



Carnival is Woman: The Female Gaze in Trinidad Carnival

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Abstract

Trinidad Carnival is often described as a celebration of freedom and self-expression, yet its dominant imagery remains shaped by the male gaze. The phrase “Carnival is woman” reflects how the festival has become synonymous with the hypersexualisation of women, with media representations fixating on their bodies as objects of desire. This mix of interview data and literature on Carnival shifts the focus to the female gaze, exploring how women reclaim agency over their own representation in the festival. The conversation with visual artists Celine Marquez and Brittany De Freitas examines the portrayal of female masqueraders through the eyes of women themselves. Marquez’s photography captures women in moments of joy and authenticity, while De Freitas’ three-dimensional art explores the sacred-secular duality of Carnival and the position of the female body within that tension.

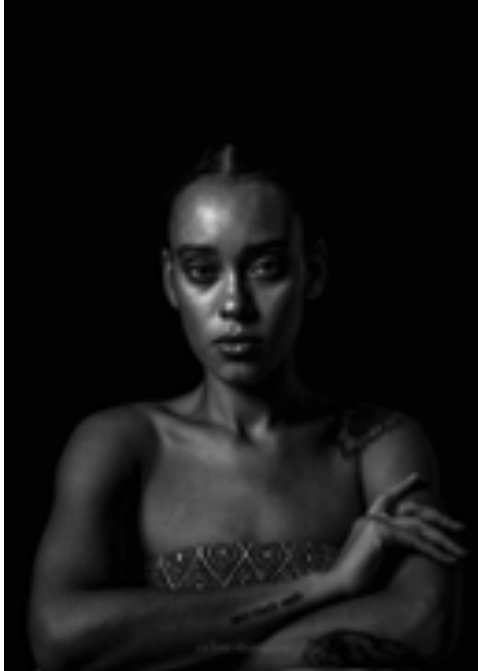
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Introduction

Trinidad's local phrase, "Carnival is woman," summarizes the central place of the hypersexualisation of women in the festival. The dominant "pretty mas" culture features women in revealing bikinis moving to soca songs that often reduce women to objects of desire. These lyrics are belted out on the streets by men and women musical artistes alike. From Fay-Ann Lyons exclaiming, "when the girls look good, yeah, the boys they come around [...] Carnival is woman, Carnival is girls, girls, girls, sexy girls" in her 2017 song *Girls*, to Kes proclaiming in his 2024 song *Dutty Flex* that "gyal run Carnival" because of the lengths a man would go for a woman's wine (the gyration of her hips against his body), there is a repetition of the idea of women defined in sexual terms. These lyrics suggest a way of seeing. In other words, Carnival greatly appeals to the male gaze. The blend of interviews and literature on Carnival that follows, here, offers an intentional shift in focus, giving privilege to the female gaze. Noel (2009) offers a unique perspective, seeing the female body itself as both a costume and a form of rebellion. Women can knowingly step into their sexuality, not for the pleasure of men but for their own pleasure. Through conversations with two visual artists, photographer Celine Marquez and mixed-media artist Brittany De Freitas, I explore how they use their creative mediums to address women's portrayal and power within the space of the Trinidad Carnival.



Celine Marquez
Self Portrait, 2022.

Celine Marquez

is a photographer from Trinidad and Tobago. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Language and Intercultural Relations. Despite not pursuing formal education in photography, she has always had an interest in this art form and hopes to be a full-time photographer one day. Marquez's artistic focus is directed at the emotions of her photographic subjects. For this reason, when she got the chance to take pictures for Toronto Caribbean Carnival 2024 and Trinidad Carnival in 2025, she wanted to represent the raw feelings that she had experienced on the road in the past.



Celine Marquez
Port of Spain, Trinidad Carnival
2025.

