

National identity and the
politics of globalisation
in contemporary Brazilian
fashion photography

FASHION- ING BRAZIL

How can we define contemporary Brazilian fashion photography? It's important not to reduce the rich and diverse output of a number of key practitioners to any stereotypical understandings of the geographical region in question, but rather to situate them in the context of a globalised world that is continually changing. Many of these image-makers are living and working between Brazil, Europe and the United States; their work necessarily evades straightforward classification or categorisation, but opens up a fruitful dialogue between the national and the international.

GLAMOUR BERBERE

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SILHETAS REIAS E ELÉGANTE, TRADUZIDAS EM VESTIDOS E TÚNICAS
LUXUOSAMENTE BORDADOS NA TÍPICA E RICA CARTELA DE COTÃO
MEDITERRÂNEO E NORTE DA ÁFRICA, TRANSFORMAM O VERÃO 2014 EM
VALENHINO EM PASSAPORTE PARA O NOVO E LUSO BARROCO

Fotos: Zee Nunes



These photographers have provided evidence of a changing and varied Brazilian population, which has selected and experimented with preferred elements of global dress, and used it to fashion its own—individual and collective—identities. In doing so, Nunes, Dequeker, Gendre, Vainer and Paganini raise pertinent questions about how Brazil has been *fashioned* by the Western media, but also how contemporary Brazilian subjects are *self-fashioning*—through the strategic appropriation of clothing, ideas and images derived from an existing and dominant global culture.

A critical examination of this work enables us to see that globalisation, which unequivocally takes place on uneven and asymmetrical terms, is by no means a one-directional force of cultural imperialism that has standardised, homogenised, Westernised and Americanised more vulnerable cultures. Rather, fashion photography in Brazil is documenting the numerous cultural and stylistic particularities that have been mobilised when Western-style dress has been worn and photographed in ambiguous ways, often reconfigured for local tastes, or adapted for different reasons, possibly even as a form of resistance to the West.

Brazil and, by extension, Brazilian fashion photography, embodies the slipperiness of the tensions between the national and the international, the Western and the non-Western.² In geographical terms, Brazil is certainly a Western nation. Moreover, it is affiliated with the West in terms of its developing free-market economy, its large export supplies of raw materials and manufactured goods, its transition to a democratic constitution following the end of the authoritarian military regime in 1985, its high cultural institutions, and its adoption of Christianity and the Portuguese language. Brazil also endures a regional hegemonic influence in Latin America that raises doubt about simplistic assertions of Western cultural imperialism.

However, Brazil might still be considered a non-Western nation with regard to its incomplete infrastructure, socio-economic disparities, unequal distribution of wealth and land, poor standards of public health, and its popular and material culture—which constitute, as David Hess and Robert Dammatta have succinctly articulated, a unique site in which 'Western culture has mixed and mingled with non-Western cultures for centuries'.³ Brazil can be understood as a microcosm of the world as a whole, and as such provides a revealing site through which to rethink how global identities have been asserted, negotiated and *renegotiated* through the representation of Brazilian dress and fashion.

Nunes, Dequeker, Gendre, Vainer and Paganini all use their photographic practice to grapple with this hybrid construction of Brazilian identity in diverse and singular ways.

With the world turning its gaze once again towards Brazil this summer, the country is becoming an increasingly prevalent—albeit controversial—topic of conversation. In mainstream Western European and North American media, Brazil is often presented through a series of recurring stereotypes that are usually centred on Rio de Janeiro. These clichés tend to focus on the tropical themes of carnival, samba, football, caipirinhas and skimpy bikinis worn on Copacabana beach, and are punctuated only by accounts of drug-fueled violence in the favelas and of political corruption.¹ Such exotic and brightly coloured images of cultural difference fail to appreciate the internal subtleties of the country's racial, religious, social, cultural, geographical and sartorial diversity. A particular strand of contemporary Brazilian fashion photography, however, is challenging reductive and one-dimensional stereotypes of Brazil, and using images of the fashioned body to engage with wider cross-cultural concerns relating to national identity and the politics of globalisation.

Zee Nunes (www.zeenunesphotography.com), Jacques Dequeker (www.jacquedequeker.com), Henrique Gendre (www.henriquegendre.com), Paulo Vainer (<http://paulovainer.com.br>) and Guy Paganini (<http://guipaganini.com.br>) are but a few names of photographers whose work highlights the development of Brazilian dress and fashion, which reflects a long history of cross-cultural contact, slavery and immigration. It is a complex and fluid process by which Brazil, now the fifth largest and fifth most populous country in the world, has, since its colonisation by the Portuguese in 1500, absorbed but also reinterpreted multiple influences that stem from its indigenous populations, as well as from Europe, Africa, Asia and the United States.

