

# Stripped bare for a rare look back

February 23, 2011

Wendy Sharpe. Photo: Steven Siewert

**Wendy Sharpe is nervous about her first retrospective show, writes Steve Meacham.**

**F**or a woman whose naked body has appeared more often, more intimately and in more unflattering light than the average Kings Cross stripper over the past 25 years, Wendy Sharpe is surprisingly nervous about putting herself on exhibition this time.

"It's all a bit scary," she says about her first retrospective show, which opens at the S.H. Ervin Gallery on Saturday, and a new book that surveys her life and career.

"I've been in a lot of books, been on the cover of books. But I've never actually had a book about me before. I've been in lots of travelling shows and survey shows, but never had one entirely of my own work. It's the most important show by far that I've ever had."

Now 50, Sharpe has been an artistic celebrity since 1986 when she won the prestigious Sulman Prize at 26, just out of art school and thrust into the limelight by that year's distinguished judge, Albert Tucker. The accolades have followed regularly. In 1996, her self-portrait as the voluptuous *Diana of Erskineville* in green bra and thongs was impishly described by Edmund Capon as "probably the raunchiest painting to win the Archibald".

In 2000, she became the first female artist to be commissioned by the Australian War Memorial since World War II when she went to East Timor. Then in 2003 came her second win in the Portia Geach Memorial Award for female artists with another self-portrait.

Over the years, the once-shy misfit who was bullied at her school in Avalon ("I was never a surfie chick") has become probably Australia's best-known female painter, admired for putting her body and her emotions on the line. But then she has always known how to get attention: her first solo exhibition in 1985 was called *Sex and Death*.

In her vast studio in a former printing factory in St Peters, she is surrounded by many uncompromising portrayals of herself in various stages of undress as well as other recurring themes of her prodigious output.

With only days to go before the opening, she is still fine-tuning which works will make the final cut of 50. "It's a kind of beauty contest," she laughs. About 20 are definitely in, key works she and fellow curator Jane Watters have borrowed from present owners. ("Some I haven't seen for a long time," Sharpe concedes. "I'm hoping I will still like them.")

But most will come from her own extensive collection, usually hung either at the studio or at her home in Erskineville which she shares with her partner and fellow painter, Bernard Ollis.

"Some of the paintings in my collection I have chosen to keep, but others were ones which didn't sell," she admits. "The ones left in the artist's studio at their death are often the key ones because they are the weird ones, the unusual ones, the ones trying something different."

The earliest painting will be the Sulman Prize winner that announced her arrival in 1986. *Black Sun Triptych - Morning to Night*, almost three metres wide, normally hangs in a narrow, poorly lit hall in her home. She is seeing it differently, juxtaposed against other works in her studio, like the Archibald prizewinner, lent by its Sydney owner.

She bristles slightly when asked where she would place herself in the canon of Australian female artists. "I'm not knocking things like the Portia Geach prize. I've won it a couple of times and I'll go in it again," she says. "But I would rather see myself as an artist generally, not just a woman artist." Fair enough. But as we look around the studio, all of the paintings feature women. Even those with male characters, nude or clothed, appear as a counterpoint to a woman.

"You're right," she says, as if the point wasn't completely obvious. "My paintings couldn't be done as a man. I'm not talking about the style, but the subject which is always from a woman's standpoint. Almost all my paintings are either about me or about the female experience."

The exhibition's title, *The Imagined Life*, is meant to convey the collision in Sharpe's work between reality and fantasy - how she has created a kind of visual mythology from her own life and body. Over the years, much has been made about how her paintings make her look heavier, dumpier, less attractive than she really is.

"I'm not really worried about likeness," she says. "I find it funny that I have won three portrait prizes but am not really a portrait painter."

A lot of her work is what she calls "semi-autobiographical" rather than strictly autobiographical. She uses herself as her principal model and muse because "I don't have to worry about whether it is flattering ... I know what I look like, and I look all right".

However, the blurring between her real and imagined personas can lead to confusion. "There's one painting which shows a pregnant woman. It wasn't me. I have never been pregnant. But people assumed it was and thought I must have had a miscarriage."

That people may have misread a painting, or believed a particular image was meant to be lifelike, doesn't concern her. "That painting of the pregnant woman *was* about anxiety," she says. "If it was meant to be about happiness, that would have been a worry!"

**Wendy Sharpe: The Imagined Life is at S.H. Ervin Gallery from Saturday until April 10.**