In our conversation, Marquez reiterated that Carnival is indeed woman. Therefore, so were about eighty percent of the photos she took. Women tend to put more into their appearance, and as a result, they tend to catch her eyes more. Yet, a man and a woman can look at the same woman and represent her in different ways. The concept of the male gaze versus the female gaze is rooted in theories of visual culture and representation, particularly in the context of gender studies and feminist theory. Conceptualised by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the male gaze refers to the way in which visual arts and media often depict the world and women from the perspective of a heterosexual male. It often objectifies women as they are framed as passive objects of desire and positioned for the pleasure of male viewers (Mulvey 2016). This also affects the way women perceive themselves (Goddard 2000). On the other hand, the female gaze challenges this traditional perspective by presenting visual content from a female standpoint. It seeks to depict women in ways that transcend stereotypes and objectification.

In Marquez's photographs, women are not seen making sexy poses. She prefers candid shots that display their joy. She navigates her craft with a genuine consideration for her subjects' comfort and consent, often questioning if the subjects appreciate how they are portrayed as part of her photo-editing process. Marquez's lens allows for the depiction of women as more than sexual objects. They are humans having a pleasurable experience. Marquez's photographic narrative becomes a medium through which the unseeable self emerges, emphasising the multifaceted nature of women's identities during Carnival. It encourages viewers to delve beyond the surface and appreciate the depth and diversity of experiences that contribute to the collective celebration of womanhood in this cultural parade. The intentional focus on human expression contributes to a more balanced and holistic perspective on women's participation in Carnival.



Celine Marquez, Port of Spain, Trinidad Carnival, 2025.

De Freitas (1999) explains how media photographs have played a key role in crafting a “Carnival is woman” narrative. Historically, “respectable” women were absent from street celebrations due to societal expectations, though many participated discreetly on decorated lorries or in masks. After World War II, they fully entered the streets, eventually outnumbering men in Carnival bands. However, it was the media’s portrayal of the 1992 Carnival that marked a shift, emphasizing women’s visibility and depicting them as dominant figures in the celebration (De Freitas 1999). Camera lenses, primarily controlled by men, fixated on scantily clad, dancing women, constructing them as the defining



Celine Marquez, Port of Spain, Trinidad Carnival, 2025.

image of Carnival. Carnival imagery increasingly concentrated on “bikinis, bosoms and bling, and women in mas are represented as accommodating themselves to stereotypes of male desire” (Marshall, Farrar and Farrar 2018, 38). While men had previously been the unmarked participants, the media now framed Carnival through a gendered lens, positioning the sensual female masquerader as “the quintessential metaphor of Carnival” (De Freitas 1999). Marquez's focus on joy and authenticity promotes a more nuanced understanding of women as Carnival masqueraders, countering the reduction of women to sexual objects.



Brittany De Freitas

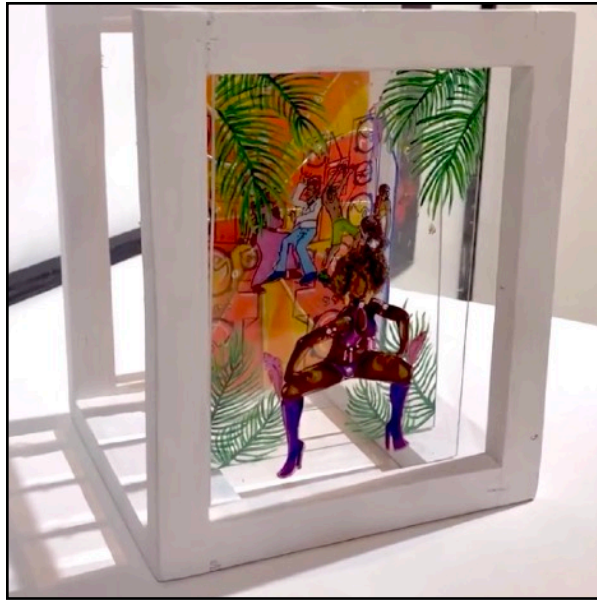
is a Trinidad-based multidimensional artist. Seeking a blend of creativity and practicality, De Freitas pursued a BA in Cultural and Creative Industries for her tertiary education. She is currently freelancing while serving as a Project Coordinator for the Menstrual Equity Project.

Portrait of **Brittany De Freitas**, 2023.
Photographer: Haydn Gonzalez.