De CARA com *a Rua*

O MORRO DONA MARTA SERVE
DE CENÁRIO PARA
CARA DELEVINGNE VESTIR
PEÇAS STATEMENT
DA TEMPORADA QUE, USADAS
COM OUTRAS DE DNA
ATLÉTICO, IMPRIMEM O
STREETWEAR COUTURE QUE
É TENDÊNCIA DA VEZ
Fotos Jacques Dequeker

FASHIONING BRAZIL: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE
POLITICS OF GLOBALISATION IN CONTEMPORARY
BRAZILIAN FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

ELIZABETH KUTESKO





Jacques Dequeker, Cara Delevingne for *Vogue Brasil*, February 2014

It is useful here to draw on the writing of Mary Louise Pratt, who coined the term 'auto-ethnographic expression'.⁴ Pratt defined it as an autobiographical mode of writing, performing and reflecting upon the subjectivity of one's own culture. The process encompasses an appropriation of the idioms of the dominant culture, but also an infiltration by indigenous modes, which enable the auto-ethnographic subject to creatively and actively self-fashion and self-present.

Pratt's formulation of auto-ethnographic expression is clearly informed by and expands upon the poststructuralist thinking of Brazilian scholar Silviano Santiago. Santiago introduced the term 'writing back' in 1978 to refer to the palimpsestic process whereby Western literary practices are modified, re-presented or even resisted in part by Latin American writers, in order to provide space within Latin American literature for the re-inscription of different and alternative modes of non-Western creative expression.⁵ Brazilian fashion photography can be understood as a form of auto-ethnographic expression, a manifestation of 'writing back' through images, which has enabled Brazilian practitioners to engage with exotic representations of Brazil produced by the West, and to re-present national identity on their own terms.

São Paulo-based photographer Nunes explores how Brazilian identities are fashioned and re-fashioned through the complex dynamic of looking, being, seeing, wearing and feeling. He produces fashion images that are inventive and original, playing with the idea of looking and being looked at. His creative practice is hybrid, drawing from a range of photographic genres that encompass ethnographic, documentary, still life, 'realist', portrait and art photography. Nunes re-presents these cross-disciplinary influences in subtle and nuanced ways, evoking a range of different moods, whether light hearted, euphoric, subdued, sombre or enigmatic. The resulting images are multifaceted: several appear candid, and are shot in a romanticised, blurry light that nods towards a so-called realist aesthetic championed by Juergen Teller and Corinne Day in the 1990s, whilst others are obviously staged, and reconstruct narrative fantasies that are heavily indebted to film and to more traditional fashion practitioners such as Edward Steichen, Horst P. Horst and Richard Avedon.

A particularly interesting example of Nunes' practice can be seen in an April 2014 editorial shoot for *Vogue Brasil* and entitled 'Glamour Berbere'.⁶ This shoot was the result of a collaboration between Nunes, Brazilian stylist Pedro Sales and Afro-Brazilian model Mariana Calazans. On first glance, Calazans is presented as an exoticised, North African beauty: at one

with her lush natural environment, she wears heavy gold jewellery and luxurious Orientalist ensembles constructed from rich, tactile suede and heavily patterned silks. Staged against verdant foliage, the ambiguous images are reminiscent of Jackie Nickerson's 2002 series *Farm*, which documented farm labourers in Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe against their working landscapes in thought-provoking portraits that addressed the role of the camera in representing, but also constructing, identity.

As a white European-descended photographer, it might be easy to discuss inherent power imbalances between Nunes and his female Afro-Brazilian subject, drawing upon issues of racism and sexism prevalent within wider Brazilian society. But a closer look at the images dispels such claims. Calazans is an active subject, and these images are far too performative and collaborative to be read in such one-dimensional terms of an active (white male) photographer and a passive (black female) subject. The images highlight Calazans's agency in self-fashioning: she poses in such a way that the distinctions between dress, body and setting are temporarily flattened, and the construction of identity becomes a fluid and performative process. Although reminiscent of European ethnographic photography, these images rewrite this well-established genre of domination and objectification in a sophisticated and self-reflexive commentary that serves to erode, rather than to construct, rigid categories of race, ethnicity and nationality.

Self-trained photographer Dequeker is also based in São Paulo, but cites his formative influence as Guy Bourdin. This is evident in his dramatic visual storytelling and stylised compositions that reconstruct the female subject in charged scenarios, simultaneously fragile and powerful, contained yet dangerous. Frequently shot in the studio, against a simple backdrop and with a shallow depth of field, his meticulous arrangement of the fashioned feminine body draws upon Irving Penn's crisp and elegant fashion portraits. These photographs are nevertheless reinvented with a colourful twist, or through the post-production intervention of hand-drawn illustrations on the surface of the image.

