



Picture: Sam Mooy

**D**EEP in the urban heart of Sydney, Wendy Sharpe's studio glows as the late summer sun pours through wide glass panels in the corrugated iron roof. The woman who won the 1996 Archibald prize with a self-portrait, *Diana of Eskineville*, is surrounded by her latest works, in which she appears as a sort of everywoman wandering and wondering through the typically crowded streets of Erko.

The busy painter is putting final touches to the works for her 16th solo exhibition, which opened this week at the King Street on Burton Gallery in Sydney's Darlinghurst. "It's a luxury to have this much space. And it's taught me the power of insulation," Sharpe says, looking happily around the 180sq m former workshop and pointing towards the heat-proof silver lining overhead. "It was unbearable before."

The place looks like a trash 'n' treasure market piles of old clothes spill from garbage bags, rags overflow from tables of various sizes. There's a huge easel against one wall and in a corner a work in progress is surrounded by dropsheets, a cassette player, jars of brushes and a small army of paint tubes. A modest kitchen is under construction: a dining table sits near stairs that lead to another similarly sized studio, where Sharpe's partner and fellow painter Bernard Ollis works. ("I was always wary of living with another painter," she says. But the double studio allows both privacy and company.) On the table is a pot of tea and a dozen tiny cakes, all in different shapes, from a local cakeshop.

Sharpe's sense of place is integral to her work. Born in Sydney in 1960, she grew up in Avalon on the city's northern beaches, where she says she didn't really fit in, although she appreciated the beauty of the bush and beaches. In 1986, not long out of art school, she lived for some months in London, Paris and New York courtesy of the Marten Bequest travelling scholarship. Three years later another scholarship took her to Egypt, Israel, Greece and Italy. Although those journeys

## THE FACE

Rosalie Higson  
meets

### Wendy Sharpe PAINTER

.....  
were a seminal experience, she never really wanted to live anywhere but Australia.

Returning to Sydney, she moved to Eskineville because she loves the city buzz. "In those days places were cheaper, of course, but I'm attracted to the diverse range of people, the local characters, the cafes and restaurants, all the different shops, like the Fiji-Indian grocer."

She probably wouldn't say so herself but it seems that her interest in observing and recording her local area is in some part inherited from her historian father and artistic mother. "My mother went to art school but her

termed admirably focused. She has won the Archibald, two Portia Geach Memorial awards, a Sulman prize and a swag of other awards and scholarships. In 1999 she went to East Timor as an official war artist.

Sharpe has always been interested in painting people. "My work has never gone on a tangent. I mean what I do now is different to what I was doing 10 years ago but it's always been about people, and it's always painterly, so it's fundamentally the same. I never wanted to paint pure landscape or anything that's non-representational abstract. I always want a picture and I always want a subject. So it's a painting *and* a picture."

And people react, even though some in the art world consider that putting oil paint on canvas is terribly old hat, she says.

"A lot of people do like to see works that relate to their world or themselves rather than something designed to sit coolly on the wall. I think painting should be intrusive; it should be more than just about texture. Sydney is really quite narrow and very anxious to follow fashion." And the thing about fashion, she points out, is that what's in today is out tomorrow.

Sharpe will continue to follow her own star. "This exhibition is about the walk from my house in Eskineville to the studio in St Peters,

**'I think painting should be intrusive; it should be more than just about texture'**

mother took her out and made her go into a secretarial course, as they did in those days.

Certainly my father was very imaginative and they were incredibly supportive of me being an artist, so regardless of what they did that's the main thing. It really is so hard for people who don't have that — it's hard enough anyway without having to ignore everyone around you."

Although she describes her career as "a narrow journey", it could just as easily be

accurate portraiture and, although the rather dummy figures do have her curious gaze, they certainly don't resemble the real-life vibrant woman with her shiny black curls and bright dark eyes.

"I don't worry if they look like me, they're still me, walking. They're not literal, they're about the whole experience — a man with his dog, the little corner shops, the chimney stacks, the signs and me thinking about these paintings as I walk along." She laughs and pours some tea. "Even today I was walking along carrying a bag of cakes, thinking maybe I should add some bars on the windows."

Working is a messy business, she says. "When I paint I really do get into a terrible mess. So I wear a scarf over my head and dirty old clothes and hand cleaner — I get covered in paint. And you have to do that and use your whole body."

"The worst thing is to be concerned that you can't drop paint. If you have one small bit of good clothing on, like a little bit of collar sticking out, that's where the paint is going to go."

Surrounded by the empty teacups, cake crumbs, sketchbooks and drawings, Sharpe is keen to stop talking and start painting. She slips off her good shirt and dons a paint-splattered black garment and sensible shoes.

Last year's Portia Geach-winning *Self-Portrait with Teacup and Burning Paintings* showed the artist sitting in the studio, her refuge and shelter, where even her paintings can be intrusions.

"Sometimes it's not that hard," she says, regarding her assembled works speculatively. "And sometimes it's almost impossible. There is no logic. Over the years you learn that if something is really hard and takes a long time, it doesn't mean it's good and it doesn't mean it's bad. It doesn't mean anything. And I nearly always feel a bit lost. I know it's true that you should always be trying to strive and work out new things each time, but I still feel like I don't really know what I'm doing."

She picks up her brush and begins.