both nationally and internationally.

This pivotal new solo exhibition embraces both new works and pieces from previous decades, drawing together a powerful representation of the artist's practice over the years. With her distinctly Australian and feminine approach to craft practice, Searles has been the central instigator of an entire art movement; based around the innovative use of local plant fibre and found objects from the landscape for artistic expression.

Situated within the international context of the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial, *Finders Keepers* shines a much-warranted spotlight on the artist's expansive oeuvre; it is the artist's first solo exhibition in eight years. Notably, this is an exhibition where the curator and artist have collaborated particularly

closely on its genesis and production. The personal is key to Searles in her work and is represented in this journey of friendship and discovery.

From humble beginnings in a cottage in Boulder, Searles remembers with clarity the natural environment of her childhood as being excessively spindly; full of double gees, prickles and spiky grasses. From there the family moved to Bullfinch and later Bakers Hill, where she attended Northam High School. This regional upbringing has gone on to perpetually inform her practice - as does the town of Kalgoorlie, a place to which she is frequently drawn back.



*Grrr*, 1999, plastic doll body, rubber animal head (both found on roadside 1990s), Xanthorrhoea bracts, handmade resin, 12 x 16.5 x 12 cm. Anne M Brody, Perth.



*"I take inspiration from the Goldfields country where I grew up and was totally enveloped in the nature of landscape there..."*

*Finders Keepers* brings together strands of the artist's work with a key foundation: experiences of location. Searles' identity is tied to the land, she inhabits the land she lives in and this connection resonates steadfastly through her art. She has travelled and camped over many journeys to be *within* the Australian landscape; for a time it literally became her studio.

Before she studied art at Curtin University, Searles was already making baskets "like a woman possessed." She was drawn instinctively to nature, in particular the Western Australian Goldfields landscape. Searles created sculptures and fibre textile works from the grasses, barks, wood, stone, native plants, feathers and seeds. She dyed fabric with pigments she made with extracts from flowers, fungi, barks and leaves. Thus, materials for her works are frequently the items found on location, spreading from the Yilgarn to the Goldfields, and beyond to the Sandy Desert and the Pilbara.

Searles has worked with Aboriginal people and enjoyed many cross-cultural experiences with them throughout her career, especially through sharing the process of artmaking. She is highly regarded for her collaborations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners, as well as her encouragement

and mentoring to others who are commencing their artistic journey.

Searles takes familiar objects and restructures them with meanings which lie tantalisingly close to the surface. Recycled textiles, salvaged clothing fibres, plants and found materials are all transformed into objects - often exquisite, often menacing, yet always poignant. The poignancy is embedded in the stories these objects carry with them, their histories potentially relate to the previous owners of the objects; be it family, a close friend, or an unknown individual.

As the artist explains, the title for this exhibition was conceived by her:

*Since its inception my body of work has largely included found materials gathered from both old mine sites and natural wilderness. For many years I singularly used salvaged objects and fibre with a doggedness. Anything other I felt was a violation of the integrity of what I was making. Occasionally a piece would be slipped in but only after I had kept it for some years to imbibe it with my spirit.*

Fascinated by the macabre, Searles has developed a distinct trope of hybrids (animal/human) which feature in the exhibition, along with specific examples of her baskets, neckpieces, armbands, grass sculptures and textile works.

Stemming in part from her initial training as a psychiatric nurse, this gothic hybrid idiom has evolved concurrently with her more moderate work - although in Searles' case, nothing can be described as conventional. Her basketware possesses a cutting edge, indicative of a determined feminist theme that courses through her practice. As Searles explains, "My learned crafting skills took me further and further into the psychological and physical interior of Western Australia, and I proceeded on that path for some years".

The current phase of the artist's practice consciously revisits earlier work. Searles reveals three new pieces for *Finders Keepers* which are simultaneously a continuum of her practice and a specific development that is exhilarating for the artist at this stage of her career. The materials are salvaged and each come with personal histories. Searles comments, "I have relocated to the body interior, much stitching and visceral as I see life at this age". Red is one of the elemental recurring colours in the new works; vivid, sexual and corporeal. The geographical and metaphysical meet and unify in the artworks, with myriad layers of personal and universal interwoven.

*Finders Keepers* features over fifty significant works held in both public and private collections throughout Australia. It includes previously unexhibited pieces of intrinsic meaning from Searles' own collection. Together they illustrate Searles' unique contribution to art and sculptural practice in Australia.

