

Exhibit goes far beyond art

■ Mark Gilbert's paintings depict cancer patients before, during and after surgery.

By DANE STICKNEY
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Artwork featuring peeled-back skin, exposed bone and pools of blood could be shocking and gruesome.

But the images that make up "Saving Faces" — a collection of paintings by Scotsmen Mark Gilbert on display at the University of Nebraska at Omaha Art Gallery — have a worth far beyond shock value. They are honest and essential **REVIEW** to the exhibit's narrative.

Gilbert knows this now. But he was leery of creating and displaying the pieces as part of a project commissioned by a London surgeon to chronicle head-and-neck cancer patients before, during and after surgery.

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After painting presurgery portraits of 32 patients, Gilbert followed them into the operating room to sketch and photograph their procedures. He then did paintings of the surgeries.

It was hard for Gilbert, who was in Omaha last week, to feel like he had the right to do so.

"That was a huge conflict for me," he said. "I'd ask the patients if they were really sure they wanted me to do it. I was afraid how their friends and family might feel about seeing such private and intimate moments."

Each subject agreed, most emphatically. So Gilbert vividly and graphically painted their procedures, works that are some of the most powerful in the 42-portrait exhibit, which can be viewed at the UNO gallery through Friday.

Gilbert realistically captures the construction of a deformed skull and the rebuilding of a misshapen nose, but the images feel surreal because those views are so foreign to the average viewer. Still, there's a beauty to the images of human flesh and

organs that feature glowing red and blue hues and subtle, flowing shapes.

The artist, though, isn't completely happy with his effort.

"I don't think I did it justice," Gilbert said. "During the operation, the organs were just bejeweled — with shimmering wetness and all kinds of different textures and surfaces."

Gilbert, 36, was nervous about how viewers would respond to the renderings.

"With most of my art, I don't really care what other people think," he said. "But I really wanted people to know I did this in a very honest, thoughtful way. I didn't want people to think I had exploited my subjects."

When you see "Saving Faces," Gilbert's thoughtful dedication is obvious. The more graphic surgical images are juxtaposed with before-and-after portraits of the patients' faces, which are straightforward pictures against solid-colored backgrounds. Coupling the two kinds of paintings gives the show a powerful narrative — one of enduring the deconstruction that

Saving Faces: Art and Medicine

What: Art show organized by the University of Nebraska at Omaha and University of Nebraska Medical Center depicting cancer patients and others in treatment for head and face difficulties.

Where: UNO Art Gallery, north end of the Weber Fine Arts Building, 60th and Dodge Streets

When: Through Friday. Noon to 4 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday; noon to 8 p.m. on Thursday; 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday. A public health forum featuring a variety of medical officials reacting to the exhibit is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at the gallery.

Admission: Free

often is an inevitable part of the rebuilding process.

"Without the portraits, the surgery paintings would just be anonymous pieces of meat," he said. "It would have appeared manipulative."

Instead, "Saving Faces" is in-

spirational, putting human spirit on display just as much as the paintings.

Creating the exhibit has had a profound effect on the subjects and other cancer patients, Gilbert said. But it's also altered the artist, too.

Walking through the gallery, he points to portraits and calls the subjects by their first names. He keeps in touch with some of them. Others, though, have died from the disease that altered their appearance and kindled their resolve.

It's obvious the exhibit has had an impact on its creator, and that's something with which Gilbert is still coping. He's had a hard time going back to painting portraits of family, friends or models.

"They don't seem to have the same respect and connection to the portraits," he said.

After dealing with the emotional subject matter in "Saving Faces," everything else just hasn't compared. But Gilbert feels lucky to have done it. "It's been an honor," he said. "Having something grow beyond just art has been such a bonus."