

## Self-Made Men

**SJSU grad student Jana Marcus documents transsexual men's notions of masculinity in her show 'Transfigurations: The Making of a Man'**

**By Mike Connor**

Some of the subcultures of Jana Marcus' photo documentaries—vampires, NYC punk rockers and S&M enthusiasts, for instance—don't exactly require a keen eye to see what makes them unusual. Like Baudelaire and the rest of the dandies, Marcus' subjects wear their differences on the outside, presenting the voyeuristic yin plenty of exhibitionist yang.

Marcus's award-winning thesis work, titled "Transfigurations: The Making of a Man," on display May 2-6 (during the SJSU Transgender Symposium, May 2-5), works in exactly the opposite direction, gently exposing dramatic questions of gender and sexual identity beneath the rather plain and unambiguously masculine exteriors of transsexual men. In fact, Marcus says some viewers don't notice anything unusual about the 30-by-30-inch portraits until they read the accompanying text, which Marcus distilled from intimate interviews with the subjects. "When they realize they were once women," says Marcus, "they go back and look at the whole show again."

Not that the whole show is subtle—the title is sufficiently descriptive, and post-surgery nudes explicitly convey the physical truth of the matter. But the majority of the show is intentionally nonsensationalist. "What gets asked a lot is, 'What do your genitals look like?'" says Marcus. "I really wanted to kind of take the focus off of that and put the focus on the thought process of what kind of men they wanted to be."

The transgendered men's ability to pass as men is particularly interesting to Marcus, who was inspired by a former renter who lived with her for eight months before he revealed—to her complete surprise—that he had been a woman seven years prior. "I realized that transgender men look so much like men that we don't realize they are part of our society—they really pass in society," says Marcus. "I had never met a transgender man before, and I realized this was a secret, mysterious world of transformation not often talked about in everyday society."

Says one of Marcus' subjects, 56-year-old Jamison, "We [transgender people] come to understand and accept our masculinity and femininity and its relationship to our female and maleness, but it's the body that gives us problems—it's the body that we have to deal with in order to express our deepest sense of self."

The sympathetic sociological dimension in her "Transformations" makes it significant to participants, curators and magazine editors alike—Photo District News has included photographs from "Transfigurations" among its "Best Photos of the Year" for 2004 and 2005. The show also inspired the Transgender Awareness Week and Symposium, an event peopled with artists, speakers and writers dealing with the transgender experience, an event that Marcus says is the largest of its kind (on a university campus)—ever.

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Transfigurations shows May 2-6 in Gallery 3 of the art building at SJSU, with a reception May 3, 6pm. The Transgender Symposium runs May 2-5 at various locations on the SJSU campus. Events include a talk by Jamison Green, a workshop by the Human Rights Commission, the documentary short 'Just a Boy' and a panel discussion. See [www.sjsu.edu/transweek](http://www.sjsu.edu/transweek) for schedule details.



*CHANGING. Jana Marcus' photographs explore dramatic questions of gender and sexual identity.*