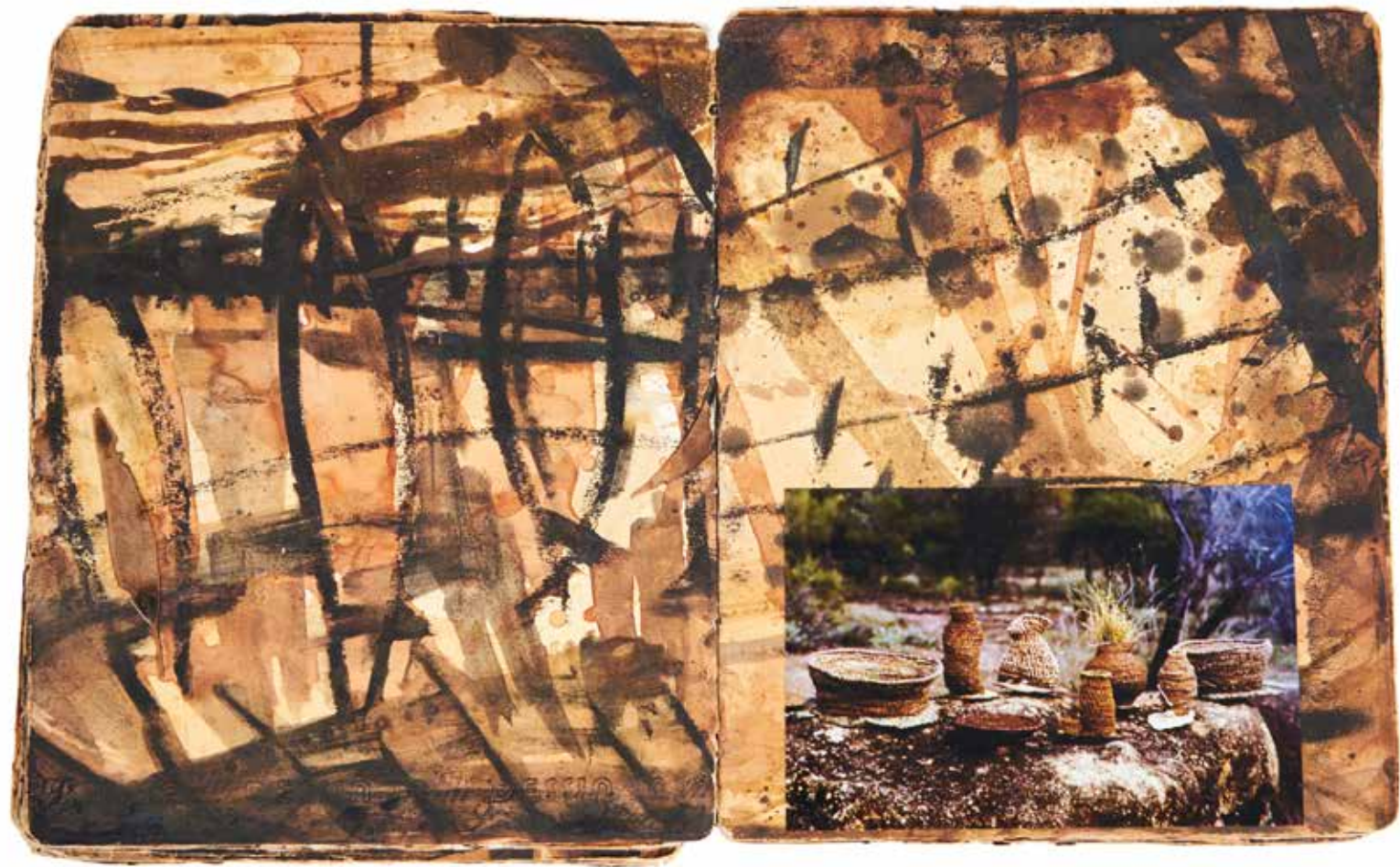
All quotes from Nalda Searles, September 2020

Sandra Murray is an independent art curator, consultant and arts mentor.

*Jug*, 1981, coiled sisal with sisal rope, hair, 34 x 20 x 20 cm. Nalda Searles Collection.







*Book (detail)*, 1992-2000, Dessin paper worked at PICA 1992 on front and verso then made into book, mark-making with plant dyes and charcoal, stitched with cotton thread, dimensions variable. Nalda Searles Collection.



*Bush basket #1*, 1992, dense plant material and assorted fragments, stitched and coiled with linen, 15.5 x 50 x 50 cm. Nalda Searles Collection.





## TRAVELLING WITH NALDA

DR ANNETTE NYKIEL

With the windscreen cleaned and seats adjusted, the tussle over the car's temperature control has begun. Nalda and I are travelling, again.

On the highways of the wheatbelt and the remote arid lands we have shared over 25,000 kilometres in her blue 4WD. We always pack the travel-stained copy of Yeats' poems, Clive James' memoirs (we were on the road when we heard of his death), basketry books and a stack of *Drifting in my Own Land* catalogues. Boxes and bags spill cloth and meadow hay for workshops, clothes and blankets to take to the ladies, leaving just enough room for a change of clothes or two and a picnic basket.

On the Great Eastern Highway, heading east, we are looking forward to dusty red dirt roads, perhaps some mud. We are visiting Dr Pantiji Mary McLean. Along the way, Nalda will lead

workshops (I lend a hand) and visit local women—swapping news and stories and passing on messages from Perth's coastal plains to the Rawlinson Ranges, not far from the Western Australian/Northern Territory border.

I do most of the driving while Nalda talks—reliving places and events, telling stories and recalling friends, while finger-plying fine silk string for a special necklace. Sometimes Nalda stitches, long stitches of black Japanese cotton on red blanket that has become increasingly felted with dog hair. Our conversation turns to Tia, who came home with us on another trip, a timid pup (*ninny papa*), sleeping all the way from The Lands.

Nalda drifting along the shoulder of the Great Central Road after recent rain, near Warburton WA. Photograph by Annette Nykiel.



We stop at op shops in the small towns along the way, lamenting the ones that have now closed and reminding ourselves of treasures previously unearthed and the women who once ran these shops.

Back on the highway, after refuelling - “diesel, remember it’s diesel” - and a coke and a choc wedge at Southern Cross (a ritual), we leave farmland behind. Scarred with recent fires, dense kwongan stretches to the shiny metallic gimlet trunks of the Great Western Woodland. We look for fallen branches - “that one gives a good orange” dye. Stories of picking quandongs with Dr McLean are recounted. I look out for the tell-tale red as only a few trees fruit in any given year. Quandong leaves make a good strong dye. Seeds are treasured for drilling and threading onto baskets and string.

