



JANA MARCUS

The Third Gender

Local photographer's award-winning thesis project explores transgendered identity | by Meghan O'Hare

Ever since Viola donned breeches and a tunic to transform herself into Cesario in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," the public has been fascinated and entertained by women disguised as men, and vice versa. Once transgendered behavior descends from the stage into real life, however, amusement, more often than not, becomes animosity. Transvestites, transgendered people, and transsexuals are the frequent targets of ridicule, harassment, and outright violence.

In a society invested in maintaining a distinction between the sexes, people who defy the norm are pathologized and labeled as deviant. Although those who wish to undergo surgery to alter their sex now have the option of doing so, their decision comes at a high price, both financially and emotionally. In order to be eligible for sex reassignment surgery, someone who identifies with the opposite gender must first be diagnosed with "Gender Identity Disorder." The cure for their "illness"—surgery—costs several thousands of dollars and is not covered by health insurance. Accompanied by intense hormone treatments and the physical effects of adjusting to a new body, the recovery process is long and painful. Even after surgery, an act as simple as using a public bathroom can be a nightmare for someone who affiliates with but does not yet fully resemble the opposite sex.

Local photographer and San Jose State University graduate student Jana Marcus captures the difficult but often rewarding transition of female-to-male transsexuals in her photo-documentary thesis project, "The Third Gender." Despite the historical invisibility of female-to-male transsexuals, her groundbreaking work caught the attention of Photo District News, the industry's premiere magazine, who honored Marcus with the prestigious Photography Annual 2004 award for best student work.

"[The award] is wonderful for the project," she says. "[The issue of female-to-male transsexuality] has been a hot topic within the transgendered and transsexual community for a while, but now it's starting to get air time in mass culture."

Throughout her 20-year career, Marcus has drawn her inspiration from people on the fringes of society. She says, "I'm interested in subcultures—what makes them what they are and how the piece fits into the body. I want to explore marginalized groups and give them a voice."

Marcus's curiosity about female-to-male transsexuals was piqued after a male acquaintance confessed to her that he was born female. His unexpected revelation provoked in the photographer a desire to learn more about the inner workings of the unexplored group.



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Photographer Jana Marcus draws her inspiration from people on the fringes of society. (self-portrait)

"As a documentary photographer, the things I have questions about I exercise through my camera lens," she says. "I wanted to break down stereotypes and allow America to experience something it hasn't seen before."

Dr. Susan Murray, professor of gender studies and sociology at SJSU and Marcus's thesis advisor, appreciates the potential of "The Third Gender" to raise awareness about transgender issues. She says, "I think, because Jana's taking photographs and interviewing people ... you can't help having empathy if you hear and see their struggle. This work and others like it are about educating people about the diversity we truly embrace ... Hopefully the project makes visible transgendered people and the contributions they make in helping us understand gender."

For six months, Marcus photographed and interviewed men in various stages of transition. Braving the hostility and threats that can follow being "outed," her subjects allowed her to reveal the most intimate aspects of their changing bodies.

"They want to educate and help other women, to let them know it's okay to be this way," Marcus says.

For many of the subjects, exposing themselves to the camera lens is a cathartic part of resolving their conflicted feelings and adjusting to their transforming bodies.

Marcus says, "A big part of the struggle for a lot of people is personal identity realization—where do they fit in society? They have always felt they were supposed to be the other sex. A lot are very suicidal. There is a high suicide rate among transsexual people."

Although mainstream society still ostracizes and discriminates against transsexuals, Marcus believes their situation is beginning to improve. More and more people are becoming aware that they have the option of changing their biological sex to match the gender with which they identify.

"For the younger generation, from about 19 to 22, [sex reassignment surgery] is becoming very popular. In San Francisco, it's almost at fetish proportions. They're making choices and

immediately getting onto hormones."

This increased awareness, however, also comes with negative consequences. The difference in attitudes and availability of surgery has created something of a generation gap between younger and older transsexuals.

"The older people, those who transitioned 30 years ago and were on the forefront, have a much different viewpoint. They're very concerned about the younger generation making choices too quickly. There are a lot of botched surgeries ... Phalloplasty [the operation by which a surgeon builds a penis out of tissue] is very expensive and doesn't always work."

Marcus wishes to continue learning more about the issues surrounding female-to-male transsexuality. Although "The Third Gender" has already won an award, she insists that it is still in the developmental stage. One of her subjects has asked Marcus to document his transition for the next two years. The photographer hopes that more female-to-male transsexuals will participate in her ongoing work. Most of all, she hopes her project will help further the acceptance of transsexuals into mainstream society.

She says, "I want to show that people aren't something to be scared of. I want there to be no more murders or hate-bashings."

Dr. Murray is also excited to see "The Third Gender" blossom. She says, "The project is developing on a daily basis. As Jana gets more involved in the transgendered community, her understanding of transgender and gender issues changes, as our understanding of gender change. Transgendered people are ambassadors for the two genders we recognize. They understand what it means to be on both sides and offer a lot for understanding the divide between men and women. They're potentially revolutionary folks."

"The Third Gender" will be published in the May 2004 issue of PDN and available for viewing at pdnonline.com. FTMs who would like to participate in the ongoing project can contact Marcus at jana@jlmphotography.com.