In her piece titled *The Sacred in the Secular*, De Freitas' positions a dancing female masquerader against stained plexiglass. The stained glass echoes the Church, but Carnival is as sacred as it is secular. The history of the celebration itself is a sacred-secular blend. The origins of Carnival in Trinidad began with the pre-Lenten festivities of French planters – their last hurrah before the piety of Lent, and the merging of their rituals with the celebratory practices of the enslaved. In the post-emancipation period, the French and Creole residents excused themselves from the festivities, which allowed Carnival to become a festival of and for the people (Goddard-Scovel 2016). Riggio (2020) notes that “it is impossible to separate [Carnival’s] Christian, primarily Catholic, framework from the politics of its evolution and development” (204). However, in the post-independence period, the festival was co-opted as part of a nation-building

and tourism project, leading to efforts to sanitize its rebellious and unrestrained nature. The moral policing of the government was “the clarion call of Puritan-influenced, middle-class ruling elites taking their cue from their colonial predecessors” (Riggio 2020, 209-210). The tension between the sacred and the profane can be seen in every aspect of Carnival, including gender relations.

De Freitas plays with this tension, presenting the woman's body in a moment of uninhibited movement while also fixing the figure in a broad frame. The act of wining is frequently framed through a hypersexualized lens and frowned upon by more conservative Christians. Yet, wining serves as a form of reclamation, allowing women to assert control over their bodies and how they are viewed (Marshall, Farrar and Farrar 2017). Some argue that contemporary “pretty mas” is “one which celebrates the female body in public through bodily transgressions, and assaults conservative notions of a woman's ‘proper place’” (Marshall, Farrar and Farrar 2018, 38). To play mas on the streets is performance-based art in itself that allows one to express their inner self (Dewis 2014). By portraying the moving woman, De Freitas reclaims the image of the female masquerader, presenting her not as an object of desire but as an active participant in her own narrative—one that embraces Carnival's contradictions and affirms the female gaze as a lens of empowerment. To recognise oneself as more than flesh is to see one's sacredness – to see one's inner self. De Freitas notes that, “intuitively, a lot of women can quicker connect to the sacredness of our bodies. We can recognise the sacredness of our sexuality. We are vessels from which life springs. A broad generalisation on the other hand, shows that men have been more inclined to see women as vessels of pleasure, finding it harder to appreciate the sacredness of a woman's body.”



De Freitas believes that “we have adopted a very commercialized version of carnival—wine and jam—which was not the initial intent. Carnival is a rebellion. In that rebellion, there’s freedom. It has boiled down to a street party, which takes away from the cultural elements.” While acknowledging the importance of the street party aspect, she urges a critical dialogue on the commodification and hypersexualization of Carnival, cautioning against simplifying the complex richness of this cultural festival to mere revelry. We cannot get so caught up in fighting conservatism that we simplify ourselves to just sexual beings. There needs to be a balance that preserves the cultural integrity and diversity of Carnival and our humanness.



Brittany De Freitas
The Sacred in the Secular, 2023.
Mixed media on plexi, wood frame
12 x 10 x 9 in.

Being aware of your impact leads to intentional creation. De Freitas knows that her work has the potential to contribute to broader societal shifts in perceptions of gender and identity. “Art is a universal language,” she proclaims. “We have the power to shape paradigms. We have seen it throughout history.” Artists have a unique platform to challenge societal norms and provoke critical thinking. Art can be a powerful tool for dissent, pushing against established ideas and encouraging audiences to question prevailing beliefs. This piece has already connected with many via social media and was showcased in the *Burn from the Inside* exhibition in Trinidad and Tobago in August 2023.

Conclusion

If “Carnival is woman,” work by Celine Marquez and Brittany De Freitas demonstrates that “woman” is an expansive, complex concept and that the phrase means Carnival is freedom. Carnival, at its core, is a space of both expression and contention—a festival where history, religion, and gender identity collide. While the dominant narrative often frames women as objects of desire, works by the artists presented here challenge this notion by offering different perspectives of women in Carnival through the female gaze. Their artworks ensure that women are not just seen but are empowered to see themselves on their own terms, in their own joy.

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