



About The Cover

LYLE REXER

For an artist with a photojournalist's sense of the moment, the decision to make a photograph may seem spontaneous. In reality, it is often a complex synthetic response to a very specific opportunity. Why did Phyllis Galembo take this picture in the midst of Carnival in the Haitian city of Jacmel? After all, her photographs, made over two decades, from Nigeria to Brazil and the Caribbean, usually feature spectacular examples of masks and altars representing the rich visual culture of Africa and the African diaspora. Exhibitions at George Eastman House in Rochester (until September 28) and Steven Kasher Gallery in New York (September 10–October 25), highlight her stunning work from the last decade. But why this young boy, hardly costumed at all, his body smeared only with a dark paste of charcoal and cane syrup? Just a photographer's instinct, you might say, but instinct in this case unites history, experience, formal apprehension, cultural knowledge, a grasp of metaphor and, beyond all that, a conviction about what defines human beings. The situation was this: it was 2004, when events in Haiti forced the departure of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The Carnival Galembo photographed, usually so festive, had a dark political undercurrent, captured in the uncharacteristic darkness of her image, with its ominous sky and coal-black young boy. "You could feel the heat," says Galembo. The picture happened during one of the re-enactments of the story of plantation owners and slaves, common to Carnival. As she always does, Galembo worked with her Haitian assistant and collaborated with her young subject to get the image right, setting it up, as Steven Kasher describes it, "in the tradition of Edward Curtis or the world-in-a-small-room ethnic fashion studies of Irving Penn." This time, however, she did not need much negotiation or preparation. It was an especially stark situation, taken more or less on the spot. And as they rarely do in her usually celebratory work, the poverty and struggle of the Haitian people animated the image of a boy whose future was as uncertain as the country's. But there were other connections being forged within the frame. Later, Galembo realized she had made a very similar photograph in Nigeria, of a masquer whose costume was reduced to the same basic materials. Slaves had no money to buy the material for costumes, and so they used whatever came to hand. Linking the two continents and images, then, is the story of oppression—the need to recall it through ritual and transcend it through art. If power and cruelty are endemic to human beings, so is the impulse to form and beauty, in all its guises. "Haiti is a mix of the difficult and the inspiring," says Galembo. "What inspires me is the simplicity from which art is made. The boy makes a paste, covers himself, and is transformed. And the situation in which he finds himself is transformed, too." □