

# HUMANITY, LIKE BEAUTY, IS MORE THAN SKIN-DEEP



VISUAL ART  
JACK  
MOTTRAM

IN **Saving Faces**, Mark Gilbert paints portraits of men, women and children with disfigured faces before, during and after facial surgery, against stark monotone backgrounds, in blood red or the sickly green of a surgeon's scrubs. This might sound like another grim slice of voyeurism, or a lame attempt to shock the viewer, but Gilbert's series is nothing of the sort. He is taking a compassionate and considered look at these lives.

The portraits were commissioned by the Saving Faces Art Project, a charity

## REVIEWED

SAVING FACES  
GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART  
UNTIL JANUARY 25  
★★★★

set up by maxillofacial surgeon Ian Hutchison, as a demonstration of the successes of modern surgery. But again Gilbert confounds expectations. His work is not an advertisement, nor simply a testimony to the changed lives of his sitters. Instead, he shows his true colours as a portraitist and gives us his subjects as they truly are,

regardless of their medical complaints.

Of course the cancers, growths and injuries are foregrounded – and there's strong stuff here – but even when patients are laid out on the operating table these are not mere anatomical studies. Gilbert is unflinching in his record of surgical procedure, but his renderings of blood, skin and muscle are compelling and puzzling in equal measure. It is often a challenge to fathom exactly what we are being shown; how these raw wounds can become the faces we see in

accompanying post-operative portraits.

This is, however, the show's great strength. For each shocking image it shows a benign one, and these can be either pre-operative or post-operative takes on the face of the sitter as once more Gilbert comes close to undermining his brief in his empathy for, and connection with, his subjects.

That said, there is something unashamedly joyous here. We see Henry De L enduring a horrific craniofacial resection, only to meet him again resplendent in his



A bruised  
Mazeeda B is  
later seen  
strong and  
healthy

barrister's silks, with a distinctly defiant grin. Then there's Mazeeda B, hardly more than a baby. She is still bruised after her procedure, but the dull eyes of her pre-operative face are gone and she appears stronger, healthy, ready for anything.

In the end, Mark Gilbert does fulfil his remit, taking the viewer on the patients' journeys from disfigurement and illness to health. Better yet, though, is the painter's skill in revealing the people behind the procedures.

*Giles Sutherland is away*

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