

won the Archibald Prize in 1996 with the flamboyant *Self-Portrait as Diana of Erykineville*. The picture demonstrates Sharpe's unrestrained love of baroque painterliness and compositional energy, as well as a fondness for mythological subjects, which we encounter again in pictures such as *Venus in Vulcar's Studio* (1997), where she takes the role of Venus and her then partner, a sculptor, that of the smith god.

Venus may indeed be a more suitable role than the virginal Diana, for these paintings deal with sexual energy and pleasure in a way that is unusual in Australian art. The early pictures include images, one titled *Fantasy* (1992), of a young woman with two male lovers, and another in which Circe becomes an alter ego, not turning men into swine as she did in the story of Odysseus, but painting on two willing victims. Other early compositions, with the title *Artist Menaced by Cupids* (1994), seem to evoke the conflict between desire and the discipline demanded by the artist's vocation.

Hercules and Omphale (1994), on the other hand, is about a dominant and sexually satisfied woman. In the original myth, Hercules becomes so obsessed with the barbarian queen Omphale that he indulges in a little cross-dressing with her, and applies himself incongruously to the feminine craft of spinning. The subject is treated with coarse humour in some Flemish pictures, and with greater discretion by Annibale Carracci at the Palazzo Farnese. Here, we see the artist sprawled in an armchair with a can of beer while her male companion sits at her feet, docilely mending her dress and wearing absurd floral sandals. There are numerous smaller pictures too that depict sexual acts in a straightforward manner, their literalism muted only by the broad expressive brushstrokes in which they are painted.

A painter with Sharpe's gifts and her energy will always benefit by the constraints — and concomitant stimulus — of a commission. In 1999 she was appointed Australia's first female war artist since World War II, and travelled to East Timor, recently liberated with Australian help and still requiring protection from paramilitary thugs



Wendy Sharpe's
*Self-Portrait as
Diana of
Erykineville*
(1996)

supported by the Indonesian military, as well as the general dangers of lawlessness. The mission was popular both in East Timor and in Australia, but Sharpe was nonetheless confronted by the evidence of recent atrocities, and in works based on events at the cathedral at Suai in which up to 200 people were massacred by pro-Indonesian militia, we discover an unusually dark note among the usual exuberance.

Her most important commission to date has been the series of eight huge panels recounting the life of Annette Kellermann (1887-1975), an Australian swimmer and film star of the silent era, in the Olympic swimming pool at Cook and Philip Park in Sydney (1999). Here she had to go through the same process as any artist of the renaissance or baroque periods — or indeed later — undertaking a large commission: first researching the story, then deciding on its episodes, working out how to conflate minor details and major themes, devising each of the panels as a satisfying composition, and finally executing them with a vigour appro-

priate to the anticipated viewing distance. Artists have always known that the degree of finish or resolution required in a given work depends above all on the distance from which it is to be seen. Small works meant for a private collection are generally painted more carefully and finely than large works to be seen from far away. Theorists have noted that too high a level of finish in a ceiling painting, for example, would result in a dead effect; to be living and vibrant, pictures intended for such sites have to be broadly painted. Lanfranco, in the 17th century, even joked that he let the air do the painting for him.

The degree of resolution Sharpe adopts at Cook and Philip is right for the circumstances of viewing, but in some of her larger easel pictures it is not quite so satisfactory. Looking around the exhibition, there are medium-scale works, like the delightful *Paris Studio* (2007), a sort of panoramic impression of a room filled with the paraphernalia of art and life, in which the level of finish seems again correctly matched to the

size of the work and the proximity of the viewer. More effective, paradoxically, are the small works in concertina notebooks, like the almost magical sequence of little images, distinct yet flowing together, that greets the viewer at the start of the exhibition.

Perhaps the most beautiful and moving work of all is *Waiting, Nuit Blanche* (2010), another concertina book, at the very end of the show. Here, Sharpe's painting loses nothing of its summary spontaneity, but the image feels dense with interest, while in some of the very big pictures it feels on the contrary rather stretched and visually thin. But the other very appealing thing about this view of nocturnal café life in Paris is that Sharpe finds real depth, including a sense of moral drama, naturally emerging from what she is so good at, which is watching people and catching the spontaneous meaning of their actions and gestures.

