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Transgender Odyssey

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WEDNESDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2011 12:52 | GREG ARCHER [COVER](#)
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In her new book, 'Transfigurations,' photographer Jana Marcus boldly captures the transgender journey and invites us to question what we think we might know about 'man,' 'woman' ... and the often uncharted waters in between

Man. Woman. Masculine. Feminine.

Eight years ago, if you asked local photographer Jana Marcus to reflect upon those words and deliver an explanation of how we identify ourselves and relate to each another, she would have been game to play along, but may have not have been prepared to truly elaborate on the subject matter and retrieve an esoteric summation.

But she is now.

That's because Marcus found herself devoting hundreds of hours interviewing and photographing the one group of individuals that, perhaps, know better than most, not only what it means to be male or female, but also what it requires to meet yourself in the mirror of your soul and fully become who you really are: Transgenders.

Enter "Transfigurations." It was the striking photography show Marcus initially launched back in 2005 that delivered one of the boldest if not most honest exposés of transgender men and women, accompanied with text. Now, on the eve of the official release of "Transfigurations" in coffee-table book form (from 7 Angels Press) and several local yet high-profile booksignings to boot, Marcus finds herself reflecting upon a journey that began in the early 2000s, realizing, perhaps, that she somehow became the creative midwife—in relatively uncharted territory—to a group of souls whose life journeys needed to be told.



"I'd always conduct interviews before I began photographing my subjects," Marcus recalls. "And afterward, as I was listening to the tapes of the people, many of them spoke about their transition and after a while many of the stories started to sound the same.

"What I found to be more interesting was not so much their transition story, but what their influences were about becoming the men and women that they were going to become. I mean, if you have been a woman your whole life, how did you decide what characteristic you wanted to embody as a man? Did they come from media? Parents? Friends? That was interesting to me and those were the stories I wanted to tell about each individual person."

Marcus did that to such effective ends, that the original work went on to win numerous awards and generate countless conversations. And with two booksignings approaching—one at Capitola Book Café on Sept. 29; the other at Bookshop Santa Cruz on Oct. 13—no doubt the dialogue on transgenders will continue.

The topic is certainly hot news at the moment, with Chaz Bono forging the way as somewhat of a bridge to understanding reversing one's gender. In addition to the release of his revealing documentary, *Becoming Chaz*, which chronicles his gender transition from Chastity Bono to "Chaz," the son of pop icon Cher is one of the featured guests on the new season of *Dancing With the Stars*. Earlier in the summer, he was one of the keynote speakers at the Gender Odyssey Conference in Seattle, Wa. Incidentally, so was Marcus. The two actually met there in a brief encounter when Bono was looking through the "Transfigurations" book.



Like her original work, the book is a vibrant collection of individuals. The forward is written by Jamison Green, a longtime trans advocate and, himself, a trans man. Broken up into three sections, "Transfigurations," "Transitions" and "Nudes" the book offers a rare glimpse into a world few know much about or may understand.

Dex. He used to be a woman serving on the force of the LAPD. Dex transitioned while still on the force and is seen here a few years after his transition in 2006.

Bottom line: "Transfigurations" is a bold, gutsy visual feast—not just for the eyes, but for the heart and soul. In her courageous endeavor to explore gender, Marcus takes us along a hypnotic ride that invites us to question everything we think we might know about "man,"

"woman" and the curious uncharted waters in between.

But to fully grasp how a small-town girl comes to embrace such an immense subject matter, it's best to turn to the images that made the biggest imprint.

Snapshots From The Past

Born in Palo Alto, Marcus and her family—parents Morton Marcus and Wilma Marcus Chandler—moved to Santa Cruz in 1968. Mort, who died in 2009 but whose legacy as a poet and film historian are the thing of legend around these parts, began teaching at Cabrillo College at the time and eventually Marcus and her younger sister, Valerie, were ushered into the creative currents of Santa Cruz County. Actually, Marcus had been trained on the piano since the age of 3 and showed amazing promise—so much so that by the time she graduated Soquel High School in the 1980s, there was a scholarship at Juilliard waiting for her.

But that snapshot wouldn't make it into the photo album of her life.

"My father gave me a camera for Christmas when I was 17 and it completely changed my life," Marcus recalls. "I realized that I didn't want to practice piano six hours a day and I had wound up playing it for everyone else. I wanted to express myself more as an artist than just playing Beethoven and Chopin, so I ran off to New York." Right after graduation, in fact. "My parents thought I would go to music school but I went off and apprenticed with a fashion photographer in New York."

