

The Art of

TRANSFORMING GENDER

WORDS BY JEANNIE GREELEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLY DAVIDSON



ACID BURN. HAIRY NEVUS. ATTACKED BY GORILLA.
EJECTED THROUGH CAR WINDSHIELD. SCALPED.

Images of beauty, these are not, by any engrained societal standard. Yet this work is the pride and joy of makeup artist David Nicholas, who flips rapidly through a portfolio that he plucked from dozens cataloguing his more than 25 years in the industry. Having put on the faces of Madonna, Sarah Jessica Parker, and countless other actors and stars, Nicholas instead showcases clients who have been disfigured, maimed, scarred at their own hands. The images are painful, sometimes terrifying, enough to well your eyes with tears.

But there's a clientele you won't find gracing any of the pages of Nicholas' books at David Nicholas International, Inc. Often, those clients receive their makeup via mail in nondescript brown paper bags. They exchange emails secretly with Nicholas. And, if necessary, they are ushered in through a private back door more often reserved for celebrities. They are that dangling participle in the gay catch-all abbreviation, GLBT. The transgender community.

"Obviously I don't have pictures because of the confidentiality," Nicholas says with disdain, frustrated by the fact that society's discomfort with transgender people forces some of his clients into hiding.

It is a population that Nicholas serves proudly, just as he did the AIDS victims in the 1980s, meticulously concealing their Kaposi's Sarcoma at a time when most people thought you could contract the disease just by touching someone.

Concealment is also a major concern for Nicholas' male-to-female transgender clients, many of whom are in various stages of hormone therapy, and are grappling with oily skin, stubble or skin left raw and irritated from electrolysis.

"Concealment is a *huge* issue," says Nicholas. "And to make it look like they're not doing a stage revue and yet get the coverage they need or want."

Today, Nicholas is hard at work on Patricia Jane Soha, a 52-year-old trans woman who has volunteered to undergo a makeover by several people who cater to the trans community. She is, in her own words, "terrified."

If truth is beauty, how come no one has their hair done in a library? —Lily Tomlin

Already Soha has had a giant swath of her long, naturally curly hair lopped from her head, with barely a flinch. As she sits in the chair of stylist Josie Baker-Procopio of Newton's Chantelle Hair Salon, bits of Soha's story trickle out in that therapeutic way they do at salons everywhere.

Formerly known as Patrick. Snip. Divorcée. Daughters, aged 17 and 33. Snip, snip. Grandparent to two. Conflicted by gender since age three. Convinced that everything would change come puberty. Snip. Refers to herself as "female with horrible birth defects."

"I'd cry every time I saw myself in the mirror after a shower," Soha says as Baker-Procopio wraps pieces of tin foil in her hair to add highlights.



Even though hers is long and full, Soha's hair has never been her *forté*. "Basically I just comb it back and it does whatever it does," she says, noting that this is the first time she's ever had her hair colored. Though lucky not to have to face the battle that many other trans-women do of having to find wigs, which can be expensive and ill-fitting, Soha still has her gripes.

“Nobody is satisfied with what they have,” she says, adding that she’s considered hair transplants and even tattooing. “I dislike my hairline. It just seems too masculine.”

By adding layers around Soha’s face, Baker-Procopio has softened the hairline and accented Soha’s lightly colored eyes. With a mess of her straggly brown hair littering the floor, Soha shakes her new head of hair, which now falls at her shoulders and glows with dimension. She finally breaks a smile, this one more coy than fearful.

Asked how important hair is in presenting her female self, Soha says it is important, but not as critical as another factor.

“The one thing that will get you in trouble as a trans-person is if there’s a lot of disparity between your appearance and your voice,” Soha says.

A good teacher will teach you the technique, but also how to listen to your voice.

—Cecilia Bartoli, Opera Singer

There’s a test vocal coach Rebecca Shafir gives her trans clients to see if they’ve been doing their homework. Call a restaurant and make a reservation. Or order something by phone. Then count how many times a person identifies them as female versus as male.

“Voice is a very fine modality to monitor and maintain,” says Shafir, who has been working with the transgender community for more than a decade. “You’ve got to put your work into it.”

A former chief of Speech and Language Pathology at Lahey Clinic, Shafir’s specialty was “injured voices”—singers with vocal nodules, or head and neck cancers.

“Gradually I started getting transgender clients who had injured voices from trying to change the voice on their own, without supervision,” Shafir recalls, adding that many trans clients also suffered from bad vocal surgery experiences.

Perhaps not ordinarily considered part of a person’s appearance, voice is a crucial physical component in transforming gender, Shafir says, as it can make the difference between a person “passing” as the gender with which they identify.



“This is part of their survival. This is part of their self-image,” says Shafir. “It is not just working with a singer to get them through an aria or a performance.”

Though many of her male-to-female transgender clients obsess over pitch, Shafir stresses that voice also has to do with resonance, pace and volume. But what she’ll often focus on first with her trans

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clients is body language—smiling, opening the mouth wider, unclenching the jaw.

