

art

NO OIL PAINTING?

Vanity, wealth and self-confidence may traditionally be seen as reasons for having your portrait painted, but the results of a year long project by Glaswegian painter Mark Gilbert, visiting the Laing this month, are promising to change such pre-conceptions.

Gilbert spent his residency at the Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Unit of St. Bartholomew's and Royal London Hospital creating a series of thought-provoking oil paintings, which document the progress of patients undergoing surgery within the ward. Seventy patients agreed to sit for Gilbert, and the result is a vibrant series of paintings that powerfully convey a sense of the individuality and character of the sitters.

Gilbert's vivid, finely detailed portraits of faces before, during and after treatment also herald the beginning of a new charity which is tackling the prejudice faced by those with facial disfigurements. Saving Faces, has been set up by Iain Hutchison, consultant oral and facial surgeon at St Bartholomew's and the Royal London Hospitals, and is the first to raise funds for the prevention and treatment of oral and facial diseases. One million people need hospital treatment for facial injury in this year annually, and although oral cancer is more common than cervical cancer it amazingly receives just one 20th of the funding.

One of the most striking portraits is that of 'Hakeem S', a 45 year old photographer from Nigeria who developed a malignant sarcoma on the right side of his head in 1995. Hakeem had surgery to rotate flaps of skin and fat from his

scalp to reconstruct this area whilst still in Nigeria. He came to England for further surgery, funded after a special appeal by a host of well known British actors, directors and impresarios. The series of small square head and shoulders portraits created by Gilbert show his profile at different angles both before and after the dramatic reconstructive surgery.

The wide variety of sitters prove that any age, race or sex can be vulnerable to facial disfigurement. All the portraits are painted with plain backgrounds and little or no props, in a consciously honest and revealing way. The portraits of child patients have an added poignancy; eleven year old Barry from Kent appears with his beloved playstation, while adult sitters are characterised by such tools as the uniforms of their trade - one sitter is painted in his barrister's robes. The therapeutic effects on the patients painted by Gilbert are said to have been life-enhancing, as they began to see themselves as more than just the face they have been focusing on. Important as it is to challenge the prejudices in a culture that is obsessed with the perfect image, there is also an urgent need for further research into early diagnosis and effective treatments. Hutchison already has 38 surgeons willing to do this work if he can raise the funds to set up a trial centre.

In a culture that puts such a strong emphasis on conventional beauty and where, as research has demonstrated, people not deemed conventionally good



looking are perceived to have less desirable personal characteristics, this is a valuable, challenging exhibition which truly deserves to be experienced.

Saving Faces by Mark Gilbert is at The Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle until 2nd September. Call 0191 232 7734 for details.

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