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Book Review: Body Alchemy

Transsexual Portraits

Reviewed by Nancy Nangeroni

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Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits (1996) Author: Loren Cameron.

Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits

by Loren Cameron
Published by Cleis Press (1996)
I.S.B.N.-13 978 1573440620

It simply presents for your exploration, another world, one of diversity and love, respect for self and others.

From its striking cover, *Body Alchemy* grabs you and won't let go until you've delved into the mysteries revealed by beautiful photographs and succinct text presented in a tastefully artful setting. This is, quite simply, a gorgeous book, on a subject so unconventional it boggles the mind. Caught within its pages, held lovingly and presented honestly, without undue trappings, are the boldest of a new generation of transsexual men. These are people born into 'female' bodies, who are living as men at least some of the time, and changing their bodies to suit their desires. Just as bodybuilders sculpt their bodies to fit their personal aesthetic, so too do transsexuals mould their bodies around an ideal, though for these folks the ideal is not about muscle or fitness, but rather gender.

Photographer Loren Cameron also serves as a subject for about one third of the book. He is obviously a man who works out, and his body as photographed is about as pleasing as I can imagine for that of a man. His animal-like tattoos create an effect like that of a caged beast, virile and potent. On the cover, he is posed in what I took at first to be a 'muscle man'

pose, but which, on closer inspection, turned out to be a shot of him injecting himself with a syringe in the upper buttock. What at first appeared a pose, becomes instead a riveting testimony to both suffering and strength. It also establishes a level of tension that heightens the subject matter.

Loren makes a fascinating subject. In some of the shots he seems fierce, projecting determination and anger. He admits to the anger that rises so easily as a result of the testosterone injections, of more frequent fights, of the struggle to contain the beast within. He writes engagingly of his relationships and feelings, and left me wanting more. He avoids self-indulgence, instead showing the many faces of a whole, healthy person.

A short section in the middle of the books shows transsexual male genitals and chests. The images are frank and informative. If you've ever wondered what the genitals of a transsexual man might look like, there's no better source.

The remainder of the book presents portraits of other transsexual men in their native environment, whether that's the gym or a police cruiser or construction site. Depicted is a diverse cross-section of the men's community, with text that varies from snippet to short essay. If there were any preconceptions or presumptions about what transsexual men must be like, this book should dispel most of those. These men come from all walks of life and inhabit all sizes and shapes, from svelte surfer boy to mountain of muscle body builder, Anglo and Latino and Afro and Asian.

A section of the book is devoted to Loren and his partner Kayt. She writes of also being F.T.M. identified, of a relationship of two likes. We see the two of them, first gentle and loving, then fiercely competitive, then again loving, this time intimately. Finally, the book concludes with an amusing view of the two of them in bed, watching television, underscoring our common humanity.

What I liked best about this book, aside from Loren's engaging narratives, is its purity of spirit. It makes no statement of needs and demands no action of the reader. It simply presents for your exploration another world, one of diversity and love, respect for self and others. Its message of understanding and compassion is delivered innocuously, inoffensively, shunning entreaty for respect for the reader and their ability to see what is plainly visible.

This is probably the most important book on female-to-maleness since *Stone Butch Blues*. In some ways, it parallels Mariette Pathy Allen's *Transformations* of 1990, whose intimate photographs of cross-dressing men and male-to-female transsexuals - unprecedented in honesty and comprehensiveness - helped liberate a community. *Body Alchemy* is of the same mettle, but comes at a time when transgenderism is out of the closet and growing in popularity. It is daring and beautifully presented, and seems destined to capture transgender hearts everywhere.

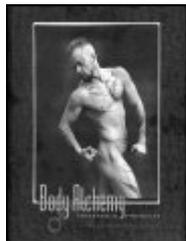
Loren Cameron

From Wikipedia:  Loren Cameron was born in Pasadena, California U.S.A. in 1959. He moved to rural Arkansas in 1969 after his mother's death, where he lived as a self-described tomboy on his father's farm. By the age of 16, Cameron identified both sexually and socially as a lesbian and encountered homophobic hostility in the small town where he lived. At this time, Cameron quit school and left his home to travel the country seeking work as a construction labourer and other blue collar employment. In 1979, he moved to the San Francisco Bay Area where he identified socially with the lesbian community until he confronted his dissatisfaction with the female body with which he was born.