We pull off down a dirt track, windows down, savouring the earthy dryness and the familiar smell of mallees. At a familiar camp spot, I wander and return to pour sandalwood and quandong seeds into Nalda’s cupped hands. I add a piece of white quartz for good luck on our journey. We talk often of white quartz and small rocks that have holes in them. Quartz collected on our first trip to the Ngaanyatjarra Lands is still on the dash.

Our conversation and thoughts become peppered with Ngaanyatjarra words that Nalda learnt while working with “the old lady”. I picked up a little language working with local

women on Country, and more with Nalda. *Yuwa [Yes]*.

Our hours of storytelling are mostly private and intimate, we laugh, we cry, we talk of love and men and life. With windows down, tyres pinging gravel, we call out to camels and caw with ravens.

As woodlands give way to mulga, Nalda points out trees and plants - “that should be yellow” (dye); “the bark of that one is strong, those seeds are good for stringing, this was where.... Please stop along here”.

There are long periods of silence, each of us travelling other journeys along this road, together and with others. Sometimes Nalda “turns her ears off” in rebuke as patience frays and strong wills clash, or the constant road noise becomes too much.

At other times, windows closed tight against the dust, we talk of mythology, art and artists, shows we have seen, ideas for new works and how they relate to what we are reading.

Nalda asks: “What are you working on? What are you going to do with it? What do you want to say? Is it working?”

“I am not so sure, dear Annette.”

The next day a handful of vehicles pass us. Red stretches

into blue sky. We stop at a patch of desert grasstrees *Xanthorrhoea thorntonii*. It is a relief to get out of the car and enjoy the desert, so colourful after rain. Will our next stop be the roadhouse (Tjukayirla)? We have fuel enough to get to Warburton. The roadhouse is closed as we pass it.

In a pool where the Warburton River crosses the Great Central Road young girls are playing. Giggling they come over to chat about us visiting their school the following day. It has been a blazing hot day and the sun sets fiery red through the smoke of a distant lightning-sparked fire burning in the spinifex to the west. On our return trip, days later, it still burns. We trace its edges already sprouting green, old camel bones fade into the swirls of ash as we pass. Nalda offers me segments of mandarin sticky with juice.

Annette Nykiel PhD is a maker and artist-researcher.

Sweeping up windfall at a favourite picnic spot, halfway between Laverton and Warburton WA, ‘these give a good yellow’. Photograph by Annette Nykiel.







*Balga pillow*, 1986, Xanthorrhoea bracts, salvaged vintage pillow, 15 x 66 x 39 cm. Nalda Searles Collection.



Nalda working on *Hirsute coat*, 2021, recycled red wool coat - gift of Lorraine Biggs, human hair, dimensions variable. Nalda Searles Collection.





## THE SCARLET WOMAN

ANDREW NICHOLLS

Given that colour functions as a language with its own distinct meanings (and repercussions – just ask Aegeus), I don’t think it’s an overstatement to suggest that red is the colour with the most to say for itself, the most profound psychological resonance.

It is, biologically speaking, the most *human* colour - supposedly the first hue that our primitive ancestors evolved to perceive between 65-38 million years ago [Finlay, 2007, 390-392], and imperceptible to many other living creatures. From the earliest stages of human evolution it has articulated a language of authority. After black and white, it was the first named colour in pre-modern cultures [ibid, 395] and the earliest to be used by artists, via the many naturally-occurring red ochre pigments. Its subsequent application in cave art and ancient sites across the globe – and later alchemists’ laboratories - suggests that our ancestors considered it to be

imbued with magical properties [Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998; Mahdihassan, 1984, 32-42].

To quote medieval historian Michel Pastoureau, “Red is the archetypal colour, the first colour humans mastered, fabricated, reproduced, and broke down into different shades... [t]his has given it primacy over all other colours through the millennia” [2018, 8]. Part of the reason for its privileged status so early in our development may be due to its scarcity in the ancient world, Elena Phibbs noting that red has “always been one of the most highly prized colours, in part because it is

*Inland boundaries* (detail), 1997 – 2007, cotton, canvas, broderie anglaise dress (circa 1970), cotton thread, plant dye, 280 x 280 cm.  
Collection of Ararat Gallery TAMA (Textile Art Museum Australia). Purchased with Ararat Rural City Council allocation, 2013. Photograph by Eva Fernandez.



among the most difficult to achieve” going on to praise the “artisans of great creativity, resourcefulness, and intelligence” [2010, 5-6] who eventually mastered its application in textiles and art.

From a cultural perspective red is highly contradictory in nature. As Finlay notes, “While wavelengths of red reach the upper stories of the brain, feelings about red – a colour typically associated with fire, anger, desire, danger and bloodshed – bubble up from its cellar.” [op cit, 394]. As the colour of blood, red has always been associated with life and death, and featured in burial customs and funerary attire throughout our early history. This association with death may be in part due to the highly toxic materials frequently used for its creation in Europe and Africa prior to the Spanish discovery of cochineal via the colonisation of Mexico [ibid, 5 and Phibbs, 2] which provided a more affordable alternative to the safer, but vastly expensive kermes dyes produced in the Mediterranean up to that point [Finlay, 398]. It is the colour of danger and of shame, of the god and the planet Mars and their associations of aggression and war, but conversely represents love, passion, marriage and good luck in multiple cultures. “Clearly red has a double meaning: it may signal either threat or opportunity, depending on the context” psychologists Kuniecki, Pilarczyk and Wichary state in their study of its attention-drawing characteristics [2015, 2].

