

FACE to face

'Saving Faces' art exhibit challenges viewers to reconsider ideas of beauty

BY MARK ANDERSEN
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OMAHA — Go ahead, stare.

Stare at Dudley, with the dime-sized black hole where the bridge of his nose should be.

At Mezeeda, the 2-year-old girl with a facial tumor. Here she is years later smiling shyly in her emerald-green dress.

At Henry, with his goofy grin, big clasped hands, funny British barrister's wig, and, oh yeah, that cancerous facial growth obliterating one eye.

The "Saving Faces: Art and Medicine" exhibit that opened Friday in the Gallery of the Weber Fine Arts Building at the University of Nebraska at Omaha invites you — no, it compels you — to look at and beyond the faces disfigured by disease or trauma.

The 42 oil portraits by British artist Mark Gilbert capture the essence of patients before, during and after facial reconstruction.

The collection first appeared in the National Portrait Gallery in London, juxtaposed against professional celebrity photographs of people like Brad Pitt and Gwyneth Paltrow, challenging people to reconsider their ideas of beauty.

There is not only the thematic context, said Weber gallery director Deborah-Eve Lombard, "This is great painting."

The portraits are part of a larger collection commissioned by Dr. Iain Hutchison, consultant in oral and maxillofacial surgery at St. Bartholomew's and the Royal London Hospital, who admits that some pieces more powerfully capture the personality of the subjects than others.

They serve four purposes, Hutchison said Thursday as he gave a preview of the show, which includes a five-part lecture series on art and healing.

He wanted the paintings to inform the public of what modern facial surgery could accomplish, as well as what it couldn't accomplish.

"You can never make them absolutely, totally normal," he said. The patient may not even notice the imperfections, but the surgeon always does, he said.

He chose painted portraits rather than photography because it could capture the emotional transformation of the person during the project as well as show their physical imperfections.

The process of painting, meanwhile, also caused the subjects to be looked upon for hours by the artist, creating a cathartic experience for both of them.

"Patients often say," said Lombard, "that when you have a facial disfigurement, people stop looking at you."

Sometimes it's in an attempt to not stare, said Virginia Alta, an associate professor of medical ethics at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and a part of the team that brought the exposition to Omaha.

■ Face

Continued from Page 1C

A story accompanies each person depicted by the portraits.

There is the before and after of a man beaten by clubs.

There is the before, during and after of the man who sailed through his car windshield into a pole.

Dudley lost his upper jaw when he attempting suicide with a shotgun.

Roland appears wearing the plastic mask used to align his face precisely for the radiation beam needed to treat his cancer.

"He loathed the radiation mask," Hutchison said, and yet he chose to be painted wearing it, meaning he wore it for hours during his sittings with the artist.

"He wanted to exorcise this demon," Hutchison said. "His grandchildren now use the mask for games. It's less of an instrument of torture."

The images involving surgical procedural are somewhat beautiful and gruesome all at once.

"I wanted people to know how we got from here to there," Hutchison said. Some won't want to see it but some will, he

said.

"It brings you back into life, showing the courage of human beings and how they overcome the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," he said.

The large painting depicting Dudley's facial surgery appears almost wet with red paint. Features are identifiable and yet there is something abstract and contemporary.

Hutchison doesn't see the beauty in this portrait.

"At this stage of the operation it was a god-awful mess," he said. The procedure was difficult, complex, long and tiresome, he said.

And yet at times, when he is delicately slicing into the anatomy of humans, he finds the body quite beautiful.

"It's almost like painting with a single-haired brush," he said.

This project has profoundly touched everyone connected with it, he said.

"We normally judge people on their faces almost immediately," he said. "And yet we know from psychological studies that if we spend time with a face we don't like, it rapidly recedes in importance."

This show allows people to look at the faces and also see the person beneath.

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