By 1982, she'd entered New York's School of Visual Arts and studied photography, particularly drawn to the city's vibrant underground culture. It was mingling in this underground that she began collecting thousands of photographs until they all assembled themselves into a fascinating photography show 10 years later dubbed "After Midnight."

Mateo notes: "I want to be strong enough to not fear appearing weak. I want to reach for the impossible because anything less is not worth it."

"It was 10 years of night life in New York, from 1981-1991—punk rock to Goth to heavy metal," she muses. "It was really the subcultures of our generation that was interesting to me."

The piece won the prestigious UC Berkeley International Photo Journalism Award and solidified Marcus as a photographer of merit.

"I have this need to document things—I don't know what that is but I am very into documenting and organizing things," she notes of her interest in photography. "The things I documented with a camera just completely worked for me. I loved taking images of the things I saw. I think growing up in Santa Cruz, it was so beautiful—this little seaside town—so that when I lived in New York, it was a giant movie set to me. New York was very inspirational to me. It was so different—180 degrees different than Santa Cruz and I just thrived there."

She returned to Santa Cruz for a while between the mid-'80s and early '90s, finishing up her degree in Sociology and Community Studies at UC Santa Cruz. Then, upon graduation, ventured off to New York again—this time with classmate Camryn Manheim in tow. (Manheim eventually morphed into an Emmy-winning actress and the two are still close today.) Flashforward to the late-'90s and Marcus was back in Santa Cruz and suddenly toting an edgy, published book of her photography, "In the Shadow of the



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The book did well. So did Marcus' photography business. She made a dent, too, as the main photographer for Cabrillo Stage, where she would eventually also become marketing director. Then, about eight years ago, she acquired a renter who, one day, happened to mention that he was a transgender man.

The admission surprised Marcus. And then the idea for a photography piece suddenly sprouted in her mind. What if she collected a series of photographs and testimonials from transgenders? What if the words of her subjects appeared next to the photographs? What if all this could, somehow, shed light on a group of individuals few knew little about?



The first incarnation of "Transfigurations" was birthed as a pre-thesis to her studies at San Jose State University in 2004 and featured transgender men. In time, the work grew and, a year later, the piece showcased both trans men and women.

Acquiring the subjects was a difficult process, but Marcus and partner Amy Scott networked, and as word spread throughout the trans community that there was an outlet for their "voices" to be heard—and for them to actually be "seen," literally—Marcus wound up with many subjects.

Matt, a transgender male, gave birth to his son after transitioning from female to male, technically making him one of the very few men to give birth. "When people tell me I'm not a real man, they are just insecure about their own identity," says Matt. "I know who I am."

"I was surprised that so many people wanted to be in the show because to them, it means that they are out," she says. "It means they are letting the whole world know, 'Hey—I am a transgender person.'"

By 2005, it officially became a photography show—55 pieces in all—that would eventually grab numerous awards and tour the country. The work was well received locally and in the Bay Area. It's provocative in that it boldly illuminates both the physical and emotional journeys of its subjects—some in vivid detail.

"My goal has been to live an authentic life, to be my authentic self," noted one subject in the show, Cait, a transgender woman. "I have tried to strip away everything that was masking that, and embrace everything that felt honest. For the most part, I've become the kind of woman I wanted to be."

Another transgender male, Logan, revealed: "I went from being the most invisible form in our society—a black female—to the most feared form in our society—a black male."

Aidan K. put things this way: "I am masculine. Whether you see that as male or female is irrelevant."

At the time, Marcus considered creating a book out of the material but ... "my agent in New York would not rep a book about transgender people. He turned me down and without an agent, I couldn't get into any publishers."

Time passed. "Transfigurations" continued to grab plenty of attention. Then, last October, after several university professors had asked Marcus when her work would evolve into book form, she decided to do it herself. She launched a Kickstarter project on kickstarter.com, known for linking artists, photographers, filmmakers and writers with creative projects to sources that could help fund them. And off she went, hoping to raise \$20,000 to self-publish the book through 7 Angels Press.

"I said to my network of friends and colleagues, 'Hey, if you really want this to be a book, help me raise money,'" she says. "And ... literally within 10 days of doing that, it went like wildfire across the Internet. People I didn't even know started donating money and within 10 days we raised all the money to print the book."

Marcus pauses to reflect. "It's a great testament to the transgender community really rallying."

Nori says she based her femininity on what she saw on TV and in the media.



Transgender Nation

It's challenging to walk away from Marcus' work and not be even modestly aware of the misconceptions circulating around the transgender community.