It is not surprising therefore that Nalda Searles chose two

bright red books as the canvases to represent *Yuwa/Yes* and *Wiya/No*, the most assertive and dichotomous words in her formative *Language of the Land, Learning Ngaanyatjarra* (1994) series. This iconic body of work saw Searles embellish book covers to create a pictorial glossary to help her learn the language of the Western Desert, where she chose to spend much of her studio time. It cemented her practice and her identity as that of a white woman who could hold her own - physically, culturally and verbally - in the most remote landscapes of Western Australia.

*Yuwa/Yes* and *Wiya/No* are among a number of works from Searles’ early practice that made similar use of this most richly-associative of colours. These include a delicately-crafted red linen thread and Jarrah-seed *Neckpiece* from 1985; blood-red ininti seeds studding her epic *Ininti Warntu Minyma Kutjara Yalatja (Seed Blanket Two Women Walking)* blanket work from 1996, and the campfire accoutrement created for Daisy Bates in *Seven Sisters – fibre works arising from the West* (2003); and rich red thread binding her *patella stellarum herbarumque (plant vessel of stars)* in 2003 and *Waterhole for Nuniwa* basket in 2005. The collection of *Samplers* she created to hone her skills with the unfamiliar material of meadow fodder in 2006 similarly incorporated flashes of red, the series’ only colour other than black, white and earth tones. This collection of fetish-like miniatures included one small work with the single command, *listen*, emblazoned across its surface in vivid crimson, highlighting

the urgency of this seemingly-playful body of works, which were her means of showcasing the potential of an ecologically-sustainable alternative to native grasses.

However, it was in her epic *Drifting in my Own Land* project in 2009 where Searles’ use of red found full voice. Visitors were welcomed to the main exhibition space by her *Siphon* (2007), a woven grass funnel with a vivid red spiral drawing the viewer’s gaze into its depths as if into the unconscious. *Inland Boundaries* (1997 - 2007) saw a crimson broderie anglaise dress unpicked and splayed on to a field of dyed and weathered fabric to create an aerial agricultural landscape. *Red Comforter* (2001 - 2008) comprised a blanket with a sun-bleached pattern of Xanthorrea bracts, and meticulously hand-stitched red thread on the reverse. A scarlet silk spiral bound together meadow fodder and snake bones in her *Before the Plough* (2008) basket, which evoked a dried waterhole. These works used red to represent a vital life force within the regional Western Australian landscape.

In other works the colour signified flirtation and sexual desire. *Her Own Skin* (2004) was a sensuous red slip (the lining of the dress from *Inland Boundaries*) hanging tremulously in the air, while dried *verticordia grandis* (feather flower) blooms dotted a pair of grass *Courting Cushions* (2007) created for her parents (whose romance was cut short by the war), and speckled her late father’s suit, signifying his unexpressed desire for intimacy. *Loitering at the Dancehall* (2008) saw her

mother’s black satin dress – still uncannily holding the shape of a female body – caressed by phallic scarlet kangaroo paws.

These various red works are among Searles’ best, and they weave through her practice like the crimson thread gifted to Theseus by Ariadne to guide his safe passage through the labyrinth. They culminate – for now at least – in the three new works created for *Finders Keepers* – a coat bristling with human hair, a tangle of rope that was previously her washing line of 25 years, and a *Pubic Triangle* (2021) embellished with black stitching. Collectively these strange bodily part-objects speak of the borders of the physical body, the sexual organs, and the conflation of interior and exterior.

One of Searles’ most enduring themes is the use of clothing as a stand-in for the body underneath, be it a specific individual (such as her parents’ repurposed clothing in *Drifting in my Own Land*) or as a more general cultural signifier (the nature-encrusted blazers and jackets of *re-coverings* in 1996). The red jacket that has formed the base of *Hirsute Coat* (2021) was gifted to Searles by (Western Australian-born, Tasmanian-based) artist Lorraine Biggs, who wore it in her youth. A beautifully constructed hand-sewn garment, it has been needle-felted by Searles with hair donated by friends and family (including her father’s, and some of my own), evoking the masochism of saints’ hair shirts. Searles has previously used her own hair in her work, but the mixing of multiple



people’s lends this work an added *frisson* of the taboo. Through its combination of well-mannered, hand-stitched construction and the prickly interiority of the corporeal *Hirsute Coat* (2021) brings archetypal connotations of the feral – the work reads as a conflation of Red Riding Hood and the wolf – and the carnal.

Searles’ work frequently has sexual overtones. In painstakingly sheathing her former clothes line in hand-stitched red cotton, she has created a disturbingly intestine-like tangle in *Suture line* (2021), (though carefully leaving a section of rope exposed in tribute to its sturdy construction and the many clothes/bodies/memories it supported in its previous life). However at the same time it is an impossibly-extended phallus with comical Freudian associations.

Like Freud, Searles has a fascination for looking to humankind’s past as a way of understanding its present, and in recent years her field of reference has retreated to our distant history. The Freudian-inspired works she created for *An Internal Difficulty* in 2015 literally incorporated antiquated crafted objects – a carved wooden goddess figure from New Guinea, a heavy disc-shaped bead of pale green Roman glass, and a fragment of a Syrian clay figurine (circa 2,300 BC) encased in her *Brain basket* (2012) (which also made a feature of dark red coiling). Her *Kangaroo Couple* (2009) were two of a number of deeply uncanny hybrids created over the course of her career that seem born of the curious union of white

woman and Western Australian landscape, like Pasiphaë and the snow-white bull. Though distinctively Australian, the pair evoked the gravitas of Egyptian deities.

