



Mark Gilbert's "Luke," oil on canvas

therapeutic relationships that are difficult to articulate, yet form the foundation of the art of care." Thus began a wide-ranging collaborative project that would involve artist, patients, doctors, medical students and caregivers of many stripes, multiple departments of several universities (University of Nebraska at Omaha, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Nebraska Medical Center), Methodist Hospital and the Bemis Center, with additional contributions from Gallup University and Clark Creative Group. As with "Saving Faces," a public component of this project was considered vital and visitor reaction to the exhibition will be analyzed.

Because the Portraiture Project aimed to study both patients and caregivers, Gilbert's range of sitters was more diverse. Even among the patients, many did not show outwardly the signs of their symptoms or treatments, and while this released him from the burden of transforming profound disfigurements into humanizing images, it presented its own instructive challenges. Instead, the portrait became a reflection of the terrain of the face as influenced by the sitter's mood, thoughts, emotional and physical health.

Further, Gilbert often made a conscious effort to strip away obvious signs of the subject's situation so that the viewer may be unable to distinguish if he is looking at a portrait of a receiver or deliverer of treatment. That his striking portraits elicit a universal and honest sense of human strength, care and compassion is also a testament to the fact that both patients and caregivers bear the imprint of the intensity of their clinical experience, with its attendant states of hope, fatigue, pain, anxiety, introspection and grace. These portraits, then, do not tell a traditional portrait's story about time, place, social or economic status, or perform a commemorative or ideal-

Care Package



"Saving Faces"

Gilbert's striking portraits invite compassionate view of patients

By Janet L. Farber

for Scottish artist Mark Gilbert, the project "Saving Faces" began as a study in science through art and he found his commissioned portraits of British head and neck surgical patients to be an investigation of his observational and interpretive skills, courage and empathy.

For UNMC nurse and professor Virginia Aita, viewing the resultant exhibition at UNO in 2006 was equally transformative, sparking an interest in creating a research program in which art could give meaning to science here in Omaha. The visual climax of that journey occurs with the display of more than 40 artworks in "Here I Am and Nowhere Else: Portraits of Care," opening to the public at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts with a reception for the artist on Friday, Dec. 12 at 6 p.m.

Aita's goal was not simply to reprise the "Saving Faces" study, which focused on patients at London's Royal Hospital undergoing often massive surgical reconstructions of their faces due to congenital defect, disease or trauma. In that show, Gilbert's canvases were big, bold and forthright, which is to say graphic, confrontational, and easily uncomfortable for a non-medical viewing audience. Nonetheless, the portraits had proven to be significantly therapeutic for the sitters and had revealed Gilbert to be a keen and adept recorder of both outward appearance and of subtler interior qualities of mind, spirit and emotion.

Along with surgical colleague Dr. Bill Lydiatt, Aita sought to create a position of artist-in-residence at the medical center in order to "unlock the

izing function.

As a viewer it is difficult not to have an immediately visceral reaction. The portraits are larger than life and quite startling. They are made in a variety of media, from very highly finished oils on canvas to quickly studied small oils on aluminum. Gilbert's charcoal drawings are vigorous, whether on canvas or paper, but range from those deeply and heavily worked to delicate renderings. Each is the result of at least one sitting per subject of at least one hour and most are done from life, with the exception of the more time-consuming oil paintings, in which photography was also used as a memory aid.

All sitters are pictured against blank backgrounds, so that the attention is completely focused on the human subject and not the trappings of environment. Added to that is Gilbert's deft ability to suggest with swift gestures those individual feelings of concern, fear, uncertainty, relief, gratitude or acceptance that each subject might have been processing at the time of his or her audience with the artist. Febrile lines connote a sense of inner turmoil, shadows deepen hollows of worry, heaviness of mark discloses a burden: visible traces of the communication developing between artist and subject.

Knowing that each portrait is informed by a compelling backstory, it may be disappointing that such information is not part of the actual display, as subjects are identified only by their first names or a chosen pseudonym. This forces the viewer to react directly to the portrait as art, gauging Gilbert's effectiveness in conveying his interpretation of appearance and attitude. For those craving to learn more, bits of biography are revealed in an accompanying catalogue, a well-documented and conceived consideration of the project from the perspectives of those involved from both medical and artistic sides, as well as observations from several of the sitters and by City Weekly's own senior arts contributor, Michael Krainak.

