



50 WEEKEND ARTS

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ART THERAPY: Mark Gilbert has lived and worked at a London hospital, painting studies of patients before, during and after facial surgery



Picture: DOUGIE MORRISON

Face paintings

ART: A surgeon and a portraitist have joined forces for a project that is both powerful and educational. By **Jay Iliff**

GESTURING at one of his paintings – a huge canvas, blood-red and not immediately recognisable as a human face – Mark Gilbert says: “Apart from being a war artist, there’s nothing more powerful than this.” You can see his point. This is a picture, raw and gory, of a person’s face under the surgeon’s knife; the accurate record of one critical moment in the saving of a life.

Gilbert is a 30-year-old Glaswegian and a painter involved in a unique project. Officially artist-in-residence at the Royal London and St Bartholomew’s hospitals in London, almost all of his work involves patients of Iain Hutchison, one of the country’s leading oral and facial surgeons.

Hutchison treats people with mouth and facial cancers, as well as injuries and deformities. It is an area of medicine which he says needs more research and more resources, and this week he has launched Saving Faces, a charity to help realise those aims.

Gilbert’s work is an integral part of the campaign. Over the past year he has immersed himself in hospital life, sleeping in a nurses’ hostel and working in the tiny room in Hutchison’s department that serves as a studio. There he has produced some 80 paintings, which will be seen in a touring exhibition culminating at London’s National Portrait Gallery in spring 2002.

Mark Gilbert is a portrait artist, but these are no ordinary portraits; by definition they are faces disfigured by disease, injury or genetic accident. His subjects are depicted before treatment and after it – and sometimes in the course of the surgery itself. This means that Gilbert has had to sit in on operations, sketching and taking photographs, becoming almost part of the team.

“When I first went to the theatre I was petrified, having seen the photos and the slides,” he says. “But it’s different in real life – the first time I was in there I just found it incredibly moving, because you are so aware of the suffering and situation of the patient.

“Sometimes there is the most amazing tension; other times it can be surreal, with Johnny Cash music being played in the background. You become sensitive to all the different moods – it’s a very intense kind of experience.”

Despite the subject matter, his work is neither bleak nor distressing. The pictures are compelling and convey a positiveness that photographs could not. “I would hate to think that all I was doing was illustrations,” says Gilbert, who, before this, taught art at Benenden, the girls’ public school.

“Hopefully, my experience in the operating theatre and my relationship with the patients come to inform the

pictures. I realise there’s a power in the images which almost supersedes how they are actually painted. The unique thing is the access I have had to all the different aspects of the patients’ treatment, which is a privilege.”

Deformity of the face is particularly wretched, since it is our faces which transmit our identities to the world. To agree to sit for Gilbert’s pictures at all must have taken a certain courage – and it took Hutchison months to get the idea passed by the hospital ethics committee.

“I started out with a rather nebulous idea,” the surgeon recalls, “but Mark’s work has become a kind of bridge, a link to educate people about our work. I wanted to educate the public about what was possible with modern facial surgery. The kind of surgery we are doing with some patients today would have killed them 12 or 15 years ago.”

“I also thought that Mark’s paintings might have a cathartic effect on patients, helping them come to terms with their facial appearance. But he has done far more than I ever expected – he has captured the emotional travel of patients as they progress through major life events.” There could even turn out to be therapeutic benefits:

“In some cases they have told Mark: ‘I never looked at photographs of myself after the operation, but since seeing the paintings I can look at myself again.’”

Hutchison hopes that Mark’s work will give focus to Saving Faces, which the surgeon launched on Wednesday at the National Portrait Gallery with the help of Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture.

“It will campaign to raise funds for research into the prevention and treatment of oral and facial diseases as well as

injuries,” Hutchison says. “It will be the only charity in the UK devoted to these aims. We need to discover the best surgical treatments. We also want to stop kids smoking, which is a major cause of mouth cancer.”

There are other aims, too: “We would like to be able to employ a psychologist and a psychotherapist – we are not only concerned with curing people, it’s also about improving their quality of life.”

As for Mark Gilbert, there is no question that he has been enriched by his experience: “In the beginning I was nervous, but the patients actually have far more self-confidence and strength than I have – and if this project proves to have some psychological benefit for the patients, that would be terrific. It’s been an incredible year, and there’s no doubt it has made me a different artist.”

● Send donations for Saving Faces through your own bank or any HSBC branch to: HSBC Bank plc (Saving Faces), Kentish Town Branch, sort code 40-04-03, account number 31371045

‘My first time in the operating theatre was so moving’