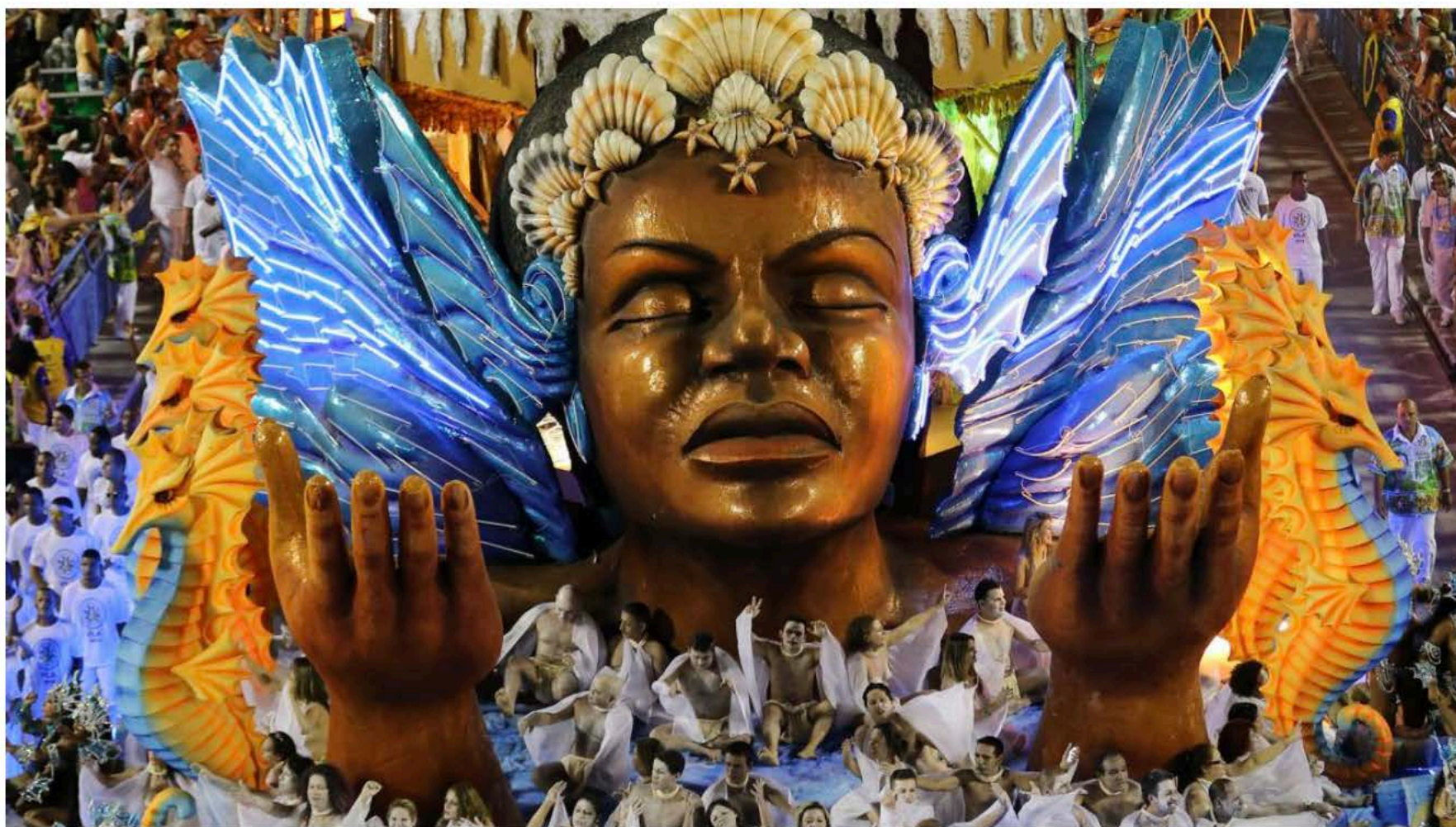


How it feels to ... dance at Rio carnival

The British artist Nicola Green, 44, travelled alone to Brazil to perform with an official samba troupe at the iconic festivities. Could she keep up with the pace?

Nicola Green | Sunday May 22 2016, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



Show on the road: Rio's heaving half-mile-long Sambadrome

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It was a hot afternoon, the day before the Rio carnival began. I arrived at a hotel in the centre of the city and was handed my costume: a huge outfit made with thick wiring, like a Roman centurion with silver wings, vast padded shoulders and a leotard. I was feeling excited and nervous as I knew no one around me, but not at all self-conscious.

I had joined an official Rio samba school, the Alegria da Zona Sul, and was looking forward to taking part in the largest carnival in the world. Unusually for me, I barely spoke for the next four days. As a woman on my own, knowing little Portuguese, I had no choice but to witness, watch and observe.

At the specially constructed Sambadrome — like a football stadium but half a mile long — samba schools parade all night down the pista, or the parade route, with floats and bands, watched by thousands in the stands. Each school competes to be the best in costume, dance and music. While there are some scantily dressed women in little more than feather boas, most of the costumes are enormous, and seem inspired by otherworldly fantasies. It is a dream of most Brazilians to do this once in their lifetime — but few tourists are lucky enough to take part.

