

Living Well, Gacmel, Haiti, 2004



## **PHYLLIS GALEMBO: MASKING THE MATERIAL**

The rituals and costumes of Africa have fascinated the photographer Phyllis Galembo for over two decades. Her images produce a metaphor for art's ability to transmute the ordinary, but also recognise the significance of such cultural material as a means by which to understand human experience.

Man with Gun and Phone, Haiti, 2004

Text by Lyle Rexer, images by Phyllis Galembo, Courtesy Steven Kasher Gallery, NYC

42 **DAM**<sub>N=7</sub> 43





Okpo Masquerade, Calabar South,
Nigeria, 2005
Masquerade, Calabar, Nigeria, 2005

44 DAM<sub>N™</sub> 45





From left to right: Ekpeyong Edet Dance Group, Calabar, Nigeria, 2005

Three Men with Chains, Gacmel, Haiti, 2004 Photographer Phyllis Galembo wants to transform you. What you experience with her photographs of African masks and costumes is not simply another form of virtual tourism. Galmebo has been photographing on the African diaspora for more than 20 years, from Nigeria to Brazil to Haiti and the Caribbean, presenting ritual celebrants and believers of West African religions, Candomblé and Voodoo, in situ and costume. She became known for her photographs of Voodoo participants in Haiti in part because she located them in a rich symbolic context (with decorated walls, ceremonial arrangements and magical instruments). Some of those pictures will be on view in September at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York. The photographs of African masks and costumes, now in a travelling exhibition at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, are simpler but perhaps more ambitious: they take you all the way over.

To see these costumes is to be transported inside them. Think of them as full-body masks. They often incorporate and mimic natural materials, such as grass, sticks and feathers. In that sense they emphasise the mediating importance of the costume. Put it on and you enter an in-between world, where the human and the non-human merge and exchange places, and the usual rules of nature and community are suspended. As Claude Levi-Strauss and Rene Girard have pointed out, the rituals that accompany the costumes are episodes of formlessness and redefinition of boundaries. In many cases, masking is not a portrayal but an embodiment - an act not of concealment but revelation. Human beings need such experiences to explain and order their world and, even more importantly, to renew it. Needless to say, the industrialised, bureaucratised world (East and West) has pushed such experiences into the background, even suppressed them. They are permissible primarily to children. That sense of suppression and loss may be why Galembo, who collects Halloween masks and children's costumes, devotes such attention to detail in her African photographs. 'This cultural material is precious, and the information in the photograph is critical,' she says. 'We need the colour and detail in order to understand the symbolic meaning and visual impact of these costumes.' To capture that information, Galembo travels with a portable 'studio'; simple backdrops she can set up even in the middle of the street during a parade. The negotiations to make the pictures are often elaborate, involving discussions with chiefs and ritual participants. And sometimes, as in Haiti, she has to get involved in the celebrations herself. There's no standing on the sidelines.

The results are mesmerising. The Gwarama masquerade of Burkina Faso seems to turn the wearer into a pile of brush, almost like camouflage in the arid landscape. The jaguar style of Calabar Nigeria, an animal masquerade involving more than one person, is a bricolage of strips of cloth. It turns a representation into a spectacular metaphor for art's ability to transmute the ordinary. Galembo may not worship the spirits of West Africa, but in these photographs she worships the art that invokes them. #

West African Masquerade: Photographs by Phyllis Galembo at George Eastman House, 28 June - 28 September, www.eastmanhouse.org, www.galembo.com, www.stevenkasher.com

