

The scalpel and the easel



INTERVIEW A
 surgeon and a painter have teamed up for a unique form of therapy. Valerie Grove met them

Iain Hutchison, a maxillo-facial surgeon at Bart's and the Royal London hospitals, and Mark Gilbert, a young portrait painter, are well-matched collaborators.

What Hutchison does to restore and reshape people's damaged faces is almost beyond our imagining. His conversation is matter-of-factly peppered with such phrases as "there was a tumour growing out of his nose. I was going to have to take out his eye, so I had to peel his face back" and "he had a malignant tumour on the right side of his head, and a large protuberance on the other side. So it looked as if he had three heads."

Gilbert, a 30-year-old graduate of Glasgow School of Art, has watched 30 or 40 operations on badly disfigured patients. His paintings present the gruesome reality on canvas in a realistic yet bearable way.

Two years ago Hutchison decided, in a kind of Road to Damascus vision, that he would appoint a painter-in-residence to record his operations and exhibit the results to raise money for Saving Faces, the charity he had founded to fund research into facial surgery.

There was a precedent for this marriage of surgery and art. Henry Tonks, the First World War artist who later became a professor at the Slade School, was originally a doctor. He drew pastel drawings of men who'd had their faces blown off in the trenches and who were operated on at the Queen's Hospital, Sidcup, Kent. The striking drawings still repose at the Royal College of Surgeons, but Tonks had no desire for the public to see his work.

Hutchison met Gilbert



Face value: facial surgeon Iain Hutchison (standing) with portrait painter Mark Gilbert, whose pictures of Hutchison's patients are at the National Portrait Gallery

through a niece of his Glaswegian wife, Helena Kennedy, the barrister and Labour peer. Baroness Kennedy had commissioned Gilbert to paint a portrait of her octogenarian mother.

Gilbert was dubious about Hutchison's offer of the artist-in-residence post. "I wondered if I could cope with all the responsibilities involved, which are not what an artist normally has to deal with."

The hospital also had misgivings. Suppose that patients felt pressured into taking part?

Eventually the Professor of Medical Ethics gave his approval, but Hutchison had to put in writing exactly what his goals were. "The first was to give the general public some grasp of what we can and can't do in modern facial surgery."

A million people arrive in casualty with facial injuries every year, many having smashed through windscreens. Another

2,000 develop cancer of the mouth. Others are born with defects.

"Secondly, I wanted to show that it's possible to be disfigured and still lead normal, fulfilled lives," Hutchison says. "Thirdly, these are exquisitely unique faces — the sort that portrait painters normally don't see. And fourthly, I thought it might have a cathartic effect on the patients and would benefit them psychologically and emotionally." He selected six patients as

appropriate and told Gilbert that he wanted paintings just of the faces "before and after and sometimes during the operation. And I wanted realism, not Cubism."

The first, Henry de Lotbinière, proved to be an inspired choice. De Lotbinière is a barrister who has undergone 15 operations in 13 years for salivary gland cancer. He has lost one eye and has no bones left on the left side of his head, just a crater. He suggested that Gilbert should paint him in wig and gown.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT

What the critics say: first-night reviews are on page 21 of the main section

"I'd always steered clear of narrative," Gilbert says, "but a single image tells a story, and this one says that despite looking the way he does now, with half his face gone, he can still put on a performance in court. He is completely relaxed and at ease with himself. The sparkle in his eye, the hands that exude calm and confidence, testify to

what a remarkable and amazing and life-enhancing person he is. I always leave him with a smile on my face."

Then there was Julian, who ran his car into a lamppost, ejected out of the sunroof and hit the lamppost face first. He was in a neck collar with a tracheostomy tube three days later, so Hutchison got the consent from his mother.

Another Henry, a male nurse from Nigeria, had saved up to come to England so that Hutchison could reconstruct his face. Hutchison would operate without payment, but the hospital had to charge £20,000, which he didn't have, so the operation was cancelled. That night, Hutchison and his wife were dining with the actor Jonathan Pryce and told him about the aborted operation. Over the weekend, Pryce rang around (Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh re-

ceived calls) — and so they raised the money.

Mazeeda, from Bangladesh, was aged not quite three when she came in with a "yolk-sac" tumour the size of a grapefruit on her face. When she returned for her post-operation portrait, she was dressed in a bottle-green party frock with a pink ribbon in her hair. "She is now blind in her right eye, because of the tumour squeezing the optic nerve, but she is a wonderful little girl whose Mona Lisa smile lights up the room," Hutchison says. Gilbert's full-length portrait conveys her joie de vivre.

Hutchison's modesty belies his high reputation. He is trusted totally by his patients, who remain understandably close to him for the rest of their lives. "Facial surgery is the most dramatic thing they have ever encountered," he says. "It is always an appalling assault on the face you present to the world.

compensated, and had always been gregarious, the life and soul of the party. Gilbert painted her in profile: she sits in a leather jacket with a smile on her face, a confirmation of what she now feels: that at last she has a face that fits her personality.

Gilbert ended up being a counsellor to the patients. Their response to the experience was so dramatic that Hutchison employed a psychologist to observe the effect that Gilbert had on them. He concluded that the patients derived a better understanding of their surgery from seeing their portraits, and it helped them to adjust positively to the future.

"I was reassured that they felt positive about it," Gilbert says. "They were encouraging me too. And their stories were so incredible. It takes a certain amount of courage to have a portrait painted at the best of times, and I feared I might be reminding them of things they would rather forget. But they would tell me things they had never told anyone."

"Sometimes I could later go and tell Iain what a patient was anxious about. I was a 'safe environment', as psychologists call it, and even if they found it hard to look in a mirror, they could look at my portrait. I would shoot a

whole film with a magnifying lens during their operation, so I could tell them all about what had happened while they were asleep.

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able. He educated all of us." Gilbert lived in a nurses' hostel and was given a poky little room near Hutchison's office to paint in. Suddenly, instead of artist-in-garret solitude, he had a constant stream of visitors, and lots of human response. "I was sad to leave the intensity of it and the collaborative nature of the work, having colleagues all around me. I went to my first office Christmas party."

It has been fascinating for both to discover how people have responded as the exhibition has toured the land. The consensus is that in every gallery where it has been mounted so far — Norwich, Newcastle, Glasgow — visitors would stay an hour instead of the usual 20 minutes, and write long thoughtful tributes in the visitors' comments books.

"I always get pleasure from making patients better," Hutchison says. "But I'm paid to do that. This project was something else. I look back on it with pride."

● Saving Faces opens in the Porter Gallery at the National Portrait Gallery in London tomorrow (020-7306 0055). Mark Gilbert also has an exhibition of his regular portraits at the Beaux Arts Gallery, 22 Cork Street, London W1 (020-7437 5799)

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"As graphic as these operations are, there are certain things I could not put in. You'd say: 'This is going too far. This is cartoon stuff.' But it wasn't upsetting. It was moving. The patients were so strong that they calmed my nerves."

Hutchison could never have anticipated that Gilbert would be so much the right person for the job. "I knew he was a nice guy," he says, "but I could never have predicted how close he would get to the patients — his humanity, warmth and ability to reassure people, despite his youth, and make them comfort-

able. He educated all of us." Gilbert lived in a nurses' hostel and was given a poky little room near Hutchison's office to paint in. Suddenly, instead of artist-in-garret solitude, he had a constant stream of visitors, and lots of human response. "I was sad to leave the intensity of it and the collaborative nature of the work, having colleagues all around me. I went to my first office Christmas party."

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RICHARD CANNON