



Home News Money Sports Living Entertainment Obituaries Marketplace Subscriber Services



Contact Us

Login | Signup



Dec 14, 2008 9:23 pm 1° F Forecast

SEARCH HELP 7 DAY ARCHIVE SHOW LAST SEARCH

entertainment

»Entertainment Home

- Food & Dining Calendar Movie Listings AP Entertainment

Printable Page E-mail Page Digg Newsvine del.icio.us Facebook

Published Sunday December 14, 2008

Artist's project finds 'more than just patients'

BY JOHN PITCHER WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Roger Poulin suffered a terribly cruel fate.



Artist Mark Gilbert

About five years ago, the former U.S. Air Force officer was stricken with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. The illness quickly robbed him of his ability to walk and talk. He couldn't even eat.

By the time his motorized wheelchair rolled into artist Mark Gilbert's loft studio at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in 2007, all he could do was blink.

GALLERY

- Portraits of Care

"But Roger did have the most expressive face," said Gilbert, who created several portraits of Poulin. "The light in his eyes was incredibly reassuring."

Poulin's portraits are now on display at the Bemis as part of the exhibit "Here I Am and Nowhere Else: Portraits of Care." The 50 or so oils, charcoal sketches and other works are products of Gilbert's two-year artist residency at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

During his stay, Gilbert sketched numerous images of 26 patients and 20 caregivers. He also instructed medical students and residents in the fine art of observation. His work wasn't art therapy. His intent was to create serious art - work that would reveal hidden truths about the human condition.

But "Portraits of Care" is also part of an innovative research project.

Gilbert's sponsors, Virginia Aita, an associate professor of medical humanities at UNMC's College of Public Health, and Dr. William Lydiatt, a head-and-neck surgeon at UNMC, arranged funding for the arts residency.

Their project is qualitative. They used the portraits to help them interpret their subjects' inner worlds.

Aita and Lydiatt plan to publish a paper on the project in the near future.

"Our initial findings are that people felt personally validated," Lydiatt said. "These portraits show people who have three-dimensional lives and who are more than just patients to be poked and prodded."

If anyone knows what it's like to be the object of a sharp scalpel, it's 5-year-old Daisy.

She was born with her intestines outside of her abdominal wall. The congenital defect caused numerous complications in her blood and digestive systems. As a result, she has spent much of her young life in hospitals.

About the show

Artist Mark Gilbert created the images in "Portraits of Care" during a two-year residency at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

She spent her first seven months in a neonatal intensive care unit, undergoing dozens of blood transfusions - her first when she was just 2 weeks old. She has also had numerous surgeries, including a small bowel, liver and pancreas transplant at UNMC in 2006.

When Daisy was invited to sit for a portrait, her mother, Joey Hoffman, felt honored.

"Most of the people who've known Daisy have been doctors

spotlight

Kickoff & Tipoff Kid Contests Donate today to Goodfellows Travel Snaps Photo FREE Classified Ads!

marketplace

- Autos Auto Dealers Locator Auto Parts & Services Homes Open House Jobs Classifieds Call the Experts Garage Sales Legal Notices Place Classified Ad Metro Guide Online ShopOmaha®

special features

- Today's Health Tips Alegent Health Encyclopedia Healthwise Featured Local Sites Games & Gadgets Page Wedding Essentials House to Home Street of Dreams Other Area Newspapers

AMERITRADE The support you need. GO

COX Security Suite Powered By McAfee



Kids 6-12! Enter to be the Omaha World-Herald



The residency was part of a study examining the impact of interpretive art on patients and the people who cared for them. The 39-year-old Gilbert, a native of Glasgow, Scotland, sketched patients at every life stage, from newborns to people suffering terminal illnesses.

Caregivers in the project included doctors, nurses, parents, spouses, social workers and even government officials.

Many of the images are stark charcoals on paper. There are also a few oils on canvas and oils on aluminum. Most of the colors are muted, suggesting quiet, inner worlds.

Gilbert created an earlier portrait exhibit called "Saving Faces." That show, which featured patients who'd undergone head-and-neck surgeries, appeared at the UNO Art Gallery in 2006.

and nurses," Hoffman said. "Her whole life has been overshadowed by illness, but now she's being celebrated."

Daisy and Gilbert formed an immediate bond. She nicknamed him Shrek, because the native Scotsman's lilting brogue reminded her of the popular cartoon ogre. He thought of her as the "Little Tornado," since she was a whirlwind of energy.

"We had to pop in a video to keep her still during sittings," Gilbert said.

Gilbert created several portraits of Daisy over the past year. They're all titled "Daisy" - most participants used only their first names to protect privacy.

Two of Daisy's portraits are simple charcoal-on-paper drawings. They show a pixieish girl with wind-swept hair.

