

Facing changes after surgery through portraiture

BY LUCY BURSCOUGH

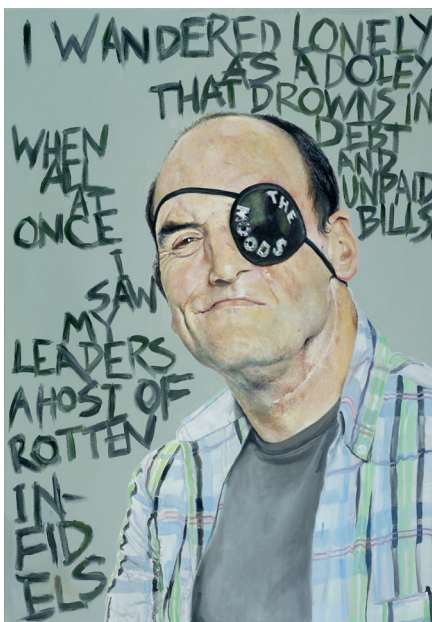
‘Facing Out: Life After Treatment for Facial Cancer’ was a two-year arts-for-health project funded by Arts Council England and The National Lottery which culminated in an exhibition at The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, in February 2019. Here, artist and project manager Lucy Burscough tells the story of meeting and painting Bernard Corri, the man whose experiences inspired the project.

As someone whose art practice focuses on telling patients’ stories through portraiture, I am interested in what happens when an individual experiences illness, trauma or treatment that alters their appearance. If the face changes, how does that affect one’s sense of self? The Facing Out portrait subjects spoke of being acutely aware of the gaze of others, in the street or at their work, and they recognise that people’s eyes can naturally be drawn to people whose faces are unusual. Becoming the subject of a portrait under these circumstances is an empowering act of defiance, and welcoming people to look at one’s face, scars and all, is an invitation to acknowledge a shared humanity and triumph over this indiscriminate illness.

I met Bernard Corri in 2015 when he was an inpatient at Manchester Royal Eye Hospital. He had recently undergone extensive surgery, including a left orbital exenteration, for a sinonasal malignancy. Bern was showing his altered appearance to the world beyond his ward for the first time as I was creating portraits for an art project in the hospital’s atrium. He tells it like this:

“I think it was about two weeks after my op to remove my left eye along with the cancer that had engulfed it, that I plucked up the courage to finally hobble my way out of the ward I was in and try and go for a wander around the hospital. It was around 7pm, so the M.R.I. in Manchester would be pretty empty at this time and the fact that I looked like an extra from ‘The Mummy’ movie would be least likely to impact on a greater number of people...

[I saw a] strange figure sat at an easel daubing away at the canvas before her. Her attention to detail, and general enthusiasm for what she was trying to achieve was immediately apparent and, having become an avid fan of art if a little bit of a latecomer to the subject, we soon became friends as a result of this chance encounter.”



Lucy’s portrait of Bernard Corri.

I was equally impressed by Bern. His warmth and humour aside, the fact that he had approached a stranger for a chat, in the face of the kind of traumatic experience that all too often triggers social avoidance, demonstrated a great strength of spirit. After this encounter we became friends on social media. There, Bern posted images of the alterations to his face, and poems that told his story. It was following Bern’s long and involved process of treatment and reconstructive surgery via his very open and honest social media posts that inspired me to think about facial disfigurement due to head and neck cancers and consider developing a project like Facing Out.

*“Inside the CT scanner who should I see?
Deep inside my left socket hypnotising me
I asked her name like a bit of a chancer
She crawled across my face and whispered
“Ethmoid Cancer”*

An extract from ‘Fighting Ethmoid Cancer’ by Bern Corri

By the time we met up in person again, at the start of the Facing Out production phase in the summer of 2017, Bern looked considerably different than he had previously, and areas of his head had lost substantial amounts of their functionality. Excision of part of his palate had impaired his speech and caused oromotor dysphagia, the fibrosis from radical radiotherapy tightened uncomfortably as it healed and, in addition, his treatment had left him anosmic.

Bern’s ongoing experience with cancer was extremely intense and physically devastating. After the completion of his portrait, he received another terrible blow as, due to the punishing level of radiotherapy he had undergone, Bern all but lost the sight in his remaining eye with only five percent vision remaining.

Bern’s tragic story cruelly illustrates the havoc that can be wrought by head and neck cancers. It also is one which highlights the extraordinary resilience that ordinary people can sometimes find to draw upon when the utmost adversity hits.

“Welcoming people to look at one’s face, scars and all, is an invitation to acknowledge a shared humanity and triumph over this indiscriminate illness”

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Bern's stages of surgery and reconstruction.

Bern's warmth of personality continued to shine through, as did his humour. He was heavily involved in raising money for cancer charities including Maggie's Manchester. I painted Bern in late summer and autumn of 2017 in residence at the support centre.

Progressive politics played a big part in Bern's interaction with the world. He often wrote poetry to share his humour, thoughts and experiences, and so we decided that the portrait would include lines from one of his poems to celebrate this aspect of his identity. True to his altruistic nature, he decided to wear a specially commissioned eye patch to promote his favourite Mancunian band, The Moods! I hope that the portrait captured Bern's affable personality and the dignity that he maintained despite the physical degradation that he endured.

"I think Facing Out has more confirmed my acceptance of my altered appearance than anything else... If anything, Facing Out has simply helped me confirm to myself that I am walking in the right direction in respect of my battle with this disease and that the only thing that has changed about me is my appearance. For me, Facing Out is another shelf on which I can display that, although they can cut away

and rearrange bits of me, they are not able to change the spirit that lies within that body, and in many ways simply enrich and make it stronger than it ever was."

In memory of Bernard Corri who died in February 2022. RIP Bern.

If you would like to read more about the Facing Out project and the other people who were painted, please visit www.lucysart.co.uk/s/Facing-Out-Evaluation-Report.pdf

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