Her new *Pubic Triangle* (2021) is infinitely more minimal than these works - almost a sketch - but is equally inspired by ancient art, in particular representations of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar, who would later become associated with Aphrodite/Venus. It recalls female figures and sexual organs depicted in Palaeolithic cave art in sites such as Roc-aux-Sorciers, La Madeleine sur Tarn and Tito Bustillo [Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 44-45]. Its hectic stitching in luxurious Japanese black cotton thread from Kyoto is suggestive of pubic hair. “And this stitch is so free. You just go wherever you want to.” she states of this looser, more gestural style, which she attributes to the fact that her eyes are “conking out”. As such it is comparable to the painterly marks of desert painters such as Jakayu Bilyabu, Nancy Nyanjilpayi Chapman, Eubena Nampitjin (dec), and Bugai Whyoulter (to name a few) in their senior years. They speak of the artists’ ageing bodies (failing eyesight and wobbly hands) but, more importantly, resonate with assertiveness, seniority, a highly-refined aesthetic and profound cultural power.

Searles has mused that *Finders Keepers* may be her final exhibition, a sentiment that has driven the development of these red works, “...so I’m thinking about that as I make the work. All the angst. Every stitch is a story. Every stitch

is a word.” As such they beg comparison with what has preceded them. Early in her career Searles’ primary focus was the basketry meticulously structured with bush-sourced materials that sang of the harsh beauty of the State’s desert landscapes, and objects exploring the ‘making do’ tradition of the white women who dwelt there. Such women are honoured in Searles’ practice. There is a palpable sense of respect for their endeavours (however flawed) to forge a truce with their surroundings in order to get on with the important business of domestic life. And there is an equal fascination with their inevitable failure, the subsequent merging of landscape and woman - what curator Kevin Murray dubbed the “poetics of infestation” [2009, 18] - seen in her bush-wrapped and embellished clothing and campwares. And then emerge the cast of playful yet threatening, hybrids, the haunting kangaroo-headed women and Xanthorrhoea-prickled dolls that seem to have stepped out of a fever dream of the Western Australian bush. But always they were situated firmly within the landscape - even her Freudian works incorporated twigs and snakes from the Goldfields. *Finders Keepers* brings us the first body of work not explicitly about the State’s interior, but her own. Unlike Ariadne’s red thread, they lead us only forward, ever deeper into the maze.

Andrew Nicholls is an Australian-British artist, writer and curator.

NOTES

All quotes by Nalda Searles are taken from an interview with the artist. Perth: April, 2021.

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Nalda working on *Suture line*, 2021, jute rope c 1980, salvaged Onkaparinga blanket, vintage black cotton thread from Obi Studio, Kyoto, 1200 cm length, circumference variable. Under her hands is *Pubic triangle*, 2021, salvaged Onkaparinga blanket, vintage black cotton thread from Obi Studio, Kyoto, 30 x 51 cm. Nalda Searles Collection.







This page: *Bush basket #3*, 1986, plant material, hand-stitched, 14.5 x 45 x 45 cm. Courtesy Todd Israel, Perth  
Next page: *Bush basket #3* (detail), 1986, plant material, hand-stitched, 14.5 x 45 x 45 cm. Courtesy Todd Israel, Perth







## A TRIBUTE TO NALDA

KATE CAMPBELL-POPE

*Swirling pots of leaves and bark, steaming and fragrant, balance over the camp-fire, releasing and imprinting their earthly matter as colour in multitudinous shades into the cloth by way of heat, water, knowledge and care; a heavenly transformation held within the fibres of silk, wool, threads and skeins.*

*A vision of silken shapes in rich golds and deep earth hues, strung together as nature's prayer-flags flying across a clear sky.*

*Figures scattered around, in solitude or in semicircular groupings, under shade or gentle morning sun, stitching, bundling, folding cloth, ready for the next pot.*

*The central hub of the camp, a well-chosen tree canopy. A bush library unfolding – a few tarps laid on the ground, adorned with cushions and blankets, Nalda's hand-picked selection of books from her extensive home library. The most precious of all being her own constructed books, pages dyed in eucalyptus, quandong, puffball and other plants, stitched and bound with strong linen thread, containing marvels – drawings, paintings, words and photographs. Treasures of books, making my heart race.*

Bush camp memories, ECU Textiles Camps, 1990s

*Kangaroo couple*, 1995 – 2008, woollen gowns, plant dyed silk, Xanthorrhoea bracts, silk strings, common meadow hay, mannequins, Brown gown: 190 x 66 x 39 cm, White gown: 173 x 56 x 36 cm. Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth. Photograph by Dr George Karpathakis.



There is wonderment to be found within the field of human creative energy, endlessly expressing itself in a myriad of forms. The unearthing of such treasures from within these realms is shared by Nalda with others, through conversation and story, but also melded together so finely and alchemically within her artworks.

Nalda's intense interest in art and artists across the millennia is demonstrated by her swoon-worthy personal art library, in more recent years also added to by her online discoveries. This ongoing collection celebrates the expression of human invention, creativity, ideas and making, and constantly enlarges her crafted wisdom.

She has a hearty appetite for knowledge and stories, meaning and learning of language, mythology, the cosmic and the geological, the universality of symbols and the psyche; that which brings us to the very roots of humanity...

Settling into her process of art making, Nalda sits attentively with her materials, found, gathered, collected, and with an open inquisitiveness, investigates their suggestions. She enters into dialogue with the material or object – handling, turning, looking with fresh curiosity, and waiting. Allowing the possibilities to unfold and ideas to percolate. Engagement of thought, enquiry, association and consultation with the library of the mind feed into the fledgling work.

