

Goddess who mixes fact and fiction

'Diana of Erskineville' has moved on from dark, erotic fantasy to reveal a new confidence and maturity as an observer of daily life, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Delacroix is reputed to have quipped that if an artist could not draw a man who had jumped from a fourth storey window before he hit the ground, he could never go in for "the big stuff". Wendy Sharpe, who once painted a large-scale copy of Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*, would be up to the challenge. Sharpe is a compulsive producer of quick sketches, capable of making a drawing anywhere, anytime. She seems impervious to the distractions that leave some artists feeling painfully self-conscious.

The survey exhibition *Wendy Sharpe: The Imagined Life*, at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, is filled with rapid impressions of cities such as Paris, Venice or Cairo. Sharpe's preferred medium is gouache, which is more opaque than watercolour but still highly fluid. She draws with the brush, setting down lines and colours with an immediacy that might only be exceeded by a photograph. Some sketches are worked up into more finished studies; others provide a basis for oil paintings.

These gouaches are the place where she experiments and daydreams. Attempting to capture the scene before her eyes, she is also jotting down visual ideas and associations that bubble up from the subconscious. The result is a very free mixture of fact and fantasy.

In the catalogue for this exhibition, Courtney Kidd quotes a review by Elwyn Lynn that claims Sharpe's painting *Self Portrait – Artist Menaced by Cupids* (1994) "keeps faltering realism alive". It is debatable that realism has ever faltered outside the tiny world of so-called "cutting-edge" art but it is odd that a work showing the artist being cajoled by two flying pink putti, while the studio itself is caught up in a whirlwind, could ever be thought of as realistic. This may not be as fanciful as it initially seems. There have been many versions of capital-R Realism beyond the precise transcription of appearances. One definition sees realism as a means of revealing underlying truths that are not obvious to

WENDY SHARPE: THE IMAGINED LIFE

S.H. Ervin Gallery, until April 10

the naked eye. Here we are on unstable ground, because one artist's realism is another's symbolism. Some probe beneath the surfaces of everyday life only to arrive at mysticism.

Sharpe's work is grounded in close observation yet there is an aspect of her art devoted to that inner world in which psychological truths are uncovered. In the artist's mind, the world is reinvented in a form that gives a more accurate scale to the things that matter. This is "the imagined life" of the exhibition's subtitle – the reconstructed version of reality in which anxieties and fantasies are inserted into a depiction of the street, the studio or the bedroom.

In some pictures, such as *Self-Portrait in Florence* (2009), memories and observations are crowded together on the canvas with no dividing line between inside and outside. A street, a clock tower and a pair of tiny cars share the space with the towering figure of

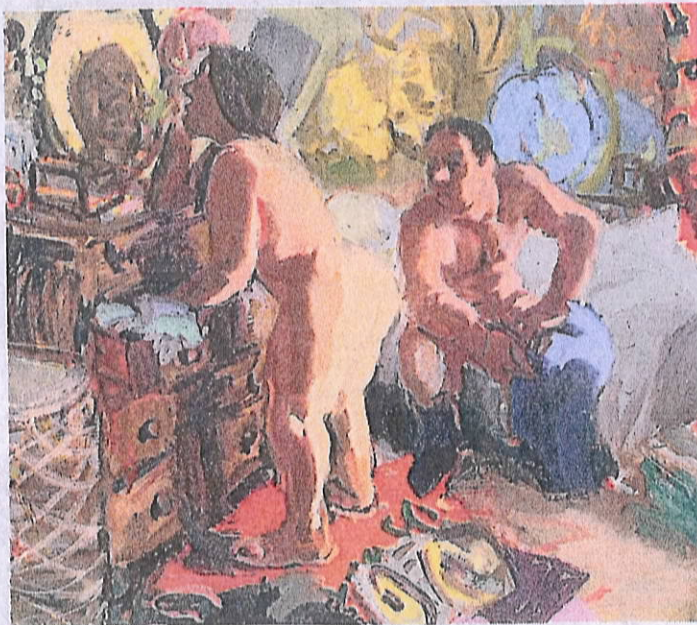
the artist and the bric-a-brac on the studio floor. In this particular work she is busy drawing with both hands, as if there is simply too much information to record.

These unusual compositions reflect Sharpe's growing ease and confidence as an observer of daily life. She has visited cities such as Paris so many times that she no longer feels like a tourist and is able to work with a degree of intimacy. They also suggest an outward turn, away from the dark, erotic fantasy that was such a prominent feature of her early pictures. This is an effect of age and – dare I say? – maturity.