Taking this kind of subject matter to a medium scale, and reducing her reliance on self-portraits, may be a promising way forward.

Questions of scale and resolution are coincidentally raised by the newly received catalogue of an important exhibition that has opened at the Thyssen-Bornemisza museum in Madrid after a run last year at the Getty in Los Angeles and then the Musée d'Orsay. Jean-Léon Gérôme was a French academic painter whose remarkable technical accomplishment was not always matched by his discrimination in the choice of subjects. His picture of the courtesan Phryne stripping naked before the goggle-eyed members of the Areopagus (1861), for example, strikes us today as rather unsavory, although it reflects the vulgarity of Gérôme's new-rich audience as much as his own puerility.

Gérôme's obsessive level of finish also needs to be seen in historical context, as a demonstration that he could outdo photography, then still relatively primitive but already calling painting itself into question, while exploiting photographic resources in pursuit of an almost uncanny hyper-realism.

Sharpe's broad brush, in contrast — and a century later — is an emphatic refusal of photographic literalism; but there is of course a lot of painterly room to move between these two extremes.

NOTHING epitomises the exuberant energy of Wendy Sharpe's painting as well as the image of her drawing with both hands, which has appeared in several recent self-portraits, as well as on the cover of the book that accompanies her retrospective at S.H. Ervin Gallery. It would be an understatement to say that Sharpe loves to draw. She does so almost compulsively: in the studio, in the street or in the course of her travels around the world. Drawing is her instinctive, profoundly felt way of engaging with the visible world, assimilating impressions and registering memories.

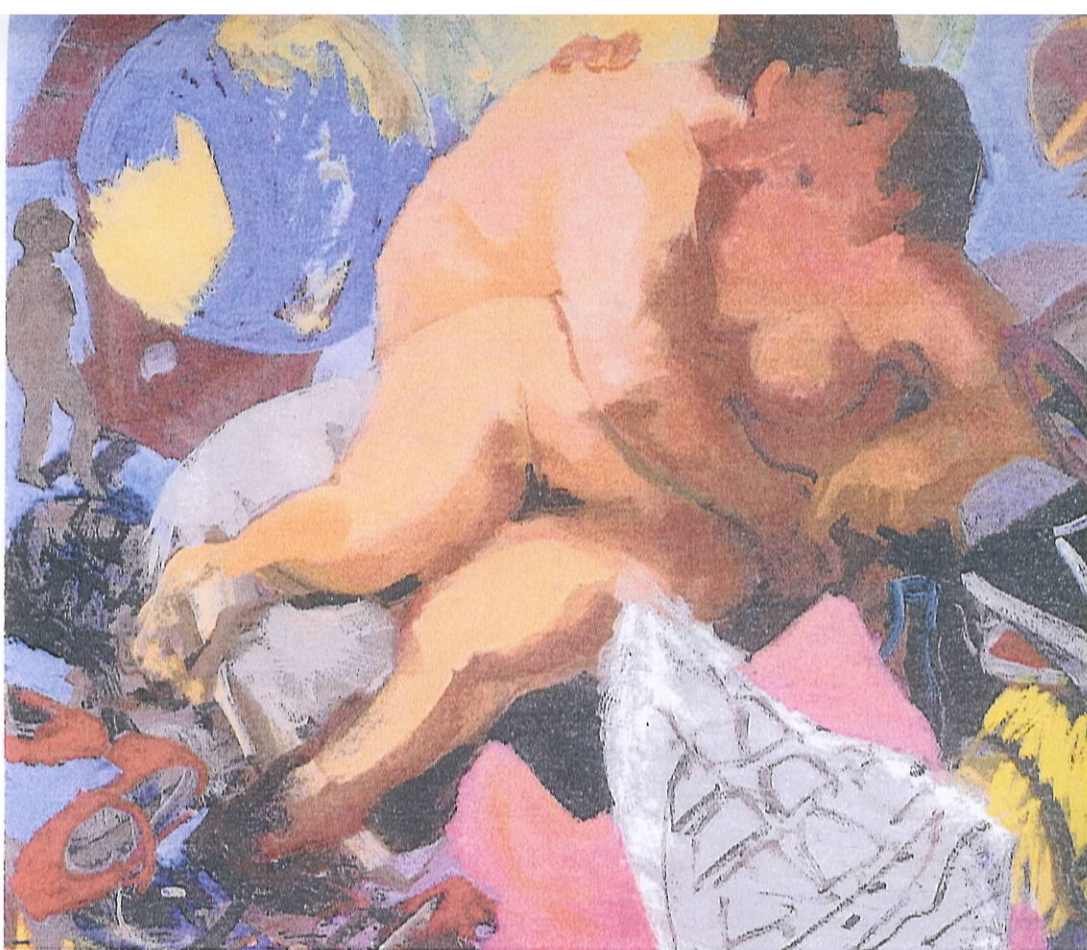
A lot of people are more in love with the idea of being an artist than with any real and concrete artistic activity. That's why they talk about their practice all the time as a kind of compensation and smokescreen; if they can't do anything at all, they speak of a conceptual practice. There's nothing like that in Sharpe's work, which is vigorous and immediate and constantly responsive to the things and people around her.