There is a question of 'how?' in this adventure, a problem

to be solved. 'Do I dare?', asks Nalda of herself. And so, a courageous leap forward is taken into active making; a dedication of time and application to task, embarking on the work of mind, heart and hand.

The presence of Nalda's hands within her work is palpable, in the stitching of a skull, a garland, a dancing dress, a blanket, a bowl of stars. Shaping, plying and twining, her fingers giving rise to flowers, fashioning and sculpting. Material and flesh connected as one in the making. Imbuing layers of meaning, posing questions for us to consider, we are offered such jewels of surprise and intrigue. As viewers, when we look and listen to her work, we find deep invocations of thoughtfulness and contemplation.

Forging friendships throughout her life, with places, trees and plants, special dogs, as well as people, Nalda builds a broad creative community around her, walking alongside others, encouraging and nurturing. Art and relationships are closely woven together.

With a natural instinct for mentoring, and an active interest

in others' making practices, Nalda possesses an enormous generosity of spirit. She has nurtured and fostered the creative practice of countless artists over several decades now. Spotting fertile soil within a young creative mind and tending to these relationships as to a garden; wisdom gathered, and sown carefully and thoughtfully over many years.

In sharing her astute understanding of the world, Nalda invites us to close our eyes and take a piece of clay between our fingers. Coaxing forms to emerge straight from the wellspring of the imagination, she offers possibility and ignites in us the creative impulse within.

At this point in our human history, we may well feel powerless and without a great deal of agency. Reflecting on the potential influence of a single human life to be a force of change, we would do well to consider the life of Nalda Searles as an artist who brings a depth of wisdom and a way of art making which has generated waves of movement felt right across this continent, and far beyond.

Future artists will continue to be indebted to Nalda, heeding the call for a new way of making and being, responsive to land, people, animals and plants, with a love and hope for the world.

What tribute could ever be enough?

Kate Campbell-Pope is a multi-disciplinary visual artist.



*Kōpi's pot*, 1989, coiled plant fibre, 9.5 x 8 x 8 cm. Kerry Fletcher Collection, Perth.

Edith Cowan textile students at a bush camp at Baladgie Rock near Bullfinch, WA. Photography courtesy of Nalda Searles.







*Earthbound boots*, 1999, rubber and stone, 38 x 31 x 13 cm (each). State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Purchased 1999. Photograph courtesy of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.



*Netted hat*, c. 1992, linen threads, salvaged eucalypt seeds, dimensions variable. Nalda Searles Collection.





Portrait of Nalda Searles 2021.

# SELECTED CURRICULUM VITAE

## NALDA MAY SEARLES

Born 1945 Kalgoorlie. Lives Perth, Western Australia.

### EDUCATION

1989 - 91	Bachelor of Arts, Fine Arts, painting major (distinction), Curtin University of Technology, WA
1978 -	Self-taught fibre textiles
1969 - 72	Psychiatric nurse training, Mental Health Services, Perth, WA

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2021	<i>Finders Keepers</i> , Mundaring Arts Centre, WA, inaugural Indian Ocean Craft Triennial
2021	<i>REvolution</i> , Gallery Central, North Metropolitan TAFE, Perth, WA
2018	<i>Sensuous Nature</i> , Fremantle Arts Centre, WA
2017 - 19	<i>Machines and Makers</i> , Mundaring Arts Centre, WA; WA state tour, Art on the Move
2017	<i>Songlines:Tracking the Seven Sisters</i> , National Museum of Australia; national and international tour
2016	<i>Holding</i> , Newcastle Art Gallery, NSW
2016	<i>field working slow making</i> , Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA
2014	<i>An Internal Difficulty</i> , Australian artists at the Freud Museum London, PICA, Perth, WA; WA state tour, Art on the Move
2013	<i>National Artists Self-Portrait Prize 2013 remix. post. connect.</i> , UQ Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD
2009 - 13	<i>Nalda Searles - Drifting in My Own Land</i> , John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology, WA; national tour (18 venues)
2011	<i>Textile Exchange Project</i> , Kobe, Japan <i>Beyond Garment</i> , WA Museum, Perth, WA <i>The Stringmakers</i> , Tjulyuru Arts Warburton Ranges, Holmes à Court Gallery, Perth, WA <i>13th International Tapestry Exhibition</i> , Central Museum of Textiles, Lodz, Poland
2010	<i>Cerebral Sanctum</i> , Mundaring Arts Centre, WA
2007 - 10	<i>Recoil</i> , ArtBack, Araluen Gallery, Alice Springs, NT; national tour
2007	<i>Canopy of Air</i> , The Gallery, Ellenbrook, WA
2006 - 08	<i>Woven Forms</i> , Object Gallery, Sydney, NSW; national tour

