



Face value:  
Mark Gilbert's  
Henry E  
And Jerry

# Bold and beautiful

## ART REVIEW

Saving Faces: Portraits  
by Mark Gilbert ★★★☆☆

Mario Testino's aspirational glamour might be enchanting but the National Portrait Gallery swings to the other extreme for its latest exhibition – a dose of unsweetened verisimilitude with Mark Gilbert's portraits of facial trauma patients before, sometimes during, and after reconstructive surgery.

His subjects are patients from the Royal London Hospital's Oral And Maxillofacial unit whose facial deformities – from tumours to cancers, savage assaults to birth

defects – he captures in glutinous oils against brilliant backgrounds of acid greens and bright fuscias.

Occasionally, a great, bloody canvas of sinew and surgical equipment will cut a swathe across the walls, capturing the events of the surgery and the grotesque theatre of the operating room. And then portraiture is resumed 'post-op' when the surgeons have worked their reconstructive magic. Some patients are making the transition from disfigurement to normality. Others are adjusting to looking extraordinary after a lifetime of 'normality'. All are both a celebration (of the surgeon's skill and the sitter's bravery) and a catharsis for

patients coming to terms with an altered appearance.

Gilbert's intention was not just to catalogue disfigurement but to 'amplify a sense of individuality' and this he manages far better than even the kindest lens could. Testino might make his celebrity subjects look their best but Gilbert makes his look themselves. And while they may not be famous, their achievements rival any in the gallery's glittering arcade.

Tanis Taylor

Until Apr 21, National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place WC2, daily 10am to 6pm (Thu and Fri to 9pm), free. Tel: 020 7306 0055.  
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