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Dex, a 48-year-old transgender man and LAPD policer officer for 17 years, is featured in "Transfigurations" exposing his bare broad chest, shoulders and ripped abdominals. Of the original work, he says, "It was unbelievable—the pictures and the words. At that time, I wanted it to be a book. These are great stories, not that I was biased, and if I had the money, I would have done anything I could to publish it."

Dex began his LAPD tenure as a woman and transitioned while still on the force. As he looks over Marcus' material today and is asked what he feels may be the biggest misconceptions the general public may have of transgenders, the man is blunt: People are like sheep—people don't want to educate themselves. They assume things.

"When I told people I was transitioning, they were like, 'What, you like guys now?'" he adds. "I was like, 'What? I am becoming a straight man.'

"Some people have trouble wrapping their minds around gender and sexuality being a separate thing. For a trans man, I don't think they have a big problem, because we're mostly a patriarchal society. But if you're a man transitioning into a woman ... I mean, a girl can wear guys' clothes and get away with it. But if a boy wants to wear princess dresses and play with dolls, it's a major issue. I guess people figure it's a weakness."



He pauses to reflect. "For me, people said, 'So ... you're gonna get the penis?' And I was like, 'Really? Me being a man ... you think I need a penis? I was directing traffic for years and I saw a man lose his penis in a motorcycle accident, so does that make him less of a man? So ... what I have between my thighs determines who I am?'"

Beth, a 34-year-old software developer living in the Bay Area is also featured in "Transfigurations." She recalls being asked to be in the original photography show and, later, feeling really "blown away."

Beth at 36, four and a half months after facial feminization surgery;16 months after hormone treatment.

"When Jana showed me her work, that was when I actually committed to it," Beth says. "I went from not willing to entertaining the idea to wanting to do everything I could to support it. Because what I saw was the most profoundly humanizing portrait of

transsexuals that I had ever seen. And that was moving to me and that was a message that needed to get out there.

"So much of what I had seen at the time was sensational, over-the-top portrayals of what transgender and transsexual issues were, and it was more a mockery and fear than any sort of humanity. I saw the polar opposite in Jana's show. She had hit the notes perfectly in her medium."

Beth also points out what the biggest misconception of transgenders would be ... "that we're perverts. I don't how else to put that," she adds. "There are things that come out of my background—that we're all sinners; that we're all damned to hell; that we're bad people; that we're delusional; that we're showboaters and exhibitionists. I don't regard myself as a sinner, exhibitionist or a pervert."

What about ... what makes a "man"; a "woman?"

"Maybe the way you interact with others," Beth says. "There's an entire social framework on how a man interacts with another man as opposed to a woman and vice versa. When I was in the most earliest part of transition, it



didn't take very much for me or my behaviors. I didn't strain. It was really easy for me to stop fighting it and just go there.



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Aidan at 25, nine days after chest surgery.

"There's a joke ... The second thing people notice about you when they meet you is your gender. What's the first thing? Whether you're alive or dead," she adds. "You recognize male or female, if you are old or young and you instantly go into how you are going to address them and how you are going to body language with them. There's a social construct. When you can't assess the gender [of somebody], it becomes a conscious question for people and they kind of panic. They really don't know what to do. And that was a very hard place to be in [early in my transition] because realizing that people didn't know how to deal with the idea ... I didn't expect that."

As for Marcus, the upcoming booksignings and talks will undoubtedly stir more conversation. And she continues to learn more as she looks back on the fascinating journey she's been on.



"I think the power of the photographs, along with the words, really brought people to a form of awareness that they had around transgender people, and what their struggles are to become whole," Marcus reflects. "I really learned that gender is both real and illusory and it's constructed and it's natural—it's all of those things. I also think that transgender people are amazing and have so much to offer us to understand male and female relationships. They have so much to teach us because they have seen the world—from both perspectives."

Isabella says that, at times, she feels the pressure to "put myself out there, in public, with my identity. But it also hurts me that discrimination is still one of the major issues affecting the trans community."

Jana Marcus speaks about her book, "Transfigurations" (7 Angels Press) at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 29 at Capitola Book Café, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola, 462-4415,

capitolabookcafe.com. Author Nick Krieger will also be speaking about his critically acclaimed coming-of-age book, "Nina Here Nor There" (Beacon Press).

Marcus also will be speaking at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 13 at Bookshop Santa Cruz, 1520 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz, 423-0900, bookshopsantacruz.com. Jamison Green will be speaking at this event.

"Transfigurations" can also be ordered via 7angelspress.com. Learn more about Jana Marcus and her work at janamarcus.com.

Photo of Jana by Amy Scott / Photos by Jana Marcus

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