



## Saving faces: art and medicine working together



### Saving Faces

An exhibition at Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, UK, showing until Jan 25, 2002, then at the National Portrait Gallery, London, from Feb 27 to April 21, and then touring throughout the UK in 2002. See [www.savingfaces.co.uk](http://www.savingfaces.co.uk).

I was struck by the number of people gathered at the Glasgow School of Art for the opening of a unique and remarkable exhibition of portrait paintings by the Glasgow artist Mark Gilbert. The exhibition, in the imposing building designed by Rennie Mackintosh, aims to promote the work of Saving Faces, a charity for research into the prevention and treatment of oral and facial diseases and injuries. This UK charity was established in 1999 by Iain Hutchison, a consultant in oral and maxillofacial surgery at The Royal London and St Bartholemew's Hospitals. Through the medium of art, Hutchison hoped to illustrate, in a form that was accessible to the general public, what is possible with modern facial surgery and show that people with a facial disability are

able to enjoy happy, successful, and fulfilled lives. His belief in the power of art to engage and transform, resulted in the creation of an artist-in-residence post within his own surgical department. Hutchison wanted to give an artist the opportunity to paint these unique faces as they progressed through their surgical and emotional journey. He also felt that sitting for, and seeing, portraits of themselves might have a cathartic effect, and allow patients to come to terms more rapidly with their altered appearance.

Gilbert explained to me that, as artist-in-residence in Iain Hutchison's surgical unit, he painted patients at various stages of their treatment—before, during, and after surgery. Ethical approval was secured from the outset, since it was vital that Gilbert had the willing cooperation of his sitters and that they did not feel they had been coerced into taking part in the project.

When Gilbert first arrived at the London Hospital, in addition to getting to know the patients, he wanted to understand the work of Hutchinson and his team at first hand. He joined them in the operating theatre and witnessed their surgery, which enabled him to see the way faces changed during operative procedures.

I was interested to see how Gilbert had dealt with such a sensitive and, some would say, taboo area of fine art. The face has been described as "the window to the soul" and these images displayed, in no mean measure, the courageous spirit of their subjects. Undoubtedly, the relationships that grew between Gilbert and the individuals that were the subject of his art are

reflected in the extraordinary work he painted during that time.

It is clear that the resulting paintings and sketches represent more than the simple form and shape of the patients' faces. Gilbert has succeeded in conveying the intensity and power of the face damaged by trauma, or unveiled during the surgical process, and the changing



Henry (1999)

Mark Gilbert



Chris (1999)

Mark Gilbert

emotions and character of the patients as they experience one of their life's most dramatic events.

There can be few things worse than developing a disfiguring disease or suffering severe trauma to the face, and then having to endure a series of procedures to correct or improve your appearance. Yet, Gilbert's images reveal how these patients were able to go a long way to come to terms with their condition. There is no doubt, from speaking to Iain Hutchison, that the paintings played an important part in the healing process of his patients. Indeed, there were some patients present at the opening of the exhibition and I felt that their presence bore powerful testimony to their dignity, courage, and resilience, so masterfully captured in Gilbert's work.

Peter Vanezis

Department of Forensic Medicine and Science, Glasgow University, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK