

# In the eye of the beholder

Shocked? You might be, but this painting is a form of therapy for others. **Mark Irving** explains

The thing about Beautiful People - Madonna, Diana, Kate and the rest - is that they persuade us to invest so much value in surface. Walk around the exhibition of Mario Testino's photographs at the National Portrait Gallery in London and you may find yourself dazzled by this idea. Or you may find the high gloss, the perfect bodies, the smiling nonchalant easiness of it all slightly repellent. Either way, you won't be prepared for the astonishing exhibition of portraits by Glaswegian artist Mark Gilbert on display at the other end of the corridor.

"I'm not even sure what they're about" says Charles Saumarez Smith, the gallery's director, as we study them with rictus grins at the press viewing, both of us realising that it is very difficult, possibly even crass, to talk about aesthetics, presentation, artistic expression - the usual critical speak - when what you see in front of you are pictures that look like massacres. It's especially hard to get art critical about them when the people depicted in them are standing right beside you. "I don't think they are just art, but then they aren't just medical pictures either. Perhaps for the first time, I'm really at a loss to describe what I'm seeing," says Saumarez Smith, his voice lowered.

In the gallery is a sprinkling of rather special individuals. There's Henry de Lot-

biniere, a barrister and the subject of several large canvases by Gilbert. He's got a very strange-looking face, a sort of pothole underneath a ravaged but still distinguished brow. His one remaining eye is shut at the moment as he is recovering from the

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last of the 15 operations he has had at the Royal London Hospital to arrest the devastating race of salivary gland cancer around his head. Not far away stands Henry Ekpe, who, suffering from a malignant facial bone tumour, found his way to the UK after a failed operation in his native Nigeria. He had read about Iain Hutchison, the hospital's consultant in Oral and Maxillofacial surgery, in a copy of *The Nursing Times*. He has lost his right eye, both cheekbones and the whole of his upper jaw. But they have been replaced with bones from his shoulder blades and skin from his back. What does he think of the show, I ask? "I think it's pretty good. Tough, but good".

Hutchison, who instigated this extraordinary art project, is giving court to the cameras, beckoning the artist and some of his star patients to stand with him. There's something intriguing about this man who can make faces and who enables others, like Gilbert, to make faces of those he has helped. Hutchison, keen to broadcast the work of his unit and its companion at St Bartholomew's Hospital, originally invited Gilbert, 32, an artist with a proven record as a portrait painter, to take up a residency at the Royal London. The idea was for him to paint a series of pictures of people undergoing facial surgery for cancer, deformity or trauma - this includes car crashes, assault or shotgun wounds - before, after, and, occasionally, during their operations.



**Making faces:** barrister Henry de Lotbiniere painted by Mark Gilbert during an operation, above, and afterwards, right

The paintings in the exhibition record stories of partial or whole transformations from desperate situations - huge tumours (such as 3 year old Mazeeda from Hackney who had one the size of a cricket ball in her cheek), smashed jaws (Chris, the victim of an attack with baseball bats), genetic disproportion (Sue, born with a hollow face and lantern jaw). Their stories are told visually, without sentimentality or sensationalism. But they are gruelling nonetheless.

"I was literally standing in the operating theatre with my sketch pad in my hands," says Gilbert, who says that any initial squeamishness about the brutal reality of the scene was swept away by an admiration for "the incredible delicacy of the surgical procedures involved".

There is, of course, a long tradition of medical illustration, with artists producing images for teaching and documenting purposes, but Gilbert's involvement was, Hutchison says, "very different. We use photography all the time to record what is going on, but I wanted to give these remarkable stories another dimension and art seemed the way to do this".



Over a period of 18 months Gilbert lived in the nurses' quarters and worked as a member of Hutchison's team, following patients through their treatment. He admits that the assignment was highly unusual in its demands on the role of the portrait painter, someone whose engagement with his subject can at times be very intense: "It took a full 12 months for me to become fully comfortable with working with the patients as I didn't want to exaggerate what I was seeing. At the

same time, I couldn't be scientifically dispassionate as I was getting to know these people as individuals, people who were responding in the most amazing way to the process of being painted," he says.

De Lotbiniere, whose dramatically shifting physiognomy during his various operations has presented the artist with something of a moving target, says that he agreed "without hesitation" to take part. "I knew that it would show people that we still had an identity and to show what could be done to help others."

The hospital undertook an ethical review of the project and found an overwhelmingly positive response to Gilbert's involvement from the patients. "I think it was something about the relationship a portrait painter has with his subjects. It happens over time and I could see how they were getting more confident about how they looked as they saw how I was representing them and their conditions," says the artist.

As for timing this exhibition to coincide with Testino's, you can either view it as poor judgement or as a brilliant case of juxtaposition. But there's no doubt that while Testino's images are about people, fame, gorgeousness, about a strategic deal with the camera, Gilbert's paintings remind us - powerfully - of the dreadful, yet miraculous humanity beneath the skin.

*'Saving Faces', National Portrait Gallery, London WC2 (020 7306 0055) to 21 April. To make donations to the Facial Surgery Research Foundation call 01962 861571 or see [www.savingfaces.co.uk](http://www.savingfaces.co.uk) for details*