

Painting Remains of Faces, Sometimes What's Behind

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subjects included Henry Ekpe, 35, a nurse with a malignant bone tumor whose face was reconstructed after the removal of his right eye, nose, cheekbones and upper jaw; Chris Pavlou, 35, an actor whose left eye was crushed when a gang of youths attacked him with baseball bats; and Mazeeda Begum, 6, who had an enormous tumor protruding from her face, making her blind in one eye. Her transformation, documented in the paintings, was one of the most startling.

"I was probably dealing with some of the most highly charged images that any artist could hope to work with, and it was quite disconcerting," Mr. Gilbert said. "But many things I thought they'd find upsetting or distressing, that they'd rather not focus on, I found turned out to be the exact opposite."

Mr. Hutchison (surgeons here are not known as "doctor") conceived the project, he said, to help shine a bright light on the generally uncomfortable subject of facial disfigurement and to demonstrate the possibilities and limits of facial surgery. He also wanted, he said, to give Mr. Gilbert, whom he knew slightly, "the opportunity to paint exceptional

faces," and most of all to give his patients the chance for the catharsis that the painting process and the final portraits might bring.

"Art therapy in hospitals usually means patients fiddling around with clay," said Mr. Hutchison, who in 2000 formed the Saving Faces charity, which helps support patients with facial illness and raises money for research. "But here the patients are the sitters, and art is done to them."

Speaking of Mr. de Lotbiniere, whose cancer is incurable, Mr. Hutchison said: "I have removed nearly every part of his head. I've removed his lower jaw, his upper jaw, his eye socket, his forehead, part of his brain. It's trite, when talking about him, to talk about courageousness. This is something more than courageous. This is a man who says: I am alive. I can do things. I am not going to let this tumor get in my way."

For his part, Mr. de Lotbiniere said he found it liberating to be painted. He is far more distressed, he said, about the loss of his faculties — he is having trouble with his remaining eye, and with his palate gone, can only talk with a special plate inside his mouth that sometimes acts up — than about the way he looks. "I thought this was wonderful — living, I mean — and I was so happy to be



Sarah Lee

Mark Gilbert, above, paints people before, during and after facial surgery. "Hakin (post-op) 1999," right, is at the National Portrait Gallery.



National Portrait Gallery, London

kept alive that it made me much more relaxed about my face," he said.

"The more people who are out there looking odd," he said, "the easier it will be for other people to go out and join them."

If there is a precedent for "Saving Faces," it is the pastel portraits that Henry Tonks drew of gravely wounded soldiers being operated on during World War I, portraits now owned by the Royal College of Surgeons in London. Mr. Hutchison said he hoped the

"Saving Faces" portraits, which will be at the Portrait Gallery through April 21, could find a permanent home too. They have been traveling around Britain for more than a year, praised for introducing people to images they would ordinarily turn from, for making them look.

"What a wonderful idea for putting it all in perspective," wrote a visitor in a comment book at the Victoria Art Gallery in Bath, where "Saving Faces" toured a year ago. "What makes us all who we are, anyway?"

Painting What's Left of Faces, Sometimes What's Behind

By SARAH LYALL

LONDON, April 2 — "When you've been kept alive through 10 or 12 operations and your surgeon asks, 'Would you like to be painted?' you say 'Yes,'" said Henry de Lotbiniere, one of the stars, if that is the right word, of "Saving Faces," an unsettling and provocative new exhibition here.

Mr. Lotbiniere's portrait, on a large wall directly opposite a glittering array of Mario Testino fashion photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, is impossible to miss, as is Mr. Lotbiniere himself. Cancer has robbed him of much of his face, giving it a startling

lopsidedness, caved-in in some places, jutting out in others. Wearing the magisterial barrister's wig and gown of his profession, Mr. de Lotbiniere gazes head-on from the canvas, his legs crossed, his expression unflinching, unapologetic and even faintly amused: a man, it seems, entirely at ease with his altered self.

Whether the viewer feels the same thing is another matter entirely, especially when it emerges that the painting just next to the portrait shows the inside of Mr. de Lotbiniere's head, mid-surgery, with the face peeled away to reveal bone, muscle and blood; bits of hair in one section turn out, on closer inspection, to be eyelashes. But forcing the public to confront the realities of

facial deformation and surgery is what "Saving Faces," a collection of paintings by the Glaswegian portrait painter Mark Gilbert, is meant to accomplish.

For two years Mr. Gilbert was the artist in residence for the oral and maxillofacial surgeon Iain Hutchinson at two hospitals in London, St. Bartholomew's and the Royal London Hospital. Mr. Hutchison treats people with severe facial deformities: accident victims, cancer sufferers with disfiguring head tumors and people with congenital defects in their faces, mouths and jaws.

Mr. Gilbert, 32, was given extraordinary access to the participating patients, staying with the surgical team during operations that could stretch to 12 hours or longer,

taking photographs and making thumbnail sketches of what were essentially works in progress. He painted the patients before, during and after surgery, a process, he said, that was at once humbling and exhilarating.

"As a portrait painter, I was already aware of the capacity to upset and offend," he said. "I said I wasn't going to sanitize or flatter, but also that I wasn't going to exaggerate. I had to be as honest and straightforward as possible. I also decided I would have to actively seek the opinions of the person I was painting, usually the last thing you would want to do."

In addition to Mr. de Lotbiniere, 56, the

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