



Looking forward: East Timorese children at Suai.

Art gives a glimpse of Timorese journey

By KERRY TAYLOR
CANBERRA

The streets of Dili were calm when Wendy Sharpe arrived to paint Australian soldiers in action.

But it was not hard to picture the devastation that went before her.

Pulling into Dili's port last December, Sharpe thought she had landed in an island paradise — green hills, clear seas and church spires.

As soon as she walked off the dock the terror was clear.

"It was shocking how levelled and devastated Dili was, the thoroughness of the destruction ... When I drove through the city streets every single building was destroyed," she said.

Yesterday, an exhibition of Sharpe's work as a war artist for the army was unveiled at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. She was the first female war artist since World War II.

The 1996 Archibald prize winner made more than 500 sketches during her tour of duty.

Her paintings vary from a watercolor of a nude female soldier (clad only in boots and a hat) to a midnight Mass on Christmas Eve in the town of Suai that had been

devastated by a massacre only months before.

For Sharpe, watching the people of Suai perform a play that re-enacted the massacre was the most moving moment of her two-and-a-half week visit to East Timor.

"It was a very hot night and the play was narrated in Timorese and English so we understood what was happening on stage. I was standing among the Timorese during the play drawing by the moonlight ... it's one of the most extraordinary things I've ever experienced," she said.

Sharpe's paintings also depict women in a direct combat role for the first time. The nude of a female corporal was painted by Sharpe at the woman's request.

"She had a boyfriend also in the army ... we were in Darwin at the time and he was in Timor. He'd asked for a nude picture of her but she thought a painting would be a laugh," she said.

As well as seeing the aftermath of war, Sharpe saw new beginnings — smiling children's faces and civilians and soldiers working together to rebuild.

Her exhibition runs until July 23 at the War Memorial.



Wendy Sharpe, above, with her painting of the Christmas concert in Dili. Below left: children at Suai. Below right: a scene from a Dili hospital.

Picture: GABRIELE CHAROTTE