One notable foray beyond the studio resulted in Dequeker's April 2014 editorial for *Vogue Brasil*, entitled 'De Cara com a Rua'.⁷ It featured the British supermodel Cara Delevingne posing against the colourful backdrop of the Santa Marta favela (commonly referred to in Brazil using the more politically correct term *morro*, which translates literally as 'hill') that occupies the Botafogo and Laranjeiras region of the Dona Marta hill in Rio de Janeiro. The morro received global media attention in 2010, when Dutch artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn—known professionally as Haas & Hahn—collaborated with local residents to paint 7,000 square metres of its façade in contrasting shades of the rainbow. The artwork is a symbol of pride for the local community, whose individual creative sartorial expressions were noticeably absent from the resulting images.



Henrique Gendre, Gisele Bündchen for *Vogue Brasil*, May 2015



Zee Nunes, Lea Tisci for *Vogue Brasil*, April 2014

Zee Nunes, Gisele Bündchen for *Vogue Brasil*, April 2014

Dequeker captured Delevingne, usually alone, but posing with the carioca funk band Os Lelek in one double-page spread, wearing a hybrid combination of mid-range to high-end Western and Brazilian sportswear. It is not difficult to point out the strikingly asymmetrical dynamics of power in operation between the French-Brazilian photographer, nor the British supermodel, and the socioeconomic realities of local residents. There is a palpable exoticism to the shoot, with its colourful styling and contrasting overload of texture and form, which raises pertinent questions about the photographer's superior vantage point in documenting a community largely precluded from the cultural and economic capital of the Cidade Maravilhosa.

Still, in placing this fashion shoot within the morro Santa Marta, Dequeker was simultaneously engaging with a well-established and negative stereotype of Brazil's favelas that is perpetuated by the Western media. It is a persistent narrative, often popularised in sensationalist Brazilian films such as Fernando Meirelles' *Cidade de Deus* (2002) and José Padilha's *Tropa de Elite* (2007), which are produced with a foreign audience in mind. Instead of glamourising violence and poverty, however, Dequeker paints the morro in a new light: it becomes a location ripe for vitality and potential, and a fertile breeding ground for art, fashion and music. In fact, by looking a little harder, this editorial does little to reinforce stereotypes, but rather suggests a willingness on the part of the photographer to climb down from his assumed vantage point.

Dequeker turns that exotic Western gaze upon his own culture, and stages a performance that re-presents one-dimensional clichés of Brazil. His images address a new dynamic of power, which no longer operates between different socioeconomic sectors of Brazilian society, but functions on a broader scale, between Brazil and foreign perceptions of the country that are entertained in the West. These multilayered fashion images challenge Western classifications and articulate a particular, as opposed to a generalised, image of Brazilian identity. It is one in which Brazil is no longer necessarily subordinate to the West, but instead uses its own cultural productions to colourfully fight back.

To refer to 'Brazilian fashion photography' is bound to provoke irritation for some, based upon the notion that in categorising practitioners into groups of nationality we necessarily form new essentialisms. This is a logical objection. Nevertheless, to ignore the strong national awareness that informs the work of each of these photographers is just as reductive as overlooking their extensive international outlook. It is through this continually shifting dynamic between the national and the international, the local and the global, that Nunes, Dequeker, Gendre, Vainer and Paganini fashion their individual and collective identities in a process that is continually becoming, and never fixed.

1. Rita Andrade and Regina Root, 'Dress, Body and Culture in Brazil', www.bergfashionlibrary.com/viewencyclopedia/bewdf/BEWDF-v2/EDch2064.xml (21 May 2015).
2. I am only too well aware of the pitfalls of employing the generalised and ambiguous terms 'Western' and 'non-Western', which are centred upon a dichotomy that implies the West is the standard by which everything else is measured.
3. David J. Hess and Roberto A. DaMatta, 'Introduction', in *Brazilian Puzzle: Culture on the Borderlands of the Western World*, ed. by David J. Hess and Roberto A. DaMatta (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 2.
4. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), p. 8.
5. Silvano Santiago, *The Space In-Between: Essays on Latin American Culture*, Anna Lucia Gazzola (ed.), Tom Burns, Ana Lucia Gazzola and Gareth Williams (trans.) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 31.
6. Zee Nunes, 'Glamour Berbere: Silhuetas Retas e Elegantes, traduzidas em vestidos e túnicas luxuosamente bordados na típica e rica caartela de cor do mediterrâneo e norte da África', *Vogue Brasil* (Feb. 2014), pp. 294–301.
7. Jacques Dequeker, 'De Cara com a Rua: o morro Dona Marta serve de Cenário para Cara Delevigne vestir peças statement da temporada que, usadas com outras de dna Atletico, imprimem o streetwear couture que e tendencia da vez', *Vogue Brasil* (Feb. 2014), pp. 140–151.