Her innate gift for drawing is evident in an example reproduced in the book — a comprehensive survey of her output — but not in the exhibition, which is necessarily smaller and more selective. The work is a life study, a female nude seen from the back, done in her first year as an art student at the age of 18. It is an impressive performance for such a young woman; the shape and contour are confident, and there is already an understanding of the way an artist abridges the complexities of the real in the interest of intelligible form. There is a strong feeling for the masses of the body and their weight, and the consequent dynamic of tension and compression which defines the attitude.

The understanding of anatomy is mostly sound, particularly the movements of the shoulder girdle and the structure and action of the spine and scapulae. But what is most striking is the way forms are modelled in three dimensions, and her feeling for what Bernard Berenson, over a century ago, called "tactile values". She understands the importance of contour, but also feels the sculptural, volumetric form of the bones and muscles of the back, which she expresses not in linear terms, but in areas of shadow and white highlights.

This instinctive feeling for physical movement, combined with a sculptural sense of the form of the body, is manifest in all of Sharpe's subsequent work. One of the most distinctive stylistic features of her work is the way she paints faces simply by a few strokes of highlighting that mark the plane breaks and define the essential structure of the features. These summary clues are enough for the mind to fill in the rest and read quite complex facial expressions.

There is another clue to the artist's subsequent development in this first study. Most of the great artists of the Renaissance, when they drew in chalk, used combinations of either black with white for the highlights, or red and white. Either of these combinations by itself is read as monochrome; black and red are used in an abstract and formal way, denoting tone rather than colour.



Couple with Globe (2006) by Wendy Sharpe

Sensuous compulsion

Some artists, however, like Federico Barocci in Italy and especially the Flemish painters, used combinations of black, red and white — known as the *trois crayons* technique — which changes the way we interpret the marks in a fundamental way. When black and red are put together, black takes a dominant role in defining form, while red suddenly becomes the colour of lips or the blush of a cheek. The reason the Flemish adopted this combination was that it was precisely this feeling of living flesh that they sought to convey, whereas the Italian vision was always more formal and structural.

It is not hard to see that Sharpe's sympathies lie with the Flemish, and those of the Italians who shared and prefigured this sensuous apprehension of the world — that is, the Venetians — as well as with later artists who were indebted to both Venice and Flanders. Her house, as we see from photographs in the book, is filled with copies of Titian, Rubens and even an enormous, but still greatly reduced, copy of Delacroix's operatic extravaganza, *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827).

I recall seeing Sharpe's work for the first time in 1989 and in the very same gallery, as part of a group show called *Fresh Art*, but she came to wider public notice when she

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