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Before and After

Painter documents women in transition

“Normally when you have before-and-after images, they are focused on the location of change,” painter Gwenn Seemel tells me over a plate of freshly baked banana bread. “I wanted to debunk that... It’s a whole person; it’s not just having their genitals changed or having bigger breasts put on or getting your period or whatever.”

The artist invited me to her home studio to discuss *Swollen: Portraits of Before and After*, an ambitious exhibit documenting women who have experienced some sort of profound transition in the past year: puberty, pregnancy, marriage, even breast enlargement surgery. Two of the subjects are queer.

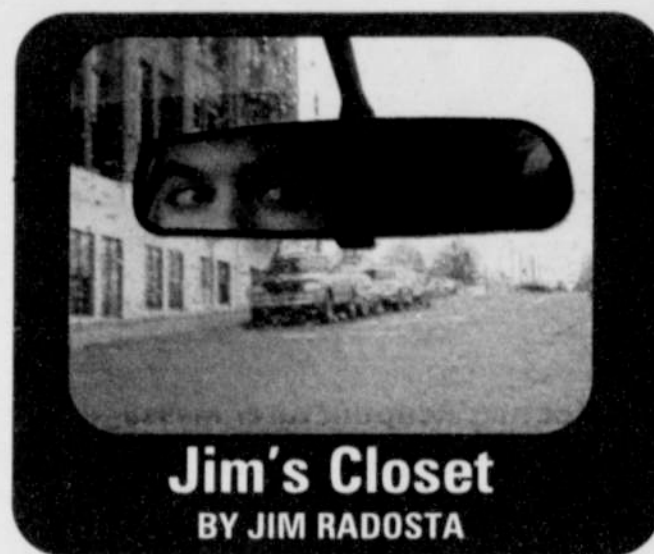
“Each...is going through some kind of physical change, except me. I’m sort of the control subject,” Seemel says. “I wanted to include background elements that would make obvious what their change was but also have an interesting metaphor. So each of the women has a physical change that the Earth has gone through assigned to her...for breast enlargement, it’s tectonic plates colliding.”

Although Mary Anne Gard considers herself a reserved person, she agreed to share an intimate personal change with Seemel: The 56-year-old lesbian just went through menopause. “It’s hard, in a way, because I am private, but it’s universal, and there’s many women that are going through it,” she says, “and the men that are surrounding them are going to go through it in some way, too.”

Gard, a physical therapist who is pursuing a master’s of divinity to become a hospice chaplain, reveals that the effects from menopause were more than physical. “It turned me more to look at spirituality in my life. There’s sort of a softening of a person. There’s also more of a fearlessness in a lot of ways; you don’t care so much what people think.” (See Page 28 for visual evidence.)

Paula Funatake also underwent a monumental change in the past 12 months: After living as a woman for many years, she took the final step toward a body that matched her identity by flying to Thailand for sex reassignment surgery. Seemel says she was “floored” upon seeing the 51-year-old business analyst for her second sitting.

“I expected changes for everyone...hers, though, was really marked. I told her, ‘You’re so much more confident now.’ She’s like, ‘I’m not hiding anything anymore.’ I really wanted to make sure to show that.”



Jim's Closet
 BY JIM RADOSTA

Funatake, who is raising a 10-year-old son named Evan, founded Transparency, an online resource to raise awareness and provide information for transgender parents around the world. “A significant number of them are U.S., but I’ve interacted with someone from Israel, Mexico, Singapore, Canada, kind of all over.”

Funatake exudes serenity in her “after” portrait. Appropriately, a rainbow shines in the background, representing the beautiful outcome of a long process.

“The focus is very personal, but I notice just another level of comfort, at-easeness, less worry... even though it’s not something that’s obvious,” she says. “This is something that I started thinking about wanting back in pre-double-digit years, so for a significant part of life, [transition] was unattainable or not realistic or risky.”

Funatake is eager to see how *Swollen* captures her interior and exterior changes. Regardless of what she thinks about the finished product, Seemel hopes for a strong reaction.

“A lot of art doesn’t connect with people, so I like doing portraits because I know that I have at least one person who will love, or hate, that painting,” she says. “Hopefully, I manage to communicate to more people.” 10

Gwenn Seemel's *SWOLLEN: PORTRAITS OF BEFORE AND AFTER* is on display through July 25 at Littman Gallery, 1825 S.W. Broadway #250, with an artist talk from noon to 1 p.m. July 17. For more information about Paula Funatake, visit www.transparency.com and m2f2bangkok.blogspot.com.

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. Write to jim@justout.com.



“It was very interesting for her to pick up on changes I never really noticed,” Paula Funatake says. “I’m living every day with gradual pace, so she was able to see differences that I wouldn’t have.”

“BEFORE AND AFTER: SEX REASSIGNMENT SURGERY” (2006 AND 2007)