

WINTER IN RIO

THE POLITICS, PARTIES, CLOTHES, AND GLOBAL REPOSITIONING AT WORK IN RIO DE JANEIRO LAST JUNE DURING RIO FASHION WEEK

The week I flew to Rio, Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva threatened to cut himself. Lula was facing extreme heat in a tropical winter. The government's votes-for-cash scandal had broken, with all fingers pointing to Lula's Workers' Party and more specifically to the president himself. Televisions around the country tuned in to the operatic congressional hearings, and national newspapers tracked deteriorating popularity polls on a leader who had swung into his seat in 2003 as the most supported candidate in the country's seventeen-year voting history. "What did he know?" "Why didn't he act?" In response, Lula promised to leave "no stone unturned," even if it meant cutting into his own flesh while wiping out insider corruption, which in his own words on his weekly radio address threatened to destroy fundamental chances to "develop this country."

Developing this country might not be on the minds of everyone who takes the nine-hour plane ride south across the equator and lands in São Paulo in another season—with connecting flights to Brasilia or Rio or São Bernardo do Campo—but it is for those looking to make fortunes or foothold ventures in the loosening markets of the Americas. In Varig Airline's business class section, the executive who sat next to me explained that she had come to "do damage control" for her own U.S.-based IT company. "When the president's party comes under fire," she said, "public support for foreign investors has a way of going down the drain fast." She got off the plane in São Paulo where two bodyguards were scheduled to meet her. I remained on board with those in more festive clothes, drinking chilled white wine and listening to the bossa nova on the complimentary headsets.

If there were signs of open revolt of the current administration, the city hid its jitters well. Rio is a city of surfaces but not in the clean and collapsible Los Angeles manner. "Paradise with teeth," as I heard it described by a friend before I visited, "but paradise for sure." June winter counted temperatures in the mid-eighties, and the shortened daylight hours did not affect the endless stream of young men in black spandex bathing suits playing smash ball and young women in bikini bottoms coming in and out of consciousness on reclining chairs along Ipanema Beach. The first-time visitor to this particular littoral learns quickly that averting one's eyes isn't necessary—voyeurism does not seem to traffic as an insult. In fact, one could argue looking as cultural reflex. Physical beauty is one of the most viable outsider myths of Brazil, which finds its actuality intact. The sweep of narrow mountains thrusting vertiginously over the gridded modernist architecture lends a sense of '60s European luxury dropped in the tropics, a slightly nostalgic best-of-both-worlds unencumbered by advertisements and billboards and foreign retail chains—paradise without the commercial filler. One thinks of Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Brazil, January 1, 1502": "every square inch filling in with foliage—/ big leaves, little leaves,



Photo Marcio Madeira



and giant leaves, blue, blue-green, and olive, with occasional lighter veins and edges/ ...fresh as if just finished/ and taken off the frame." The week before I went to Rio, I had flown on a 747 from Paris to New York and sat next to a Polish college student who told me with serious disappointment that he heard "real American girls don't look at all like they do on television." Postcards of Copacabana were fading in the afternoon sun next to the far more incredible vista they tried to capture.

Rio Fashion Week was another opportunity to examine the city's spectacle in its own preferred terms. And in that week of political upheaval it might have come as an anodyne to concentrate on homegrown aesthetics. Rio has often been considered the less cosmopolitan sister to São Paulo's fashion industry, but on the runways at the Modern Art Museum the designers issuing their Spring 2006 lines carried such a devout sense of optimism it seemed possible to imagine that aesthetics could indeed carry the day. Standouts were many: Graca Ottoni's deliberate fuchsia and aquamarine explosions; Lucy in the Sky's jumbled color-wheel prints; O Estudio's casual primaries leaking out of, in one striking outfit, a men's black-and-white checkered suit. At one point during the week I found myself backstage just before the models flocked onstage wearing Blue Man swimwear. In the dressing rooms a group of preteens wearing the designer bathing suits gathered around a film crew and screamed on cue, "Welcome to Fashion Rio!" Ten minutes later these kids opened the Blue Man show, carrying surfboards and paddles into the tent, mimicking a day at the beach before their older replacements walked coolly across the floor in their adult bikinis and board shorts. This suggestion of innocent children morphing into lean-bodied 20-year-olds was fraught with a kind of nationalistic symbolism—marketing the myth that the next generation will grow up to be just as beautiful and leisured as those of the past, a myth, one would argue, that wasn't jibing with the political witch hunts and corrosive consequences of a president found guilty of bribery charges.

Former Labor Party leader and resident whistle-blower Roberto Jefferson said Lula cried when he first told the president about the corruption. "Tears fell from his eyes," Jefferson testified to a congressional panel in an attempt to clear blame. The only person who stole the front page headlines from Lula that week was Gisele Bündchen, who walked in the Colcci show wearing ripped denim and blue bangles. The next morning, every paper pressed Gisele's face under their title—another indication that aesthetics were indeed a controlling chip in the city's power struggle. Because, of course, the image of children in designer swimsuits or Gisele in a jean top isn't merely done to sell a favored image of the country to itself. Rather, it's to sell it globally. At an afternoon cocktail reception, a senior agent from the textile industry explained that Brazil was interested in making a move to become a major world exporter. "We want to compete with China or India for world sales in fabric," he said. "We are working to change the export taxes on us and plan to do this after the World Trade Association meetings in the fall. We already have the factories in place." It became increasingly clear why Gisele and Lula competed for media attention that week with the significance of a president losing credibility on an international scale and a famous face coming home to walk in its fashion program. It was understandable why the executive on Varig Airlines was flying down to smooth hostilities before it was too late. The Brazilian *real* was trading down on the U.S. dollar. Brazil is the fourth largest democracy in the world and, until the pork-barreling scandal, its markets were strengthening significantly, as was its measure in the world. Brazil was a paradise that was turning into an international vested interest, and much of that interest was built on the strength of its looks, style, and clothes. Again from Bishop, describing the impression of the country on the Christians conquering it: "corresponding nevertheless, to an old dream of wealth and luxury/ already out of style when they left home—/ wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure."

At night I went out to clubs like Zero Zero, where many of the models hung out after their shows. They told me how much they "liked" New York, but not "to live, not more than a year." Brazil is home. They drank caipirinhas. The clear apogee of Rio Fashion Week was the swimsuit show by the rightly celebrated designer Lenny, in which lithe Amazonian bodies posed in Day Glo orange, milk-white, and reflective gold bikinis and one-pieces. It was hard to imagine a more fitting tribute to the overwhelming beauty of Brazil. "An old dream of wealth and luxury... plus a brand-new pleasure." Lula forced the resignation of his chief of staff, Jose Dirceu, in an attempt to cut the tumor from his flesh. The Friday before I flew home, Varig Airlines filed for bankruptcy in a Rio courtroom to block Boeing's seizure of eleven unpaid jets—this seemed a reverse in the global-market strategizing Brazil had made its *modus operandi* in recent years. During the night, along Copacabana and Ipanema, under the floodlights lit to keep the beaches safe, men in swimsuits played volleyball and the ocean swelled against the dark. **Christopher Bollen**

Photography Tina Tyrell

