

The art of saving faces

A surgeon was the inspiration for a very special collection of paintings. **Edi Stark reports**

CONSULTANT oral and maxillo-facial surgeon Iain Hutchison sits in a dowdy office in a dowdy hospital in a dowdy part of London and talks of seduction. "I was seduced into this when I worked in casualty and saw people whose lives had been wrecked by car crashes. I could help to restore those lives," he says.

Now he specialises in the treatment of mouth and facial tumours, and reconstructive surgery for facial deformities caused by injury or genetic disease.

"I love my patients; I've always loved my patients," he says. "They are the major joy. The joy they give me when they get better is amazing. It's wonderful to be able to achieve that."

When he was in his mid-thirties and still a bachelor registrar, one particular patient drew his attention. "I went into the waiting room to call the next name and saw bright blue eyes under a brown fedora hat."

Helena Kennedy was defending barrister in a major trial

6 I was lying face down into the mask, dreaming I was James Bond

at the Old Bailey and insisted that she had to be cured within three days to be back in court. Hutchison, who diagnosed sinusitis, felt equally motivated to

treat successfully and discharge her as his patient in order to ask her out. They married in Rome. But there should be no assumption it was his wife's connections as QC and left-wing baroness which helped persuade culture minister Chris Smith to launch the charity, Saving Faces, at the National Portrait Gallery last year.

That would be to underestimate the persuasive passion of Iain Hutchison, the doctor; the quality of the portraits by the artist, Mark Gilbert; and the bravery and dignity of the patients who allowed themselves to be painted before, during, and after facial reconstruction. During 18 months as artist-in-residence at the Royal London Hospital, Mark Gilbert, a young graduate of Glasgow School of Art, has captured on canvas, in great sweeping brushstrokes, an emotional intensity and raw power to make Jenny Savile and Peter Howson weep.

Saving Faces began with a small legacy left by Iain Hutchison's mother, Dr Martha

Redlich, a single parent who single-handedly ran a general practice in working-class Birmingham. She and Iain's Scottish father split up at a time when life wasn't easy for a boy whose schoolmates mistook his mother for a Nazi. In fact, she was a Jewish refugee from Vienna. According to her son, although she brought him up in the Church of England, "she remained a middle-European Jewish woman - very outspoken, forceful, and forthright."

"My mother was a wonderful woman and a great doctor, but she didn't have great skills in dealing with people. Helena has her strength of character coupled with wonderful personal skills."

Hutchison is equally candid when talking about fatherhood. "I've realised that, not having had a father myself, and always wanting one, in fathering my children, I'm fathering myself as well."

He explains that his attraction to Helena was further consolidated by her 18-month-old son, Keir, who offered him instant fatherhood.

Now Keir's father, Roger, is a welcome member of the family group. Helena told me that she had been broken-hearted when her partner left, but having met Iain, she believed they were always meant to be together. It transpires her husband also believes in fate.

On a platform at Central Station, returning to London from a visit to Glasgow, the family bumped into Mark Gilbert, an old acquaintance.

They had previously commissioned him to paint a portrait of Helena's mother, Mae Kennedy. At six feet, the painting is considerably taller than its diminutive sitter.

But Hutchison, who until the railway encounter hadn't considered Gilbert for the art project, claims that their meeting was more than coincidence. He explained his idea to Mark and, later in the hospital, when Mark produced the first charcoal drawing, the consultant recalls: "I knew for certain that Mark was absolutely the right person to be doing this."

The artist, though didn't share Hutchison's confidence.



TRANSFORMATION: two of Mark Gilbert's paintings of little Mazeeda, before and after the operations to reconstruct her face after the removal of a large growth

"I just thought when I'd done that first drawing that it had better get better than this," he says.

Initial misgivings and anxieties about being a disruptive influence on vulnerable patients proved groundless. "Because the room in the hospital was so tiny, I began with small-scale work, although I'd always done big paintings," Mark says. "Then Mazeeda arrived wearing an amazing dress and I decided just to go for it."

Towering, arresting images are the result. Because Henry de Lotbiniere liked "the open, homely, friendly conversation" of the artist, he humoured his "perverse" request to paint the barrister in wig and gown, but was stunned by the result.

"It is more than a painting," Henry says.

And Gilbert talks with admiration about his subject. "He's such a charismatic character that within five minutes you

look at him and see a beautiful head," he says.

"I've always tried hard to steer clear of obvious narrative in my work, but I wanted to convey Henry's *joie de vivre*. Here's a guy who is an incredible achievement medically, whose face has been changed dramatically, and he's funny, charming, and brilliant. I hope that building up those positive relationships with patients has informed the pictures, given them an essence."

"It was an honour to be allowed to share the most intimate parts of their lives."

HENRY takes a pragmatic approach to what he calls his "arcane form of cancer" and the progressive devastation endured by a once handsome face. "They cut it out, you carry on." Adenoid cystic carcinoma has required life-saving excavation

of mouth, eye, and forehead. When he was 42, a large tumour on the roof of his mouth was removed. Within three weeks he'd learned to speak with a plate in his mouth and returned to the courts, where he has continued to work since.

"Being a cheerful fellow, I can still picture the radiotherapy treatment after the first operation," Henry says. "I was lying face down into the mask, dreaming I was James Bond in the *Goldfinger* movie."

The Bond moment was to recur. Fifteen operations in 13 years. On the most dramatic occasion, the facial and neurosurgeons took more than a day to finish the microscopically intricate operation.

"After that, when I asked for a mirror, even Anita, who is a wonderfully practical, supportive wife, suggested that I might look too diabolical," he says.

But Henry, the positive thinker, felt that in a month's time "I could look back on this and think how much worse I looked then". He accepts his "less than perfect face" and the prognosis. Would 007 demonstrate such fortitude?

Gilbert reckons there are few artists who have the opportunity to paint such unusual faces and encounter everyday heroism.

"When I started I had no idea what a wrench it would be to leave. I will never forget. I have met remarkable people who are now friends. I've never tried to sanitise or flatter."

"Previously, I spent my life offending models who didn't like how I'd portrayed them. But

they like the work, which is often brutal."

Chris, a young Nigerian who was savagely assaulted, displays a photograph of his portrait on his sitting-room wall: chin bandaged, skull caved in, a feeding tube in his mouth.

IT IS an inspiration for him. He has survived. Later, when his face had been reconstructed, Mark painted him again but the response was less enthusiastic. "Do you not think I look a bit depressed there?" he asked.

Perhaps vanity is the true sign of rehabilitation. Art has transcended the particulars of facial deformity, it has shown what is surgically possible and what is not. Artist, doctor, and patients have created an accessible way for the public to absorb information. But that is only the beginning. Iain Hutchison's mother's money is spent. He desperately needs £150,000 per annum to establish a centre devoted to research into the treatment and prevention of facial diseases and injury.

Amazingly, since oral cancer is as common as cervical or skin cancer, the centre will be the first in Britain. Hutchison would far rather I'd skipped the stuff about him and Helena and written solely about the research centre. But we don't always understand

each other's professions. Recently the man with the scalpel asked the man with the paintbrush to reconsider his portrait of Helena's mum. "Could you not make it a more pleasant expression?" he asked. Spoken like a surgeon who transforms people's faces - and their lives.

● Stark Talk with Iain Hutchison transmits on Radio Scotland on Sunday at 11.30am and Monday at 10.10pm.
● The Saving Faces exhibition is at Glasgow School of Art in December. Contact www.savingfaces.co.uk

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Don't miss



HEALING HANDS: Iain Hutchison was the man behind Saving Faces

Picture: PAUL HACKETT