Through it, we learn for instance about Jason, seen with arms aggressively crossed in a darkly expressive charcoal drawing. Jason is a cancer patient in remission who, after endless bouts of grueling treatment, was left with facial scars but an excellent prognosis and a spiritual outlook. He also represents the role of caregiver, an employee of the medical center who hopes that his participation in this project will inspire hope in others. Knowing this, one might read his pose as one of stoic strength and acceptance, rather than one that might otherwise be interpreted as anger and defiance.

You can also follow the artist's repeated interactions with Roger and his wife Dolores, the former of whom is seen battling the debilitating effects of ALS (Lou

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Gilbert in his studio.

Gehrig's Disease), the latter of whom is caregiver by both profession and, now, marriage. These images are hard to witness and, for them, that is the point – to give a physical dimension and dignity to this experience. Gilbert also spent a great deal of time following Anthony Thomas through his treatment and recovery from head and neck cancer. The contour drawings, paintings and woodcut of him represent some of the most vital, vibrant and confrontational in the show, delineate a path that seems to indicate improving health, wellness and beatific calm.

Children were a part of this project as well, bringing with them an anticipated amount of fragility and innocence

mixed with verve and maturity. Judging by her testimony and her portraits, Daisy and Gilbert achieved an especially touching bond and his comprehension of her delicate charm shines through in his paintings and drawings of her. Gilbert was also witness to several births, including that of Luke, whose bloody, forceful, life-affirming entry into the world in the capable hands of his obstetrician is also one of the exhibition's centerpieces, reminding us of the larger arc of human life that is observable in the microcosm of this show.

For one not involved in the research on the symbiosis of art and medical care, the most effective works in the exhibition are those of patients, especially the large, highly fin-

ished portrait heads in oil on canvas and the exceptionally expressionistic charcoal and oil stick drawings. Through the character of color, shape and line, they convey most strongly the intensity of the portrait session, as well as the introspective, vulnerable or fragile quality of the sitter. For this writer, perhaps they're notably attractive because of a perceived relationship between Gilbert's work and that of some of the most psychologically incisive portrayers of the human condition – the early 20th-century Austrian and German artists Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, Käthe Kollwitz, Georg Grosz and Otto Dix.

Perhaps it is in our very nature to want portraits to illustrate the most meaningful aspects of our existence. It's no secret that NPR Storycorps' personal revelations of touching relationships, network TV human interest stories, and even Hallmark moments tug at the very core of our emotional beings and, hopefully, incite us to become more sympathetic contributors to the human experiment. Perhaps we are less moved by simple images of workaday people, whether they be doctors, administrators or nurses, whose narratives don't obviously carry us away from the places we already occupy.

Or perhaps the connection between artist and caregiver was not as strong, in general, as those between patient and painter, where the therapeutic aspect of the sitting was quite pronounced, as their testimonies reveal in the catalogue.

As images they are all honest, though each one not equally profound.

Indeed, Gilbert's penetrating interpretive images seem to sum up best the words of Kokoschka, whose own vibrant psychological portraiture tried to capture the way in which the human spirit projected itself onto one's face: "A person is not a still life."

We come away from the exhibition not simply with a visual dossier of several dozen people's biographies, but with a prescription for compassion and respect – for those who were willing to share their adversities, for those who devote themselves to helping others, for those who have the gift of insight, and for those who brought it to view. **CV**

Joslyn receives grant from MetLife Foundation

Last week, Joslyn Art Museum announced it received a \$50,000 Museum and Community Connection grant from the MetLife Foundation, one of only 16 art museums in the U.S.

Joslyn's grant goes to support "Culturas Unidas," a program the museum created to "engage and invigorate the community, particularly non-traditional and emerging constituencies such as the Latino population," according to a press release.

Launched earlier this year in October, "Culturas Unidas" coincides with the "Diego Rivera: Masterworks from the Museo de Arte del Estado de Veracruz" exhibition currently on view. Through 2010, four future exhibits are scheduled to be part of the program featuring Latino arts and culture as well.

The museum also is set to offer several programs aimed at celebrating Latino culture that aim to educate the public about Latino contributions to the arts and humanities.



OAA's annual soiree this Friday

Following up to last year's successful "Snip Show" (more than 600 patrons came, saw and conquered), the Organizatoion for the Advancement of the Arts (OAA) hosts "Faux Show," an annual non-juried student art exhibition at the Bemis Underground.

Come check out original works from several UNO art students. Live music and members of UNO Writers' workshop will also be featured through out the night.

A special "live dinosaur birth" is the mystery of the night. The show is one night only: Friday, December 12 from 7 p.m. to midnight. Admission is free, but donations are encouraged. More info at UNOmaha.edu/oa.