



Future Gender

Transformations

Philip Gelter

**Mariette Pathy
Allen**



In 1952, the *New York Daily News* published a front-page story that stopped the world in its tracks: “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty.” George Jorgensen, Jr., from New York, had traveled to Denmark for sex reassignment surgery and returned—elegant, poised, and triumphant—as Christine Jorgensen. She was the first transsexual the general public had ever known, and pictures of her arrival at Idlewild Airport appeared in newspapers across the globe. Jorgensen explained that she had grown up feeling like “a woman trapped in a man’s body.” In interviews, when asked about her sudden media popularity, she said knowingly: “I guess they all want to take a peek.”

It would be another half century before transgender consciousness evolved beyond the public’s perception of Christine Jorgensen as a cultural novelty. Certainly, news of her transition touched a delicate psychosexual nerve in the collective unconscious. The phenomenon might account for the combination of confusion, fear, and, no doubt, disquieting recognition that reflexively hardened into deep societal hostility at the broader spectrum of gender variation as it became, through the decades, ever more visible under the umbrella of the LGBT community.

Mariette Pathy Allen has spent almost forty years photographing transgender individuals, beginning with cross-dressers whose forays outside the safety of their homes were made at constant peril of social alienation or physical violence. Many of her subjects from the 1980s were married heterosexual men with professional careers, such as scientists or engineers. Their female personae tended toward a surprisingly conventional reserve, in contrast to the more flamboyant and performative attributes of drag. Some, such as Felicity, had begun cross-dressing secretly as children or adolescents, the only available garments at hand belonging to their mothers or sisters or aunts. Later, while they were living as adults in suburban neighborhoods, their cross-dressing had to remain stealth. They didn’t want to draw attention to themselves by looking too stylish when going to the mall. It was dangerous.

Allen, a painter by training, set out to make a photographic chronicle of transgender individuals after a trip to New Orleans for Mardi Gras in 1978. She encountered a group of cross-dressers at her hotel and, in the process of making a group portrait, struck up an immediate rapport with one of them, Vicky West, who turned out to live only blocks from Allen in New York. West would become her close friend, ambassador, and guide through the broader transgender paraculture—a word, according to Allen, introduced into the lexicon by Ariadne Kane (also known as Ari), the principal creator, in 1975, of Fantasia Fair, an annual transgender conference.

In the 1980s, Allen attended Fantasia Fair in Provincetown, Massachusetts, with West, photographing her at the Crown & Anchor Hotel. West, a graduate of Cornell University, worked as a book designer for a major publisher. Although West also lived as a man and was in a heterosexual relationship with a woman for ten years, she was ostensibly gay when cross-dressing. “She was both a very good-looking man,” Allen said, “and woman.” West’s high style is evident in Allen’s expressive portraits of her, as is the trusting friendship between photographer and subject.

Allen’s artistic intention has always been to make an honest chronicle of members of this paraculture, and she collaborates with each of her subjects to represent them in the ways they want to be seen. Some have become good friends; others have been part of a long and deeply personal odyssey. “Sometimes, when I am with transgender people, I am afraid: I lose track of who I am or what attracts me,” she writes in the introduction to her 2003 book, *The Gender Frontier*. “That fear usually turns into exhilaration when I see the old stereotypes rebuffed and outdated conventions overturned.”

Since physical anatomy, gender identity, and sexual orientation do not always align in predictable ways, how do we translate the visual cues in a portrait of a cross-dresser? Does it matter, say, if the anatomical male is detectable within the constructed female identity? Allen’s portrait of Paula exemplifies the question. Much is packed into Paula’s story—as well as her portrait. The photograph presents a composed, dignified woman in an embrace with her young daughter. Paula is an ex-husband, a father, and, as a man, sexually attracted to other men; she was a public affairs officer for the military, first stationed at the Pentagon, before moving into media relations in Philadelphia.

“Before the session Paula asked me if it’s okay for her to be photographed because she was homosexual, since every other cross-dresser I’ve photographed was straight,” Allen said. Paula acknowledged the difficulty of integrating sex and cross-dressing. “If I was seeing a man, I didn’t cross-dress because gay men don’t like cross-dressing,” Paula said. “If they wanted a woman they would be with one.”

As Allen writes in *The Gender Frontier*, “My work over the past 25 years has focused on people who live in more than one gender, or are in transition from one to another. They prove that anatomy need not be destiny nor dictate a person’s sex, gender identity, or choice of partner.” To be recognized for who you are with natural regard and common respect is all anyone can really hope for in the culture of one’s own time. That is the graceful impulse at the core of Mariette Pathy Allen’s body of work.

This page:
Toby, at rest after a long
shoot. She was the opening
act for the drag performer
Ethyl Eichelberger, 1990

Overleaf:
Paula and her daughter,
Lisa, 1987; Steve Dain,
formerly Doris, at home,
1984







*Nancy with her niece,
on her father's boat, 1993*



