Phyllis Galembo’s archive of masquerade photography is decades deep and spans more than ten countries across the African Diaspora. For this issue’s Look, Galembo gave us access to her entire collection, including rare glimpses at emerging costume trends in the secret societies of Sierra Leone. Some of her most striking work comes from Haiti, and in the last 14 years, Galembo has visited the island almost annually. “Haiti is just an amazing place,” she says. “I don’t know whether it’s the survival mechanisms they have in music and art, but there is a very special energy there that’s hard to describe.” Galembo had been planning to return to Jacmel, an historic city in the south of the country, for carnival, before the devastating earthquake hit earlier this year. She is currently working on a series of limited-edition prints to raise money for the area and a new book called Mask that will feature her photography from Haiti, as well as Nigeria and Zambia. She’ll also be exhibiting alongside artist Nick Cave at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art in Charleston, South Carolina this May, and Cave’s sculptural “soundsuit” promise to be a fitting foil to her portraits.
SPIRITUALIZED: PHYLLIS GALEMBO CAPTURES THE MAGIC IN THE MASQUERADE

PHOTOGRAPHY PHYLLIS GALEMBO

LOOK

Left: Freetown, Sierra Leone. Right: Grange Hill, Jamaica. Opposite: Freetown, Sierra Leone.

PHOTOGRAPHY © PHYLLIS GALEMBO. COURTESY STEVEN KASHER GALLERY.
To trace the thread through photographer Phyllis Galembo’s impressive body of work, you almost have to go back to her childhood, when the photographer embarked on a solo trick-or-treat mission in her Long Island neighborhood dressed as a beatnik. Halloween is said to be the time of year that the spirit world and the real world come closest, and it’s where her fascination with elaborate ensembles and ritual dress began. Since gathering one hundred years’ worth of homegrown Halloween wizardry for her book Dressed for Thrills, Galembo has captured images of vodou ceremonies under Haitian waterfalls, masquerades in Zambia and kingly and queenly in the globe so many times in the last 25 years that it allowed her to make connections. “I think in all societies, people like the opportunity to express themselves through ritual,” she says. “People enjoy that moment of transformation.” In her series of photos from Rara, Haiti, the mundane is joyously transformed into the magical with spangly outfits fashioned entirely out of last year’s Christmas decorations. In Zambia, the costumes have a distinctly ancestral beauty—painted wooden masks are paired with woven raffia or crocheted body stockings. Flipping through her archive uncovers a secret recipe book of otherworldly invention, and many of her subjects have yet to be documented anywhere else. Every October, Galembo watches the parades on Sixth Avenue in New York and keeps an eye out for the latest Halloween trends (“Michael Jackson and zombies last year,” she notes). In the same way, carnival costumes in Haiti are a barometer of the times, with sartorial statements that confront topical issues like deforestation and AIDS. Mostly though, masquerade comes down to showmanship, and in Sierra Leone, avid costume makers have started importing taxidermy in their efforts to upstage one another, adding stag heads to already intricate pieces, the male-dominated art form mimicking the way a peacock spreads its feathers. Equally powerful are pictures of the youngest carnival participants and their simple kindergarten creations, such as the little masked zombie boy in Jacmel, Haiti, his torso wrapped in rope and glinting with black paint like he’s been brushed in hot tar.

I witnessed my first West African masquerade around the same age that Galembo donned her first Halloween costume. It was by my grandmother’s compound, a tiny village outside of Owerre, Nigeria called Umuobia and the memory remains vivid as her photographs. I spent most of the affair huddled behind my mum’s caftan, afraid of the creatures before me. My father assured me there was nothing to be scared of, that the masqueraders were the same kids I’d been playing with the day before, that it was all part of a secret society that connected us to the realm of spirits. Galembo’s uncanny ability to dismantle the barrier between the observer and the observed only makes me wish I’d joined the dance.

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Left: Sierra Leone. Opposite: Jacmel, Haiti and Mexico.