

BORN IN BRAZIL

LAST JANUARY, RIO FASHION WEEK MARKED ANOTHER CHANCE TO INSPECT THE LOCAL BEAUTY LOOKING FOR A TICKET NORTH

I am sitting on the twenty-fourth floor of the Othon Palace Hotel on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. It is the early afternoon and I am supposed to write to tell you what winter will look like here. I am wearing a swimsuit that is farther down my legs than the national average, looking out of the window at the tide waters and the specks of swimmers that go in and out of the waves like ash. The night before, at a club in Ipanema, I had this thought, There is too much beauty here. The sentiment of that sentence seemed so urgent I retrieved a pen from the bartender and wrote it down on the flap of a matchbook to remember it later. Today, the matchbook was used but the message offers little guidance, less enlightenment, no direction. I'm not precisely sure what deeper truths it was meant to express. That too much beauty can be harmful to you? That it's somehow dangerous for too long an exposure? Perhaps it's the situation of a visitor who doesn't want to forget home, however unattractive New York sounds in early January when the beach is at your door and your skin is turning brown.

A friend from Rio warned me about the sun in January. He said it was "much stronger than anywhere else, be careful," and he is right. It is hard to think about clothes during this intense kind of summer, mostly because everyone else seems constantly trying to get out of them—in the day and, for different reasons, at night. Nevertheless, Rio Fashion Week sent its Fall/Winter 2006 lines down its runways at the Modern Art Museum where there was also an exhibition running on Carmen Miranda. For some reason I kept trying to see the exhibition at the wrong times and never ended up walking around the remnants of a woman who once defined the Brazilian style for my grandparents' generation. I did see the fashion shows. I saw Gisele walk down the runway at Colcci wearing a beautiful white cotton shirt stitched in lace cutouts, in a sort of hippie punk cross-stitch. This is not a shirt one would wear through a New York winter, but the terms of seasons lose their antonymic currency down here. Colcci is probably the most celebrated line, but there were a few impressive newcomers as well, such as the duo behind the menswear line Reserva, who seemed to understand the idea of layering and played brilliantly with sweaters, oversized shirts, and striped shorts—like preppy skateboarders—without overdoing any particular subculture. Designers like Victor Dzenk and Lucy in the Sky, in very different ways, brought color back into their cuts in exotic unexpected forms. Redley proved a certain breakdown of peasant dress and native fabrics could build a rather striking modern collection.

I spent a little time talking to models, most of which were from the south of Brazil—known for its western European migrations—and few of which had been to New York. When I asked one male model if he ever went back home to visit his family, he looked at me funny and said, "Of course. It's my family. I love them." Perhaps the idea of escaping to the big city and casting one's dice in the modeling world as a way of disappearing from the past is a northern phenomenon. On the desk in front of me in my hotel room is a packet of financial statistics, presented to me at a meeting with APEX, a government agency that deals with Brazilian exports and trade. In this packet they clarify in very direct terms that the goal of the country is to "reach US\$4 billion in exportation up to 2008." Brazil is the world's fifteenth largest economy, and in this packet it also claims they are the fifth largest producer of textile items. The point then is that it is not merely in the interest of APEX and its private partner ABIT (the Brazilian Textile and Apparel Industry Association) to export fabric rolls but also the silhouettes, the cuts, the style. This is Colcci, not Carmen Miranda. Reserva should be in New York because young men would wear it. Getting the message out, through the Brazilian models who walked surely down the runway as stand-ins for a market north, far less tan, severely less uninhibited, and actually able to consider the winter lines of the southern tropical zone for their summer closets—that was what that week had in mind.

We had in mind the beach and the parties and the sun. There is too much beauty here is not just an insight at one in the morning. It is the economic plan of a country with the skills of going global by sticking to what it grows best. **Christopher Bollen**

Photography Thomas Alexander



Photo Marcio Madeira

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