“In my trans clients, that way of communicating thru the body language is squelched from early childhood,” she says. “It’s releasing what I call ‘the body voice.’ ”

Using exercises and computer software, Shafir aims to get her trans-clients’ voices into what she calls “no man’s land,” a range of frequency between 170 to 250 hertz. (Julia Roberts would fall on the lower end of that scale, while NPR’s Robin Young would rate on the higher end.)

But vocal limitations for the male-to-female trans community are



many, Shafir notes. Physically, a biological male has thicker vocal chords, and a larger chest cavity and pharynx, both of which produce greater resonance. Psychologically, voice might be that last vestige that a trans-person holds on to, as she straddles various environments of acceptance in the coming out process. And then there are the gener-

ally unrealistic expectations that many people have when it comes to self-image.

“I recently had a 300-pound trans woman who wanted to sound like Meg Ryan,” says Shafir. “It’s just not going to happen.”

The best thing is to look natural, but it takes makeup to look natural.—Calvin Klein

Where Shafir leaves off, makeup artist David Nicholas picks up. “I could take Muhammad Ali and make him look like Oprah if you give me three days,” he quips.

But with Soha seated before him, the two of them reflected in the makeup station’s mirror, Nicholas explains that his goal with the trans community is not the gaudy showgirl look of a drag queen, nor the uber-femme look of a Pamela Anderson. Rather, it is to subtly soften. He eschews the word “passable” in favor of “intrinsic,” lamenting the fact that society seems accepting of the “passable” trans-woman, but not the non-passable.

“I’m dying for the day that [transgender people] can be who they need to be, freely, without the judgment and the chastising, or if you’re not a pretty transgender,” says Nicholas. “What’s that have to do with it? What does pretty have to do with equality?”

Nicholas’ three concerns for trans clients are bone structure, concealment and feminizing. With contouring, highlighting and shading techniques, Nicholas can narrow a male jaw line, recede



a chin, raise a cheek. He can just as easily hide a five o’clock shadow as he can create an almond-shaped eye. Wide noses can be thinned, and thin lips can grow full, the brush in Nicholas’ hand fluttering like a magic wand.

Considering Nicholas’ usual clientele, Soha is a snap.

“She’s just been blessed,” Nicholas concludes, pointing out Soha’s refined features, narrow nose and “beautiful” bone structure.

“Minimalistic concealment” will be Nicholas’ approach, as he highlights Soha’s inner eye area to reduce deep sockets and sets her light foundation with mineral powder. Lastly, he tackles Soha’s eye-brows, shading them with a color that matches her new hair. Soha observes intently, admitting that brows have always been a challenge. Adding to the challenge is the fact that Soha is legally blind in one eye, which makes it nearly impossible for her to apply makeup perfectly to both eyes. It isn’t an insurmountable problem, Nicholas interjects, explaining his unique “Totally Touch Technique,” a mirror-free makeup application process he uses in his work at the Women’s Eye Health Task Force to help visually impaired women apply makeup.

With a finishing touch of tea rose lip liner and lipstick, adding some pout to Soha’s mouth, Nicholas’ job is done. But not before he has time to add one more classic Nicholas quip.

“I always say, a little powder, a little paint, helps to make you what you ain’t!”

Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn.

—Gore Vidal

It's just past 1 p.m. at Lord & Taylor, where image consultant Ginger Burr is anxiously awaiting Soha's arrival and standing guard at a fitting room stockpiled with garments.

After nearly 20 years of dealing with the trans community, Burr doesn't need a body by her side to get her work started. She has already logged her visual assessment of Soha: 5' 5", short torso, longer body, a bit hippy.

The learning curve for dealing with a trans-clientele was never quite steep, says Burr, self-defined as "one of the first lipstick lesbians." "I discovered immediately it was the same as working with genetic women," she says. "They have the same needs—they want to look good."

However, the physical challenges of a trans client can be a bit more complex than correcting someone who thinks socks look fabulous with sandals. Height, broad shoulders, low waists and large hands often need to be camouflaged through some miracle of materials. And Burr often finds that her trans clients—many in their 40s and 50s—either dress too teeny-bopperish, or too matronly.

"They know what they see on TV and in the fashion magazines, but somehow can't get that to translate to their bodies," she says.

Shedding her stretchy Levi jeans and pink V-neck T-shirt, Soha

stands in a white sports bra and pair of bikini briefs, as Burr assesses the items hung around the room. "This is either going to be really fun, or it's going to be a nightmare," she says, plucking a shirt from its hanger.

Miraculously, everything Burr has selected seems to fit Soha. Whether it looks good is another story. "I don't think this is working," Burr admits. "I don't think the colors work for you."

A fan of Target and Levi jeans, Soha admits that a lot of the clothes she admires, she feels she can't pull off. "But I actually like lots of everything once it's on," she says.

