

TITILLATING AND TRANSCENDENT

Jana Marcus' captivating work dives into gender identity.



— GREG ARCHER

Jesse says: "I am a young man. A gentleman."

Tyler says: "I am one of many types of men that exist in our world."

Isabella is more direct: "In America, I can be killed for just being true to myself."

Jesse and Tyler have something in common with Isabella. Isabella was a man. Jesse and Tyler were women. Now, they're all transgender.

Nobody would have really known all that much about this striking trio — or their emotional journeys, were it not for the curious nature of an award-winning documentary photographer named Jana Marcus. It was more than three years ago that Marcus rented out a room in her Santa Cruz home to a dashing young man named Robert. Eight months later, Robert came out to her by saying: "I was once a woman."

"I was completely shocked," Marcus recalls. "I had no idea that he was anything but a dude. I didn't know

complete with poignant quotations from its subjects—racked up a bevy of awards and is now destined — along with other transgender photographs — for a stellar New York premiere in the fall. But first, there's another San Francisco show beginning in July at Good Vibrations. Dubbed simply "Transfigurations," the current exhibit features much of Marcus's original works and also includes female transgenders as well as all post-surgery nudes. Collectively, the exhibit explores the notions of both masculinity and femininity.

that women could become men. I didn't understand it and I was curious. It was really through the experience of knowing him that I became interested in knowing what was a transgender man; how do women become men and why was that nobody knew anything about them?"

Well, they know now.

Marcus' award-winning work, "Transfigurations: The Making of a Man" — a captivating collection of male transgenders

"Throughout all of this, I thought, if this is interesting to me, it had to be interesting to somebody else," Marcus says. "It felt like very much like a secret society to me. Transgender men walked through the world and they blended in very easily. It seemed almost mysterious, almost romantically mysterious. Hopefully, through these pictures, we can discover something about a minority culture in our society."

It took Marcus six months to assemble a good number of transgender male subjects willing to tell their stories and be photographed. The iconic author Jamison Green was one of those trans men. "Being a man is a gestalt, a wholeness of mind and body," reads the caption from Green next his photograph in Marcus' show. From there, the work made rounds in San Jose and stunned audiences in SF's GLBT Center. Suddenly, the awards came pouring in:

Best Photos of the Year 2004 & 2005 by Photo District News of New York; the 2005 Phelan Art Award; Excellence in Photography Award 2005 from SJ State's School of Art & Design and the Center for Photographic Arts Awards 2004. By the time it hit the beachfront of unconventional Santa Cruz, it had been booked for two separate eye-popping shows, one at the town's Diversity Center, another at the Santa Cruz Institute of Contemporary Art. It wasn't until last year, that Marcus decided to add onto the work by spotlighting female transgenders.

"I learned a lot about how gender is structured in our country," Marcus says. "I say 'our' country because it is very different in other countries.

I am learning a lot about gender construct, which I never thought

about before. I never thought about how strict this concept of 'male' and 'female' in our culture. We are so entrenched in it when we grow up that most of us don't think about it.

She says she came to understand gender as being a much more fluid concept — one that doesn't have to be restricted to the concept of "What is a perfect woman? What is a perfect man?"

"I also think at this point for me, the work is much bigger than just being about transgender people," Marcus adds. "The work really is about having diversity and having understanding for any under-represented group in our culture, and allowing people to realize that ... 'they' are just like 'me.' I think that's the bigger universal message that I have learned."

In the meantime, the masses who experience the "Transfiguration" show learn that, male/female aside, there seem to be two things that most people all have in common with each: Being human; and a lovely quest to satisfy the thirst to do whatever it takes to become your true authentic self.

The photo documentary "Transfigurations" runs July 4- Aug. 21 at Good Vibrations Gallery, 1620 Polk Street, San Francisco. Admission is free. A reception for the artist takes place at 7:30 p.m. Monday, July 10 at Good Vibrations. The show heads to the CEPA Gallery in New York State this fall and on tour in Manhattan galleries in early 2007. For more information, visit www.jlmp photography.com. **ON**



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