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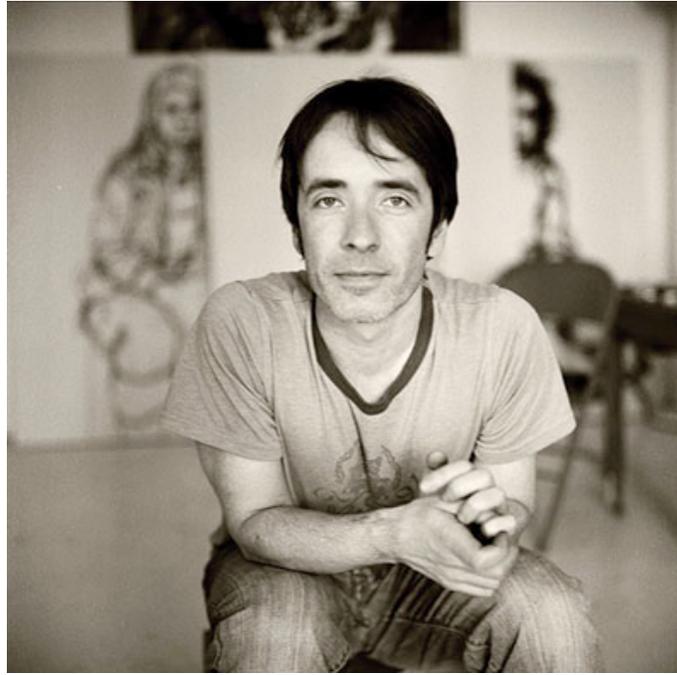
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Patient Portraits



Artist works with UNMC patients to create, educate

by Sarah Baker

For Mark Gilbert, art isn't just about the creation of work. It's also about capturing images — often times, difficult ones — of the human condition.

The Scotland native first introduced to Nebraska audiences his large-scale portraits of British patients suffering from facial cancers and other facial deformities in a February 2006 University of Nebraska at Omaha exhibit, *Saving Faces*. Now he's bringing his patient-artist connection and work closer to his adopted Midwestern home.

Gilbert is home in Scotland after recently finishing a half-time artist-in-residence stint at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and a two-month tenure at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art as a visiting artist, where he began working with patients living with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease.

When Gilbert returns to Omaha in late summer, he will continue working with one ALS patient, Roger Poulin. Through a full-time position at UNMC, he will begin to work with many other patients suffering from a number of ailments: cancer, leukemia, AIDS, morbid obesity and, he hopes, children and mothers in the maternity unit. He'd also like to collaborate with patients suffering from psychological disorders, as well as geriatric patients and caregivers.

"I'd love to be able to work with any of those people," Gilbert said. "You never know what you are going to get."

He said the projects he's looking forward to starting when he returns to Omaha after a visit to his home in Europe are much closer to the work he did in London. "It's going to be fascinating work," Gilbert said. "The sitter's reaction really depends on their ailment and where they come from. It can be cathartic."

In his Bemis studio in late spring, Gilbert had a number of sittings with Poulin, who came for about an hour-and-a-half to work with Gilbert a handful of times. The result is a number of large-scale, charcoal sketches of Poulin, which will eventually lead to large-scale paintings when Gilbert returns.



Gilbert met Poulin through Steve Langan, the executive director of ALS in the Heartland, which serves as a resource to ALS patients and their families and aims to enhance their quality of life. Its services include in-home consultations, support groups, community resources and referrals, an equipment program, a respite program, and fundraising events for local patient services and national research efforts into the causes and cures for ALS. ALS in the Heartland got involved with the UNMC Patient-Caregiver Portraiture Project through UNMC professors, Langan said.

Roger Poulin's wife, Dolores, said her husband feels like he's making an important contribution through the art. "Not a lot of people know about ALS," she said. "This is a really unusual way for us to educate others. Some people approach Roger with fear, and maybe this will allow more people to be comfortable and to understand."

Gilbert said he hopes the work he does in Omaha can eventually be shown, possibly as part of a traveling show. "It's really essential that we show this work in Omaha, in the community that it was made," Gilbert said.

As for the Poulins, Langan said they're looking forward to Gilbert's return and the finishing of the portraits.

"The project has really given them a purpose," he said.

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