

'TRANSFIGURATIONS'

Photographer Jana Marcus examines the transsexual experience in her new collection of photos.

{ **OPENING MAY 1** Reception with the artist: May 5, 5 to 8 p.m. Runs through June 30. The Attic, 931 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz. Free admission. Details: www.jlmphotography.com. }



ABOVE: 'Transfigurations' features large black and white images of male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals.

LEFT: Santa Cruz photographer Jana Marcus first became interested in 'reassigned' men and women after renting a room in her home to a man who had grown up as a girl.

By WALLACE BAIN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The men and women in the photographs of Jana Marcus are remarkable in that they were all once women and men, respectively. The subjects of Marcus's new show to be exhibited at The Attic in Santa Cruz are transsexuals, among the growing number of people who choose to go through the socially, emotionally and physically traumatizing experience of changing their gender.

Marcus's contribution to the understanding of transsexuals has been in her insistence to highlight the distinctions between the two varieties of transsexuals: female-to-males (transsexual men) and male-to-females (transsexual women). Many of the lessons she has taken away from her encounter with her subjects have to do with the widely divergent experiences between the two types.

A year ago, Marcus made a splash with her collection of photographs called "Transfigurations: The Making of Man," which focused exclusively on transsexual men. Now, she's turning her photographer's eye on transsexual women. The show at The Attic, which is scheduled to travel to San Francisco and New York later this year, is new work of both "reassigned" men and women.

"This work is not so much about the surgeries and the body changes and such," said Marcus, a Santa Cruzan who has won several honors with her "Transfigurations" photos. "It's really about what does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman?" Marcus first became interested in the subject five years ago when she rented a room in her home to a nice young man who she later learned grew up as a girl. At the time, she said, she had an attitude, shared by most, that transsexuals were almost exclusively men who had become women. "I didn't even know that women could become men," she said.

That encounter led her to seek out other transsexual men, bringing her insights not only on the unique experience of changing gender, but in the universal experience of living with gender. For instance, she said, she was shocked to hear transsexual men talk of the foreign experience of inner rage after injections of the male hormone testosterone.

"I learned something of the power of hormones," she said, "particularly how testosterone is a ravager of the body. I talked to transsexual men who talked about the literal pain of not being able to cry after this testosterone therapy."

Her more recent experience photographing transsexual women was just as eye-opening. Male-to-female transsexuals, she said, face a myriad of issues distinct from those of transsexual men. Issues of "passing" are much more daunting for trans-women than for men, said Marcus, who is shopping a book of her photos to publishers. "You see someone with facial hair and you just assume they're a man. You don't even think twice about it." But people's antennae are much more attuned to former males trying to pass as women.

Counter-intuitively, male-to-female surgeries can more complicated, traumatic and expensive, especially considering facial re-construction surgery. And perhaps, most difficult for trans-women, said Marcus, is the transition that involves learning to inhabit a female body.

With trans-men, she said, she noticed a certain ease with their post-op state. "They were fairly comfortable with who they were. They were very feminist-minded men. But they were men." With trans-women, the learning curve can be more difficult. "They really struggle with the idea of living as a woman." Many, she said, become fixated on clothes and make-up and adopt an almost child-like quality to the experience of being a woman.

These transitions represent the humanity inherent in her photographs, said Marcus. "I was so emotionally overwhelmed," she said of the positive reaction to her show last year. "It's really important for a group like this to be represented in society." the learning curve can be more difficult. "They really struggle with the idea of living as a woman." Many, she said, become fixated on clothes and make-up and adopt an almost child-like quality to the experience of being a woman. These transitions represent the humanity inherent in her photographs, said Marcus. "I was so emotionally overwhelmed," she said of the positive reaction to her show last year. "It's really important for a group like this to be represented in society."

Contact Wallace Baine at wbaine@santa-cruz.com.