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# Showcase: Surreal Selves in Rio

By Mariana Vasconcellos Feb. 16, 2010

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Too much of a gaudy thing?

[Rogério Reis](#) decided in 1987 to turn his back on the sparkle of the officially sanctioned Carnival parade of samba schools through the Sambodromo in Rio de Janeiro. Instead, he began to explore the rawness of the “counter-Carnaval” along Rio’s back streets.



Rogério Reis

There, he focused intimately on individuals by photographing them against a weathered tarp that he had set up as a backdrop. “The canvas is the curtain between the excess and what I actually want to see,” Mr. Reis wrote in “Carnival in Canvas” (2001). “It is an invitation, a space for performance and, at times, a diabolical studio.” Some street marchers were lured into his makeshift studio. Others were coached into it.

Almost counterintuitively, Mr. Reis used black-and-white film to capture the hyper-colorful marchers, as he tried to reveal the human souls beneath those vibrant, psychedelic costumes.

The interaction with his subjects convinced Mr. Reis that “without complicity, there is



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no portrait.” He sees his Carnival photographs as “a healthy duel of desires and fantasies.” He describes the project as “a path to common understanding, acceptance and relationship with the holy and the profane, without restrictions or prejudices.”

Mr. Reis has chronicled three distinct segments of Carnival: the political satire prevalent as a theme in the financial district; the gay parade of the beachfront enclave of Ipanema; and the frugal, handcrafted costumes of the Campo Grande suburb.

Early in the project, Mr. Reis envisioned what he called the “pseudo-anthropological” mission of mapping out his subjects by their professions and where they lived. That led him to ask a man dressed as a tree what his profession was.

“I am tree!” the man answered.



Rogério Reis

It was then Mr. Reis realized that occupations and social status were irrelevant here; that the essence of Carnival was the shedding — for those brief magical moments — all titles and codes of hierarchy. “The crowds only want to live in the here and now,” he said. “And so did I.”