



"Saving Faces" is also a testimony to the practitioners of reconstructive surgery, the unseen angels of mercy whose skill is immortalized in these portraits

Art of Medicine

'Saving Faces' exhibit features surgical portraits of pathos and hope

By Michael Joe Krainak

There is nothing like a significant and controversial art exhibition to bring forth an array of axiomatic expressions bordering on platitudes by both its defenders and detractors.

The former argue on behalf of artistic license, often interpreted as "anything goes," and the latter respond with outrage in defense of community standards, which some consider a cover for censorship itself.

And there the hapless viewer sits amidst the hue and cry, armed mostly with the familiar, "I don't know art, but I know what I like," grateful for a clue and a few cues, and quite willing to see and judge for himself.

The public will get a chance to do just that with "Saving Faces: Art and Medicine," a fascinating yet disturbing art show which opens Friday, Jan. 13 and runs until Feb. 24 in the University of Nebraska at Omaha in the Weber Fine Arts Gallery.

A special opening and reception for the public will be held Sunday, Jan. 15, 2006, for "Saving Faces," 42 portraits by painter Mark Gilbert of medical patients in the process of surgical restoration of their facial deformities caused by cancer, trauma or congenital defects.

Gilbert, a highly acclaimed portrait

painter from Glasgow, Scotland, accepted the offer of Iain Hutchison, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon at the London Royal Hospital in 1999 to paint his patients for perceived benefits for them as well as the public.

Though "Saving Faces" transcends the few detractors it has had since this traveling exhibition began touring last year in North America, these often graphic, some might say gruesome, portrayals of disfigurement cannot be rationalized as works of art with a single "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

At the very least, this show reminds us that occasionally art isn't always about beauty, at least in the traditional sense. One need only view the grotesque portraits of Francis Bacon or the work of Hieronymus Bosch to understand the political, social and religious perspectives art often employs and enjoys.

This strikingly colorful and humanistic marriage of science and art is bound to draw a mixed response from its public, often in the same viewer, whether intended or not. And with images available at the UNO Art Gallery Web site and recently viewed on the cover of the Living section of last Sunday's *Omaha World-Herald*, the public is curious, if a bit cautious.

Witness the reaction of one segment of the public, a group of retired teachers who meet every Monday morning for

breakfast to discuss everything current. Little escapes them and last Monday, several acknowledged seeing images from "Saving Faces" and their comments are equally provocative as they consider seeing the show itself.

All admitted the portraits were difficult to view at first, some even expressing relief that they or someone they knew was not the "object" of any painting. But they were also moved and drawn to the subject behind the mask of surgical detail. Jim Coulter and Dick Briles spoke of the empathy felt for "the suffering they must have had to endure," and Chuck Broghammer commented on the admiration he felt toward "their spirit of survival."

But did they consider these portraits to be art, much less a thing of beauty? In a broader sense of both, they clearly did. As another of their group, Warren Mattes, reminded them, "It was Carl Sandburg who said, 'If you stare long enough at a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, even he begins to look beautiful.'"

Program directors Deborah-Eve Lombard, director of the UNO Art Gallery, and Drs. Virginia Aita and William Lydiatt of the Nebraska Medical Center are counting on this enlightened "vox populi" on behalf of "Saving Faces," and have planned an extensive five-week

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PICTURE

Tuggin' at Hot

Lincoln's Tugboat host an opening Saturday in downtown Omaha at the Hot Shops Art gallery. The group show features established and new artists with exceptional talent.

Hot Shops Art is at 1301 Nicholas St. from 7-10 p.m.

Tugboat's Tom Gomez, Jake Gil Lynch were looking for a niche and bring good art in a fun and interesting way according to a press release.

The spectrum covered by the show includes sculpture, video, print, oil, acrylic and watercolor. The show will run through Feb. 11 and is sponsored by Recordz, Hot Shops Art, Yia Yia's Pizza, Beagle's Seagull and the opening reception performance. Registration at Hot Shops are 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. Fri. and 11 a.m. - 5 p.m. Sat.

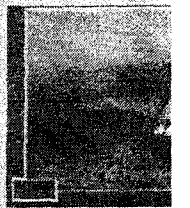
Beagle's Seagull is the opening reception performance. Registration at Hot Shops are 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. Fri. and 11 a.m. - 5 p.m. Sat.

Bemis can't ren

It was a quarter ago that artists J Hepburn, Lorne Schomlau set out venue to support scene. This Jan. Bemis Center celebrates birthday.

And in those over 700 artists Omaha to live, work produce some of the best created in the world.

That's something not to mention of the receipt of grants - and plans on doing exciting line-up for





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speaker series beginning Friday, Jan. 13 that will include subjective, social, philosophical, historical and aesthetic aspects of this exhibition.

Highlighting the series are: Iain Hutchison, who will speak on Jan. 13 on the history and background of "Saving Faces" at 7 p.m. in the Weber Fine Arts Theater; Ted Kooser, poet laureate, who will talk on "Healing Through Poetry," Jan. 26 at 7 p.m. in the Scott Conference Center, south of the UNO campus; and painter Mark Gilbert who will head a panel discussion Feb. 16 at 7 p.m. in the UNO Art Gallery.

Speakers will also address certain obvious ethical issues. One of the first steps in Gilbert's painting process was to ensure that potential sitters gave "clear and informed consent" to being painted and did not feel any coercion to participate. In a BBC interview in 2003, Gilbert said, "I was anxious about the project, worried I may be focusing on traumatizing details that the patients sitting for me may not have wanted to think about."

But during and after the sittings, Gilbert came to some interesting conclusions. "The reaction from the patients has been universally positive. Some say it's good fun, others say that looking at the paintings helps them come to terms with the treatment and how they look."

Perhaps the most revealing was "A few patients say they can't look at photos of themselves, but that the paintings are OK." Which is to say, they are no longer just an object for medical study and record but a subject possibly transcending their initial experience on their way to recovery.

Gilbert has said in his artist statement that his "aims were largely concerned with amplifying a sense of human individuality...I hope, as with any paintings I attempt, to instill an emotional charge... I am always aware that being painted at

To that extent, Gilbert has succeeded at several levels. On the one hand, his larger-than-life, close-up paintings appear almost as mythical masks that echo universal physical and psychological trauma. But his use of broad, expressionistic strokes and contours along with bold color and shadow more than hint at the personalities or "stories," as he calls them, that lie beneath the mask.

Consider the triptych of an African-American man whose "story" of facial reconstruction from hideous trauma cannot hide his expression of peace and acceptance. Likewise, there is a portrait of Roland S., whose radiotherapy mask of yellow, green and red, forbidding at best, is met by its wearer with eyes wide-open and full of anticipation.

Not all the portraits are as tragic or traumatic. There are, for instance, several paintings that show their subject on the way to recovery. There is Henry D., whose several images depict his facial reconfiguration from cancer which he defied as a barrister until his death in 2002. There are also portraits of Rhonda G. and Tuba K. whose expressions in post op reveal their spirit of survival.

The most difficult images to embrace predictably are those of children. A painting of Barry C, sitting at play with his video game, shows promise, but another of Mazeeda B. in pre-op, waiting for the removal of a large facial tumor on her right side speaks for itself even if she can't. It's portraits like these that give new meaning to pathos as we try to cope not only with a child suffering but their complete lack of comprehension.

Of course, "Saving Faces" is also a testimony to the practitioners of reconstructive surgery, the unseen angels of mercy whose skill is immortalized in these portraits as well. Art and medicine may seem like strange bedfellows, but this exhibition is proof positive that sometimes beauty is