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS CONTINUED

2006	<i>Tamworth Biennial</i> , Tamworth Regional Gallery, NSW; national tour
2004 - 06	<i>Seven Sisters - Fibre works Arising from the West</i> , for FORM, Central TAFE Gallery, Perth; WA state tour
2002 - 04	<i>Tracking Cloth</i> , Wollongong City Art Gallery, NSW; Indonesia tour
2002	<i>Coiled up</i> , for Intertwine Project, Adelaide Festival, City of Stirling Council Centre, SA
2001	<i>SOFA for Australian Craft Council</i> , Chicago, USA <i>On Line</i> , with Dr. Pantjiti Mary Mclean, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology, WA <i>Commitment - Craftwest Fellows Exhibition</i> , Craftwest Gallery, Perth, WA <i>Home is Where the Heart Is</i> , Art Museum, University of South Australia, SA
2000	<i>Folding</i> , Museum of Arts Crafts, Itami, Japan <i>Miniature Works: Textiles from WA</i> , Gallery Gallery, Kyoto, Japan
1999	<i>X - Recent Works</i> , Fremantle Arts Centre, WA <i>Searles at the BAT Centre</i> , BAT Centre, Durban, South Africa <i>Foldings</i> , Festival of Perth, Gallery East, Perth, WA
1998	<i>Many Voices - 13th Tamworth Textiles Biennial</i> , Tamworth Regional Gallery, NSW; national tour
1997	<i>re-coverings</i> , Moores Building, Fremantle, WA
1995	<i>Language of the Land, Learning Ngaanyatjarra</i> , in collaboration with Dr. Pantjiti Mary McLean, Kalla Yeedip Gallery, Midland, WA; tour to Kalgoorlie-Boulder and Fremantle Arts Centre, WA
1995	<i>Longitudinal Project - Minmya Kutjara</i> , with Dr. Pantjiti Mary McLean, Fremantle Arts Centre, WA
1994	<i>High Fibre Diet</i> , Fremantle Arts Centre, WA
1992	<i>En Kai Pai</i> , PICA, Perth, WA
1989	<i>Sticks and Stones</i> , with Eileen Keys, Craft Council of WA, Perth; WA state tour
1988	<i>Burnt Offerings</i> , with Eileen Keys, Fremantle Arts Centre, WA
1987	<i>Bush Picnic</i> , New Collectables Gallery, Perth, WA
1986	<i>Strings from the Pilbara</i> , Narek Gallery, Canberra, ACT
1985	<i>Bush Meetings and Basketry</i> , Craft Council of WA, Perth, WA
1983	<i>Basketry of Nalda Searles</i> , Cheese Factory, Ballingup, WA

### AWARDS

2014	West Australian Living Treasure
2009	Lifetime Membership Award WAFTA
2009	Inaugural Award, Artsource for Contribution to the Visual Arts in Western Australia
2008	New Work Grant, WA Department of Culture and the Arts
2006	New Work Grant, WA Department of Culture and the Arts
1998	Award for Excellence in Public Art, Government of Western Australia
1997	Fellow, Craftwest
1995	Creative Development Fellowship, WA Department of Culture and the Arts
1991	Award for Outstanding Graduating Student (Visual Theory and Painting), Curtin University of Technology, WA
1983	Creative Development Grant, Australia Council for the Arts

### COLLECTIONS

Art Gallery of Western Australia
Central Museum of Textiles, Lodz, Poland
Curtin University
Edith Cowan University
Janet Holmes à Court Collection
Kerry Stokes Collection
Murdoch University
Museum of Arts Crafts Itami, Japan
Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory
National Gallery of Australia
National Museum of Australia
North Metropolitan TAFE, Perth
Western Australian Museum
Wollongong Art Gallery
Numerous collections in collaboration with Dr. Pantjiti Mary McLean
Private collections



LIST OF WORKS

All works by Nalda Searles apart from collaborations listed. Measurements in cm. h x w x d.

NALDA SEARLES COLLECTION

Balga pillow 1986  
Xanthorrhoea bracts, salvaged vintage pillow  
15 x 66 x 39

Spinifex basket 1986  
spinifex grass gathered in Pilbara, stitched with linen thread circa 1986  
9 x 43 x 43

Neckpiece 1 c. 1980s  
bush sticks, calico  
dimensions variable

Neckpiece 2 c. 1980s  
Shells collected near Esperance, WA (gift), calico  
dimensions variable

Neckpiece 3 c. 1980s  
beads made from ostrich egg shell (Botswana), eucalyptus, seeds, cotton thread  
dimensions variable

Neckpiece 4 c. 1980s  
Kimberley shells, cotton and silk threads  
dimensions variable

Jug 1981  
coiled sisal with sisal rope, hair  
34 x 20 x 20

Necklace 1 1989  
dried bush figs threaded and knotted with silk  
dimensions variable

Bush basket #1 1992  
dense plant material and assorted fragments, hand-stitched and coiled with linen  
15.5 x 50 x 50

Netted hat c.1992  
linen threads, salvaged eucalypt seeds  
dimensions variable

Necklace 2 1994  
quandongs, seeds, clay  
dimensions variable

Bird basket 2002  
clay base with earth stones made in Papalangkutja, fired in bush kiln, grass and cajebut twig found at Running Water, Pilbara  
32 x 18 x 12

Woodcutter's shoes 2005  
artist's father's slippers with rubber bands from cycle tyres, covered with sandal wood shavings from beneath his lathe (gifted to the artist)  
11 x 37.5 x 28.5

Warburton journey 2007  
Collaboration with Dr Pantjiti Mary McLean  
silk and wood discs on hand twined cord  
dimensions variable approx. 32m length

Brain basket 2012  
silk fabric, silk thread cotton rope, figurine Mesopotamian c. 2300bc  
28 x 24 x 24

Figure vagialis 2008-12  
artist's hair, black cotton, wooden figurine from PNG  
11 x 35 x 14

Book (Images of the artist's works) 1992-2000  
Dessian paper worked at PICA 1992 on front and verso then made into book, mark-making with plant dyes and charcoal, stitched with cotton thread  
dimensions variable

Suture line 2021  
jute rope c. 1980, salvaged Onkaparinga blanket, vintage black cotton thread from Obi Studio, Kyoto  
1200 length, circumference variable