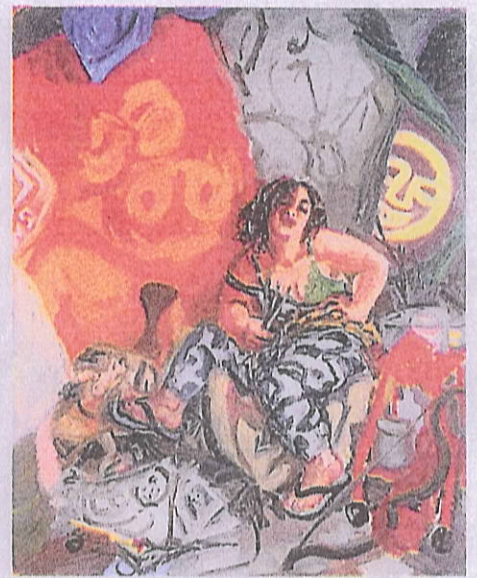
The turning point was probably Sharpe's 1999 posting as a war artist to East Timor, where she completed more than 500 gouaches in less than three weeks. Most importantly, she had first-hand experience of a country still bleeding from the massacres that followed the vote for independence. Feeling a bit like Goya observing the aftermath of the French invasion, Sharpe was inspired to paint some of the most heartfelt pictures of her life.

The sex and theatre would re-emerge, but with a sense of introspection that had been missing in the past. Nowadays there are still a few saucy pictures in Sharpe's repertoire, notably *Pink Cup Venice* (2010), in which the artist stands, hand-on-hip, wearing only a pair of pink slippers, in front of a view of canal and palazzo. Yet this is an exception in the context of her recent work, which is dominated by brilliant street scenes showing crowds of people in daylight or darkness. These acts of artistic reportage put a contemporary spin on the standard views of Venice, Paris or Cairo produced by generations of travelling artists. Instead of famous monuments, Sharpe paints the tourists swarming around these attractions. She captures the hordes of latter-day pilgrims with their shoulder bags, sunglasses, maps and cameras. It is like looking at a hive and seeing only the bees.

If we turn to the first work in this show, *Black Sun Triptych* –



Naked imagination... the sensual *Bedroom* (2006).



Another world... Sharpe's *Pink Cup Venice* (2010) and *Self Portrait - as Diana of Erskineville* (1996).

orning to Night (1986), for which Sharpe was awarded that year's Sulman Prize, we see a completely different artist. The confident rightswoman has yet to emerge: these all panels are vigorously but crudely painted; the action they describe is as mysterious as the rituals of a witches' coven.

Sharpe's early work was permeated by the influence of Edvard Munch and the German expressionists. The results are predictably dark and histrionic, although Munch's brooding melancholy has been replaced by a taste for baroque fantasy. For the following decade, Sharpe is in love with costume drama, painting self-portraits in the guise of me goddess, some heroine from myth or story. She dresses up her models in similar fashion, making use of studio and boyfriend props for her theatrical extravagance.

These works are never perfect – they are rough and awkward but painted with such gusto that one might forgive almost any sins against technique and composition. It was during this time that Sharpe won the first of her two Portia Geach Awards (1995 and 2003)

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and the 1996 Archibald Prize for *Self Portrait - as Diana of Erskineville*. This picture, which shows the artist in thongs, animal print pants and a green bra, pouting seductively at the viewer, is the most sexually suggestive work ever to win this venerable prize, which for many years was given only to brown paintings of men in suits.

The self-portraits in which Sharpe appears again and again as a sultry, buxom temptress raise many questions about the sex goddess persona. Does Sharpe really see herself in this way? Is she a raving narcissist or a femme fatale? It would be hard for even the artist to decide what is true and what merely play-acting. It's tempting to see these pictures as

icons of a new feminist assertiveness, which does not complain about longstanding injustices but takes an active stand. *Diana of Erskineville* need not feel cowed nor beholden to any man. She is not the passive object of the male gaze but a woman who takes pleasure in her own sensual and physical nature.

I'm sure Sharpe will forgive me if I suggest that in reality she is no Greek goddess. The figure who appears in her self-portraits is more like "the goddess within", which new-age beauty therapists tell us resides in every woman. She often bears only the vaguest resemblance to the artist.

Sharpe once identified her alter ego in an interview: "I don't care if she's thinner, fatter, older, younger. It's not relevant. She's playing me in the movie, if you like."

For every erotic self-portrait there is one, or several, depictions of the artist in her workaday clothes – knee-length skirt, coloured leggings, cardigan; her hair pulled back for convenience. Even the raunchiest pictures are undercut by self-deprecating humour. Her nude figures are wearing socks or sandals, reading a book or holding a can of VB. Her erotic paintings are also broadly humorous, more like sexual satires than acts of titillation.

Sex and humour may be equally desirable commodities, but to put them together is a bit like pouring wine and beer into the same glass. One of the few occasions when Sharpe transcends this dilemma is in the painting *Bedroom* (2006), in which a naked woman leans forward to look at herself in a mirror while her partner examines her back, hips and legs, outlined in a shaft of light. This picture has the same sensuality we associate with Bonnard's nude studies of his wife, Marthe, who remained forever young and alluring in his portraits.

Sharpe is not so idealistic. She reserves the right to alter her age or her measurements in either direction, to make herself raunchy or frumpy as the mood takes her. It is the painter's prerogative to treat life as fiction, knowing that while everyday existence may be dull, the imagined life is a perpetual carnival.