

Standing proud to break cycle of shame and secrecy

5:00AM Saturday April 05, 2008



Mark, Boy/Girl 1998, by photographer Rebecca Swan, is one of the works in the Assume Nothing exhibition opening at the New Dowse gallery in Lower Hutt on April 12.

An exhibition about to open in Lower Hutt seeks to challenge preconceptions about transgender and intersex people.

Auckland photographer Rebecca Swan's black and white portraits are dramatic and bold, some searingly beautiful. Often they mask stories of discrimination and violence.

Mani Bruce Mitchell, hermaphrodite, sexual abuse survivor, counsellor and spokeswoman, is one of the photo subjects.

Topless, staring directly at the viewer, a wispy beard visible on her chin, Mitchell's expression is a curious mix of defiance and vulnerability. Scratched across her breasts are the words "I am not a monster".

Mitchell's small Wellington flat is filled with brightly coloured swathes of fabric, exotic masks and dolls, and hats. Mitchell, 55, has kind eyes and a quiet manner. She is self-contained, articulate and thoughtful.

Even when discussing extremely personal and painful experiences, Mitchell is frank and open as she describes an incredible life story she has only recently pieced together.

Born with both male and female genital tissue, she was welcomed into the world with a shriek from her nurse.

"It's a hermaphrodite," she screamed at the bewildered parents, starting a cycle of shame and secrecy.

Brought up on a farm in rural Kirikau, south of Taumarunui, Mitchell's secret was guarded well by her conservative mother and father, who kept her clothed at all times, even when around her siblings.

Her "condition" was never spoken of.

Mitchell was raised as a boy named Bruce until the age of 1 when invasive surgery determined her sex as female and she became Margaret.

At 8, there was further surgery, removing what she describes as a small penis or very large clitoris, and bringing the uterus and vagina forward. The surgery left her with clearly female genitalia, but significantly impaired sexual functioning.

The absence of discussion about the process left her with confused memories and a lack of ownership over her body.

At school, she was sexually abused by a teacher. She says in retrospect she was a "perfect victim". Paedophiles are good at picking children who won't give their secret away, and abuse is common among intersex and transgender people.

Seeing her old Plunket book, after her mother died, she found a reference to "Bruce Mitchell", "nice wee lad" and another saying "seen by doctor ... sex determined as female", just before her first birthday.

But it was not until her late 30s that she truly began to join the dots.

Workshops, therapy and, most importantly, meeting other intersex people helped Mitchell understand who she was and how she wanted to live.

"When I went back and held this puzzle, I realised that as a child, part of me was very masculine. The term that would have been used was 'tomboy', I guess. There's always been paradoxically a very feminine side to me as well. As a kid I loved dressing up, loved fabrics and colour, still do."

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Mitchell's decision to stop shaving her facial hair, which had always embarrassed her, was part of accepting who she was.

"I came to this place, where I decide to hold all of me. I'm not going to do what society's done and say I'm this and abandon parts of me that are there."

For Mitchell, her parents' decision to surgically remove part of her genitalia was a cruel cut made purely for cosmetic reasons.

"The thing is you're operating on non-pathologised tissue. There's nothing wrong with it, it's just physically different.

"It's the tissue of eroticism and sexual pleasure and it's being damaged or destroyed for some notion of normalness."

She accepts there are people who, as adults, will decide to have the surgery, which was "absolutely their choice".

"But one of the things that I would like to see changed is for that option to be left for the person who owns the body. And for society to get to a place where it's comfortable with bodies that look different."

In 1996, Mitchell travelled to a US retreat for intersex people - nine Americans and one New Zealander still in the process of learning her own story.

For Mitchell, it was a life-changing experience. Realising how important it was for people to see other people like them was key to her decision to tell her story.

Mitchell now works as a counsellor, working with trans people, and is on the Intersex Awareness Trust - a not-for-profit organisation focused on training and advocacy.

She was also involved with the three-year Human Rights Commission's inquiry.

The report recommended the Human Rights Act be altered to include "gender" to the grounds of discrimination, and amending the procedures for changing sex on passports, birth certificates and other legal documents to make the process easier.

Mitchell says: "A significant number of trans-gender-identifying intersex people came to the inquiry. Given the size of New Zealand and how new the intersex issue is as a visible public issue, that really astonished me."

The report was presented in a "professional, beautiful and proud" way, which had been affirming for New Zealand trans people.

"[When the report was launched] the room was full and it had this most amazing cross-section of the trans community. And everyone was there with their heads up and there was enormous pride in what had been achieved."

GENDER ISSUES

* The report on the Human Rights Commission's Inquiry into Discrimination Experienced by Transgender People released in January recommended strengthening legal protection for trans people, making discrimination against trans people unlawful; improving access to health services, including gender reassignment services; and simplifying requirements for change of sex on a birth certificate, passport and other identification.

* Transgender: A person whose gender identity is different from their physical sex at birth.

* Intersex: Term used for about 30 different medical conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical biological definitions of female or male. Figures suggest one in every 2000 live births is affected.

* Mani Mitchell says intersex adults spread themselves right across the gender and sexual orientation spectrum. The majority grow up identifying with the gender to which they have been assigned.

* The next biggest group comprise people who feel they have been assigned the wrong gender and follow a transgender path.

* The final group, small and emerging, comprise those who see themselves as neither male nor female.

* The Ministry of Health funds up to three male-to-female and one female-to-male gender reassignment surgeries every two years.

- NZPA