Cameron's interest in photography coincided with the beginning of his physical changes as he documented his own physiological transition from female to male at this time. Despite his lack of formal training, beginning in 1993 Cameron studied the rudiments of photography and began to compassionately photograph the transsexual community. Since 1994, he has given lectures on his work at universities, educational conferences and art institutes. By 1995, Cameron's photographs had been shown in solo exhibitions in San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles.

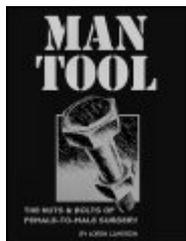
Loren's photography and writing was first published by Cleis Press in 1996. *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*, documented his personal experience of transition from female to male, his life as a man, and the everyday lives of transmen he knew. *Body Alchemy* was received with much positive acclaim and became a double 1996 Lambda Literary Award winner. It remains his most well-known work to date, though he has since published other photographic works.



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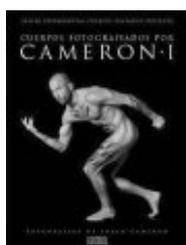
From Amazon Books:  *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* is a unique and extraordinary photographic collection by artist Loren Cameron. *Body Alchemy* is Loren Cameron's intensely personal photo documentary of female-to-male transsexuals. A transsexual himself, Cameron brings a sensitive, sophisticated insider's eye to his subject matter. Using documentary style, a series of before-and-after photographs documenting the transformation of a number of F.T.M.s in

Cameron's transsexual community, his own striking self-portraits, and intimate autobiographical text, Loren invites the viewer to experience this transformational rite of passage. Loren Cameron's work strikes a warm, familiar tone that invites the viewer's participation - even when the subject matter is quite startling.



Man Tool: The Nuts and Bolts of Female-to-Male Surgery
Author: Loren Cameron
Publisher: Zero eBooks, (2001)

From Loren's [now obsolete] website: Photographer Loren Cameron's second book — available only on the World Wide Web — addresses urgent and intimate questions about plastic surgery options for the female-to-male transsexual. Over forty photographs of surgical body modifications for the F.T.M. transgender. Phalloplasties, metoidioplasties, chest reconstruction. Now, in an unprecedented eBook you can gain access to the photos, along with first-person stories about the subject's experiences, surgery, and sexual sensation.



Photographs by Loren Cameron Volume 1
Author: Loren Cameron
Publisher: Taller Experimental *Cuerpos Pintados* (2003)

From Loren's [now obsolete] website:  The photographs that Loren Cameron did for *Cuerpos Pintados* have been published in two complimentary volumes: Cameron 1 and Cameron 2. In the first, we see portraits of transgender people that were born female and became male.

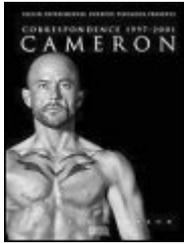


Photographs by Loren Cameron Volume 2
Author: Loren Cameron
Publisher: Taller Experimental *Cuerpos Pintados* (2003)

From Loren's [now obsolete] website: The photographs that Loren Cameron did for *Cuerpos Pintados* have been published in two complimentary volumes: Cameron 1 and Cameron 2. In the second, we see portraits of transgender people that were born males that transformed themselves into females.

Cameron Correspondence 1997-2001 Volume 3
Author: Loren Cameron
Publisher: Taller Experimental *Cuerpos Pintados* (2003)

From Loren's [now obsolete] website: In order to have a better understanding of the process of this metamorphosis of gender, *Cuerpos Pintados* published *Cameron: Correspondence 1997/2001*, a book that contains a striking written chronicle in which Cameron tells a series of stories filled with



emotion and humour, based on experiences with his models. Each of them subtly expresses what it means to be a transgender and reveals the deep humanity found in each of the individuals photographed in the books.

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