After tearing through Capri pants, A-line jean skirts, dusty rose cotton shirts, and sleeveless tanks, Burr and Soha reach their last item—a lime green, casual summer suit. One quick roll of the



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waistline and a slight tug on the sleeves, then Burr backs up for a look.

“Wow! This looks awesome,” she says, Soha blushing as she turns to get a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror. “Everything has worked so beautifully on you.”

But beauty, Burr notes, is always open to interpretation. “Everyone is beautiful,” she says. “My belief is when you feel comfortable with who you are, you project that comfort and that confidence, and then people feel comfortable around you.”

The Cost of a Look

Many people in the trans community suffer economically as a result of losing a job or paying for expensive gender re-assignment surgeries. Consequently, a costly makeover might not be possible. But there are ways to get the most bang for your buck.

MAKEUP

David Nicholas

David Nicholas International (DNI), Charlestown

(617) 242.0177

www.makeupdni.com

Private, one-hour sessions cost \$250. Nicholas usually schedules at least four to five sessions with trans clients. Clients will then come back once a season, annually, or around a major event like surgery or electrolysis. However, in its efforts to form a non-profit component, DNI offers free services to clients deemed indigent.

HAIR

Josie Baker-Procopio

Chantelle Hair Salon, Newton

www.jbakerstyles.com

Hair services are expensive. Period. But using good hair-coloring products will make the color last longer. An overall color is cheaper than highlights, and will also grow out more naturally. When it comes to wigs, professionals recommend spending the extra money on one quality wig, rather than buying several cheaper versions that look ... cheap.

Earlier in the day, after speeding down Boylston Street, past policemen and construction workers and women on their way to lunch, Soha, when asked her how she felt with her new look so far, confided: “I feel the same as I always do. I feel normal.”

A day later, after her makeup has been washed down the drain and her wavy hair rebounded to curls, and the Lord & Taylor clothes were returned to their racks, Soha offers other confidences: She is middle-aged and struggling to find work. She is devastated that the surgery she once dated on her calendar got canceled as her unemployment funds dried up. She is old fashioned when it comes to relationships, and chokes up thinking about her romantic fate. She is fearful that her current physical state can get her both whistled at or left bloodied on a curb. She is who she is, regardless of whatever powders may grace her face, or how a skirt may show off her nice knees, or how her hair may fall around her face.

“I’m this femme tomboy that I’ll always be, surgery or not,” she says. “I will never be symmetrical. I will never be ultra feminine. I will never be mistaken for a guy, except on the phone.

“If that means that in our current society I’m always in a little bit of a perilous state, that’s life,” she adds. “Everyone is in a little bit of a perilous state.”

CLOTHING

Ginger Burr

Total Image Consultants, Somerville

(617) 625-5225 or (800) 380-8726

www.totalimageconsultants.com

A fashion wardrobe consultation ranges from \$130 (in studio) to \$160 (in home) an hour. This approach can save money, as Burr works with clothing a client already has, rather than purchasing new clothing. Personal shopping services are \$160 an hour. Burr notes that a one-time image consultation can be a lot cheaper than wasting a lot of money on ill-fitting clothing. Burr also participates in the Tiffany Club’s First Event, a conference for the transgender community where they can learn about everything from fashion to makeup for a flat fee. Visit the Tiffany Club’s website at www.tcne.org for more information.

VOICE

Rebecca Z. Shafir, M.A.CCC

Mindful Communication, West Newbury

978.255-1817; www.mindfulcommunication.com

Shafir’s services are \$150 an hour, which includes all materials, CDs, etc. The average session is one hour, and trans clients often have one to two visits per week. It might take anywhere from 25 to 50 sessions for a trans client to reach his or her goals, Shafir notes. Because she recognizes the importance of supervision by a voice expert, however, Shafir will pack as much as she can into one session with a trans client, and then have them come back a month later after practicing on their own. Group therapy options are available at significantly reduced rates. Shafir also suggests that people search online for trans chat groups where they can get feedback on their voices, and/or learn from guest vocal coaches. Shareware is also available online, including the popular PRAAT speech analysis software.



FIVE FASHION SECRETS FROM GINGER BURR, TOTAL IMAGE CONSULTANTS

1. **FIT.** Proper fit creates balance, beauty, and makes clothing look expensive (even if it is not). If it does not fit right, have alterations done or do not buy it!
2. **COLOR.** Wear colors that flatter you and it will draw focus to your face and make your eyes sparkle.
3. **ILLUSION.** Use color, line and design to draw focus away from features you do not want to emphasize and to those you do, e.g., don't wear a boat neck top if your shoulders are broad, choose a scoop or V-neck to draw the eye up to your face.
4. **HAIR.** Be sure your hairstyle and hair color flatter your face shape and skin. Beware of falling into the trap of wearing your hair long and straight. It is not flattering on most people.
5. **POSTURE.** Whether you are 5'5" or 6'5", good posture is always flattering. Rounding your shoulders won't make you look shorter, it will just make your clothes fit badly and make your height more noticeable.

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