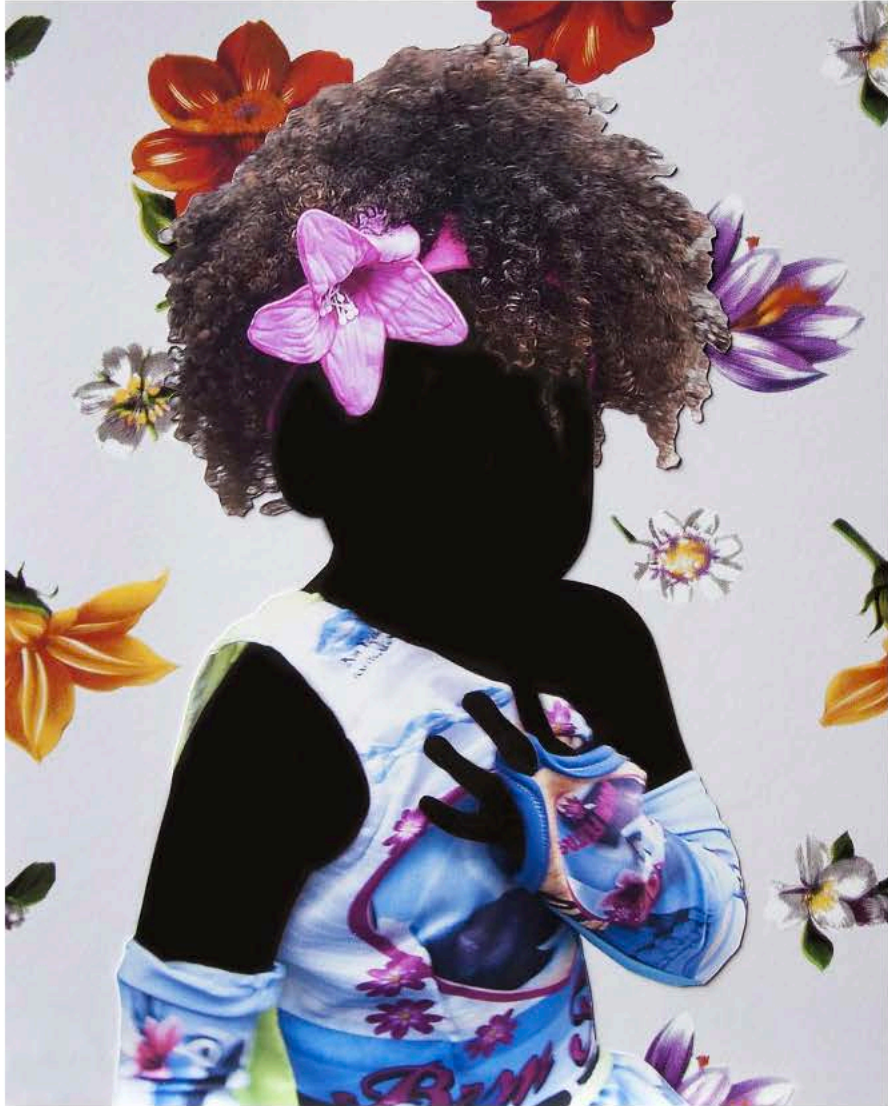


Nicola limbers up
© NICOLA GREEN

So how did I come to be at Rio? I had first witnessed the parade the previous year as a spectator. The energy, chaos, colour and heat was intoxicating. As soon as I got back home to Britain, I began researching how I could return as a dancer. Brazil is also interesting to me for another reason: as a mother of mixed-race boys, I often think about what it means to be of mixed heritage in the 21st century. I'm an artist, and was planning a series of works on this subject. I focused on Brazil for three reasons. First, my husband's family are from South America; second, more than 80m Brazilians describe themselves as mixed race; and third, their history of cultural and racial identity is deeply compelling and complex.

The tradition of carnival stems from the time of slavery, when, on a festival day, role reversal and freedom of expression became central to celebration. So began the cross-fusion between European, African and native traditions through music, dance and dress.

Over those few days, the normal order of things was suspended. Power, money and status became unidentifiable. Anything could be subverted and reimaged. This gave a sense of freedom that still exists to this day: a chance to find and express new and suppressed versions of oneself.



Her painting Carnival Beat, Hibiscus 2016
© NICOLA GREEN

I went with the flow and fitted into the great narrative of my 1,000-strong school, whose huge floats brought together African goddesses and St George and the dragon. Outside the Sambadrome are blocos — groups creating their own carnival, usually with a samba band and often a theme. These consist of five people or hundreds dressing up, meeting on a street corner and dancing, and they are everywhere you look, day and night. In the mix are the bate-bolas — gang members who redefine themselves by wearing Tudor-style doublet and hose, fur, manga motifs and clown masks. Although people are friendly and happy, they are mostly carried away in their own emotions. I was able to take in so much while everyone around me was partying and singing.

On the night of our parade, I couldn't believe I was actually there, in such a fantastical costume, surrounded by strangers in equally crazy outfits. Our instructor was barking rules and instructions, and I panicked that I'd be the one letting the whole school down. I was hot and nervous. The gate opened, our music began and the beat was powerful. Miraculously, not being the greatest dancer and with only an hour's training, I was swept down the pista with all the others. Out of nowhere, I found my samba rhythm. I was part of something much bigger than myself, and I literally danced my shoes off.

Rio in numbers

- **2m:** the estimated number of people on the streets of Rio each day during the five-day carnival, which is held annually before Lent

Nicola Green: The Dance of Colour is at Flowers Gallery, London W1, May 25-June 18; flowersgallery.com

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