Pubic triangle 2021  
salvaged Onkaparinga blanket, vintage black cotton thread from Obi Studio, Kyoto  
30 x 51

Hirsute coat 2021  
recycled red wool coat - gift of Lorraine Biggs, human hair  
dimensions variable

STATE ART COLLECTION,  
ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Earthbound boots 1999  
rubber and stone  
38 x 31 x 13 (each)  
Purchased 1999

CURTIN UNIVERSITY ART  
COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE  
CHRISTENSEN FUND 1994

Large grass basket 1984  
Wandarrie grass, linen, eucalyptus twig with gall  
5.5 x 12.5 x 13

Coiled Pilbara hat with stand 1987  
cotton, bloodwood, seeds, metal and ochres  
40.5 x 22 x 21

Feathered neckpiece 1987  
bloodwood seeds, bush turkey feathers, silk and linen threads  
50 x 14 x 2

Necklace 1987  
galls, native figs, string  
125 x 5 x 3

Basket c. 1987  
desert grasses and palm fibre coiled with linen thread  
17.5 x 39 x 40

Hat for the Landor Races 1987  
silk, linen, emu feathers, natural dyes, rope  
35 x 33 x 33

Grass and clay bowl 1988  
Wandarrie grass and clay  
6 x 9 x 8

Bush form container 1988  
mallee twigs, myrtle, kangaroo grass, seaweed, linen thread  
56 x 16 x 16

Rainforest neckpiece 1988  
candlewood nuts, fabric dyed with wattle flowers, bush string and linen  
30 x 30 x 6

Pilbara shell string 1988  
collaboration with Eileen Keys  
impressed stoneware forms, shell, fibre  
16 x 13 x 3

KERRY STOKES COLLECTION,  
PERTH

Kaarnka... Crow Crown 1995  
burnt marri twigs, eucalyptus dyed silk, black stones, cut tin  
43 x 34 x 30

Stone shoes 1996  
unglazed terracotta and stone slab  
9.5 x 21.5 x 20.5

Siphon 2007  
Grass, red blanket and linen thread  
30 x 30 x 30

Kangaroo couple 1995 - 2008  
woollen gowns, plant dyed silk, Xanthorrhoea bracts, silk strings, common meadow hay, mannequins  
Brown gown: 190 x 66 x 39, White gown: 173 x 56 x 36

ON LOAN FROM WOLLONGONG  
ART GALLERY

Whiteboy blazer 1996  
salvaged woollen blazer with xanthorrhoea spathes, hand-stitched  
90 x 60 x 25

MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY  
OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY  
COLLECTION

Our bleeding heart 1996  
plant fibres: grasses, myrtle, Xanthorrhoea, grevillia twigs; silk, linen, cotton; coiled  
37 x 31 x 31  
Purchased 1996

COLLECTION OF ARARAT GALLERY  
TAMA (TEXTILE ART MUSEUM  
AUSTRALIA)

Inland boundaries 1997 - 2007  
cotton, canvas, broderie anglaise dress (circa 1970), cotton thread, plant dye  
280 x 280  
Purchased with Ararat Rural City Council allocation, 2013

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY ART  
COLLECTION, PERTH

This red land 1989  
open coiled basket; mallee tree roots from Balladgie rocks near Bullfinch, WA, copper wire  
30 x 10 x 10

ANNE M BRODY, PERTH

Ggrrr 1999  
plastic doll body, rubber animal head (both found on roadside 1990s), Xanthorrhoea bracts, handmade resin  
12 x 16.5 x 12

Woman with dog c. 2000  
glazed ceramic, raku fired  
14.5 x 8.5 x 6

Bowl c. 2000  
glazed ceramic, raku fired  
7 x 10.5 x 10.5

ON LOAN FROM THE CHRISTINA  
MCGUINNESS COLLECTION

Tjunti 1996  
rubber tennis ball and small stones (found in Tjunti riverbed, Northern Territory 1996)  
5.5 x 9.5 x 7.5

Seed gatherer's jacket c. 1998  
small doll's jacket made in Narrogin, melaleuca seeds hand-stitched onto surface  
20 x 40 x 3.5

Assorted neckpieces and armbands 1988-2009  
various found and gathered materials  
dimensions variable

PRIVATE COLLECTION

Extending nature 1984  
mallee bark rope wrapped around wandarrie grass stitched with bush string from Arnhem Land. Cocoon, stone base, bark and grass collected from area around Westonia  
10 x 26 x 12

COURTESY TODD ISRAEL, PERTH

Bush basket #3 1986  
plant material, handstitched  
14.5 x 45 x 45

KERRY FLETCHER COLLECTION,  
PERTH

Kopi's pot 1989  
coiled plant fibre  
9.5 x 8 x 8

Bush teapot 1989  
coiled plant fibre  
15 x 12 x 11



This catalogue is published in concert with the exhibition *Nalda Searles: Finders Keepers* curated by Sandra Murray at Mundaring Arts Centre 14 August - 31 October 2021 as part of the inaugural Indian Ocean Craft Triennial (IOTA21).

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Cover and inside: *Suture line*, 2021, jute rope c 1980, salvaged Onkaparinga blanket, vintage black cotton thread from Obi Studio, Kyoto, 1200 cm length, circumference variable. Nalda Searles Collection.

Back: *Pubic triangle* (detail), 2021, salvaged Onkaparinga blanket, vintage black cotton thread from Obi Studio, Kyoto, 30 x 51 cm. Nalda Searles Collection.



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