Many of the exhibit's portraits are charcoal sketches on paper. Images, therefore, are often simple and unadorned. But they are arguably more powerful because of it.

"Oil paintings can seem very contrived and artificial, like a posed photograph," said Gilbert. "Drawings are an immediate, spontaneous and urgent journey into the unknown."

That said, Gilbert did paint one oil portrait of Daisy. It shows her sitting on a stool, wearing a pink ballerina dress. She looks thoughtful, alert and perhaps a little bit sad.

"I think a lot of people in the portraits come off looking introspective," Gilbert said.

Jason Schoo, on the other hand, looks downright defiant.

His charcoal portrait shows a man dressed as a surgeon or an operating room nurse. His arms are folded on his chest in a defensive posture. And he's wearing a scowl.

But there's something else.

A deep scar disfigures the center of his face; a substantial portion of his nose has been removed.

Schoo, a 35-year-old UNMC medical assistant, participated in the project as a caregiver. But he's also a cancer survivor.

He was diagnosed with sinus cancer in 1995. He underwent 12 surgeries, 11 different chemotherapy treatments and 60 sessions of radiation. Then in 1997 the cancer metastasized to his lung.

Schoo said his first reaction was denial.

But during an early chemotherapy session, he took a short bathroom break. His eyes were sensitive to the light, so he kept the lights off. To his horror, he noticed that his urine glowed in the dark.

"I realized the chemicals from the chemo were going through my entire body, and I got really scared," Schoo said. "That's also when I got really serious."

Schoo's powerful survival instincts kicked in, and he eventually beat his cancer.

At the time of his diagnosis, he was planning to become a professional golfer. Instead, he remained with the doctors and nurses who saved his life, becoming a caregiver.

Sketching caregivers was an integral part of Gilbert's project. He drew doctors, nurses, medical assistants, parents, spouses, social workers - anyone who was providing care to a patient.

Aita and Lydiatt wanted to look at the emotional impact of illness on caregivers. What the portraits often revealed was the burden of care. You see weariness in the eyes of many caregivers. Certainly, you see it in the eyes of Jodee, who sat for a charcoal on paper sketch.

She was the principal caregiver for her son Jarad, who lost an arm to cancer.

Gilbert created several portraits of Jarad, including a large oil on canvas. In all of the drawings, there's a look of steely determination, even anger, in his eyes. It's the demeanor of a young man who's not going gently into that good night. He died in September at age 20.

"He had every right to be mad," Gilbert said. "You could see it in his eyes."

Amazingly, there appears to be no anger in the eyes of Poulin, the ALS patient.

Poulin, who flew as a commercial pilot after retiring as a lieutenant colonel from the Air Force in 1989, was diagnosed with the disease in 2004. He finally succumbed to the illness last July at age 61. His wife, Dolores, said he accepted the disease with stoic calm.

"I never, ever heard Roger complain about anything," she said. "It just wasn't a part of his makeup."

As the disease progressed, Poulin communicated with the world through a small computer attached to his wheelchair. The same kind of device is used by famed physicist Stephen

Phishing Spyware



Identity Protection

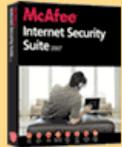


Parental Controls

All in one package.

All FREE with Cox High Speed Internet.

Get it now!



Hawking, who also has Lou Gehrig's disease.

Poulin was excited about Gilbert's project. He wanted people to know about ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

So he sat for the artist, often wearing his favorite Air Force blanket - decorated with a menacing trio of F-16 fighters - to keep his atrophied muscles warm.

Gilbert said Poulin's "heavenly gaze" reminded him of the images seen in paintings by the artist El Greco. Poulin was communicating with his eyes.

"ALS can take a lot away from you," Dolores said. "The portrait project made him feel useful again."

• **Contact the writer:** 444-1076, john.pitcher@owh.com

Contact the Omaha World-Herald [newsroom](#)

Copyright ©2008 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.

[↑ Top](#)

[Printable Page](#)

[E-mail Page](#)

[Digg](#)

[Newsvine](#)

[del.icio.us](#)

[Facebook](#)

A yellow banner containing several logos and messages. On the left, there is a checkbox icon next to the text "leave air pollution unchecked". In the center, there is a checked checkbox icon next to the text "fight global warming.com". On the right, there are logos for "ROBERTSON FOUNDATION e ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE" and "Ad Council".

©2008 Omaha World-Herald. All rights reserved. [Copyright](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Site Map](#)

[RSS Feeds](#) | [Write a Letter to the Editor](#) | [Submit a Calendar Event](#) | [Order Photos or Reprints](#)

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? webmaster@omaha.com

This site best viewed at 1024x768 in [Mozilla Firefox™](#).