

# Envy this Sydney artist

PAINTING PARIS FROM THE BALCONY



This letter from Paris comes from Wendy Sharpe, written during her residency at the Denise Hickey Studio, one of two live-in studios held through the Art Gallery of NSW Trust. The Studios are part of the Cite Internationale des Arts complex in central Paris. Four artist residencies of three months each are awarded each year. Wendy Sharpe was there from October to December 2007 – exactly the same studio residency and dates she was awarded back in 1987.

I HAVE AN OLD PHOTOGRAPH of a wide-eyed young woman with red streaks in her hair wearing a 1980s jumper. I recognise it as me, taken in a Paris photo booth exactly 20 years ago. It is a revealing psychological study, something that passport photos are not usually known for. It captures some of the excitement and trepidation I felt during my first trip out of Australia, and at the start my previous residency in Paris.

I had recently completed seven years of study and was lucky enough to have received a number of awards, including the 1986 Sulman Prize (judged by Albert Tucker), the Dyason Bequest and the 1986 Marten Bequest travelling scholarship. All this enabled me to spend 18 months in Europe.

On that first trip I was constantly in museums and galleries, overwhelmed by seeing paintings in the flesh that I had only

known in reproduction. I still have boxes of sketch books from this time, filled with excited scribble, detailed obsessive drawings and copious, almost illegible notes (my writing has never improved). It helped develop my love of museums and what has now become, an obsession, with travel.

Although, I have returned to Paris many times since then, having a studio for three months is a different experience. I am interested to compare the impressions of my young self with now.

In my 20s, a three-month residency seemed to stretch out luxuriously. Now I am almost too aware of how fast it will go. I now have a bit more of my bad French: *“Je sais que mon Français est mauvais, mais j’essaye”*.

“I know my French is bad but I try” – well not as much as I should. I still seem to end





up talking to English-speaking people, avoiding French conversation beyond the real basics.

The Cité Internationale des Arts studio complex is wonderfully placed, on the banks of the Seine, and now the leaves have fallen there is a breathtaking view of the islands and Notre-Dame, five minutes walk away. It is also within walking distance of the Pompidou Centre, the Picasso Museum and the Louvre.

It says a lot about a city that it allows so much of its prime real estate to be used for artists' studios. President Pompidou first envisaged the complex, and Monsieur and Madame Brunau were its first directors in 1962. It has more than 300 studios for

artists, writers and musicians from all over the world. When I was there in 1987, Tim Winton was there. Imagine a similar environment in Sydney and what cultural significance it would add to this city.

Twenty years ago there was no internet or any mobile phones, and Australia seemed very far away. Now I have a little laptop in the studio where I can paint while listening to ABC Radio National and follow the news from Australia – which is bizarre and makes me occasionally forget where I am. The studios are all similar. They are like bedsits with a work area, green lino, a basic kitchen and all you really need. My studio is next to a rehearsal room, and I can hear piano scale played constantly, and sometimes wonderful

singing. I have made friends with a tall, dramatic opera singer, who is currently rehearsing the role of Electra. She came to my studio yesterday to model for me.

I have managed to produce an extensive amount of work. I have completed two long scroll-like paintings (375 x 80 cm each), a painting about the studio and another about the tourists near Notre-Dame. I painted these on linen, pinned to the studio wall. I will have to roll them up to send them home and stretch them back in Australia. I have also produced a pile of gouache (opaque watercolour) sketches and small oil paintings. And I had the opportunity to spend several days working on the balcony that runs around the roof of the Cité. The view of Paris is dazzling.



Wendy Sharpe painted Paris from the balcony on the roof of the Cité Internationale des Arts (previous page), where she had a residency in a studio held by the Art Gallery of NSW Turst. She sketched discreetly in the café at the top of the Musée d'Orsay (photograph above, painting top left), and put down her impressions of the crowded Metro (above).

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Photos: ???



I have made work about my own experience here as a sort of free-range semi-tourist in the cafes, the back streets, the Metro, the mix of people and the over-crowded tourist sites. I have taken the opportunity to explore different areas of the city, from the lively and poorer to the quiet and more gentrified. A lot of images that could easily be clichéd are brought back to reality by the tourists in logo-laden sports wear.

As a short term visitor living in a rarified place in the centre, it would be foolish and presumptuous to attempt to make work that critiques the political situation in the outer suburbs of Paris, but I have made work about the Metro strike, which I directly experienced: hellishly crowded and at times pretty awful, it was visually interesting.

There is always far more to see in Paris than you have time. While I am here there are major Courbet, Soutine and Giacometti exhibitions as well as many wonderful small shows. Of course, the permanent collection in a museum like the Louvre is almost endless, even though I must have been more than 20 times over the years. It has 30,000 works of art in total. The best way to approach it to 'see' one section each visit – for example Assyrian sculpture or large format French paintings. I like to go on Wednesday and Friday nights when it is open until 10pm and many Louvre galleries (except those near the *Mona Lisa*) are almost deserted.

In a classic, if somewhat clichéd way, I am writing this in a Paris café. An incredibly thin

woman, to my right, looks savagely at a French newspaper and sips black coffee. Two American tourists eat croissants and discuss the pros and cons of visiting the Louvre or the *Egouts* (sewers) after lunch. Ironically, the sewers win. I only go to cafes where it is good to draw; this one has interesting shabby décor and a corner seat suitable for secret drawing.

## WENDY SHARPE

*Back in Sydney, 1996 Archibald Prize winner Wendy Sharpe is exhibiting work she did in Paris at King Street Gallery on William, Darlinghurst, this month.*