

art review

SAVING FACES

Glasgow School of Art ●●●○○

THE painting is a glorious, vivid burst of red and purple. A tangible, sensuous, ambient abstract somewhat in the manner of Frankenthaler or Richter. Look closer though and you might find something to make you recoil. It is a human ear. This is no abstract. *Split Mandible* is exactly what it says - a detailed, highly magnified painting which takes the viewer deep into the flesh of an operation on the human head. It is one of the most powerful images in a highly emotive exhibition currently showing in Glasgow prior to a run at the National Portrait Gallery in London. *Saving Faces* is essentially a show of portraits. But these are portraits like no other. They seek not to flatter or immortalise an individual, but humanity.

In a year-long residency at the Royal London Hospital artist Mark Gilbert observed the work to reconstruct the faces of patients - variously disfigured by cancer, disease, trauma and deformity. While it is a shocking show, it is far from the extremes to which we have become accustomed in modern and contemporary art; from Bacon to the Chapmans. The shock rather lies in the reality of the subject matter and more deeply, within ourselves, raising a variety of important questions about the way we perceive our fellow human beings. While the essence of mankind is our individuality, we are reassured by our common physicality. In any face - particularly in its symmetry - we see ourselves. Spoil that symmetry and our minds don't configure. We prefer to look away. Along with this sense of



unease, the exhibition also provokes questions of how we perceive ugliness. Why are we revolted? By what right do we condemn?

This is not quite as post-modern as it may seem. In the 1800s Théodore Géricault was portraying disability and looking at the distortions brought to the human face by mental and physical illness. The lonely heroism implicit in his images is no less evident here. But while the work of both artists is deeply sensitive, Gilbert's alone, with its before-and-after miracle, is celebratory. And when Mazepa B turns from a distorted face into a smiling little girl it is no less than triumphal. The convention of portraiture has been turned on its head.

Until January 26

IAIN GALE

Scotland on Sunday