



Wendy Sharpe

Story Robert Buratti

WENDY SHARPE never considered any career other than painting. And while she has had her fair share of acclaim in top-level prizes and with major public commissions, prestigious residencies and appointments such as Official War Artist and artist-in-residence on the Mawson Centenary Voyage, behind all this lies the simplicity of an individual who is driven to create.

Sharpe ponders her art continuously. Her mind is often mid-thought between solving a problem and inventing another. Her process remains intuitive, thoughtful, but ultimately new ideas start with drawing, and a lot of it. It's here that the foundations are set and directions found. In conversation, I'm always amazed by her ability to effortlessly decode an image, the subtlety of its composition and colour, in a way far removed from simple art history. This kind of perception comes from countless hours solving problems on the canvas herself. She understands what makes a great image, and that this ability is an ever-evolving dynamic.

Her homes here and abroad show the mark of an artist driven to create, with a plethora of drawings, sculptures and paintings which often extend across the wall tiles and furniture. One could imagine that while she has an expansive studio in St Peters, Sydney, her creative space is anywhere that inspiration happens to take her. Her new home and studio in Paris, is filled with canvases and drawings, and the kitchen tiles were painted with Parisian-inspired scenes. There are few things more fascinating than gaining an insight into how great artists meld their lives with the creative process, and I had the pleasure to visit Wendy in Paris this year to discuss her approach.

Your recent expedition to Antarctica was an amazing opportunity. How did this come about?

This year is the centenary of the Australian explorer Douglas Mawson's expedition to Antarctica, and I was contacted by David Jenson, the CEO of Mawson's Hut Foundation, and invited to go on the voyage. The foundation works to preserve the huts built on the

edge of Antarctica by the original expedition, and to bring attention to the importance of Mawson's work. The long voyage on the icebreaker, Aurora Australis, was for nearly six weeks, leaving from Hobart and arriving back in Fremantle. I was the only artist amongst the crew, the majority of which were marine scientists.

How did you manage to create work in such an inhospitable environment? Was it difficult being taken completely out of your comfort zone? Did your approach have to change?

I have camped and worked in the Egyptian Sahara near the Libyan border and that was extremely isolated and otherworldly, but the Antarctic was even more so. Drawing and painting my experiences helped me understand the place more and my feelings about it. When I had the Australian War Memorial commission to go to East Timor, as soon as I started to draw I felt as though I knew what I was doing and could start to comprehend the situation. I am used to working in weird makeshift studios. In Antarctica, I had a 'studio' at the top of the ship in the meteorology lab near the bridge. I was worried that the sea might be too rough to paint, with everything sliding back and forth, but we were quite lucky and I only had one day of seasickness! I was able to work all day every day and made over 100 gouaches.

Most of your work seems to deal with city life. Did the Antarctic landscape throw up any new problems that you hadn't dealt with before?

Obviously, although I am not a landscape painter, I found the incredible sight of icebergs and wonderful clouds compelling, and it took me a while to understand the strange colour of the Antarctic sky. I was able to go into Mawson's hut, still full of discarded everyday things from 100 years ago. There was a wealth of subject matter from scenes of ship life, people and, of course, penguins!

Do you have a different approach to creating work in Paris as opposed to the Sydney studio?

In Sydney, I am lucky enough to have a large warehouse, but the

studio in Paris is small [so it is used] more for smaller work and collecting ideas. Paris is a great source of subject matter. There is something special about the streets, the cafes and bars, and the diversity of people throughout the city. Besides my paintings of Parisian life, I've also been attending many burlesque shows, particularly the small, intimate, and non-touristy cabarets. I've managed to get to know some of the performers, and they have posed for me in their costumes.

It looks like your current interest in burlesque has found its way into the subject matter for your next Sydney show. Was this a result of these drawing studies in Paris?

Yes, but I also went to many burlesque performances in different venues across Sydney, including the Burlesque Ball and Pretty Peepers Cabaret, where I was able to draw backstage, Anything Goes Cabaret, Dr Sketchy's, and many others. In Paris, I drew in many places, including Paris Burlesque Festival at La Bellevilloise, and at legendary theatres like La Cigale as well as venues so small they can only fit a dozen people! I have also had performers sit for me at my studio in Sydney, in Paris and in Adelaide.

What is it you find particularly exciting about burlesque?

In my view, burlesque should be satirical, bawdy and raw. It is at its best when it has the gutsy quality that was in the cabarets that attracted Toulouse-Lautrec, whose studio incidentally was not far from here. In its original form it was not the highly produced Moulin Rouge of today but was full of humour, irony and really quite rude. I love the craziness, the costumes and lack of them, and the fact that it had all kinds of women. The best performers are witty and irreverent.

Glitta Supernova is the burlesque producer and starlet of Pretty Peepers Cabaret in Sydney, and I've painted her several times. When I asked her for a definition she said: "Burlesque, if you look it up in the dictionary, says that, for the sake of laughter, vulgarises lofty material or treats ordinary material with mock dignity. So with that in mind I leap gaily forward into the unknown."

Your previous work focusing on the Australian Opera and Sydney Dance Company, and the recent commission to paint The Australian Ballet, had much the same approach to capturing stage lighting and bodies on show. Did this previous approach come into play with the new series?

I have always loved theatre, dramatic lighting and the contrast between backstage and the magic world of the stage – all imagination and illusion. I do lots of quick sketches to help me to understand the performance, and I've especially loved having the opportunity to draw in the dressing rooms. For me the most exciting place is backstage. I love the juxtaposition of crazy props and the banal – someone wearing a monster costume eating a hamburger or a rather large Cleopatra wearing glasses to read her text messages.

The burlesque performers modelling in your studio seem to have that same sense of theatre and intimacy. Do you think dramatic lighting is a major aspect of this work?

Yes, I have always loved intense light and dark. When I was a student my friends and I would take turns posing for each other by candlelight, nude or in ridiculous costumes. I have always been drawn to paintings about the night. Drama, mystery and often illusion, like theatre.



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How important is travelling to an artist these days? After many years, your work never seems to get stale or repetitive. Would you put this down to your consistent travelling or are there other inspirations which keep you developing?

I am glad you say it doesn't get repetitive! Although I find myself returning to themes, I always want to address them in different ways. It seems that in the last few years my work has either been quite self-referential and about my life in Sydney as an artist or about my travels, but it is always about people. I became obsessed with travel since I won my first scholarship just after art school. I thrive on seeing new places and people, and this excitement can only fuel inspired ideas for work. Painting and travel are my preoccupations, so it's great that I can do both!

Who were the artists you looked to when starting your career? Were there any particular local influences which stood out?

Really too many to list and for different reasons. I am always looking at the work of other artists. Some artists for subject matter and some for technical reasons. My list of early influences would mostly include narrative expressionist artists such as Munch, Beckmann, Kokoschka, Kollwitz, Nolde, Vuillard, Clemente, Auerbach, Sickert, Kiff etc. I just saw two great exhibitions in Paris of Matisse at the Centre Pompidou and Degas at the Musée D'Orsay which remind me again how great they are. Of course, I have always looked at many Old Masters: Goya, Titian, Rembrandt and so on. In Australia, I would say Arthur Boyd and Kevin Connor.

You're an artist who is always working. How important for your personal practice is it to keep to set hours? Do you work 9-5pm or as the mood grabs you? Do you prefer having a studio separate to your home?

If I don't work I become irritable and resentful – not nice things to admit but true. I usually arrive at the studio around 10am. I'd be lying if I said earlier. It is about 25 minutes' walk from the house in Sydney's inner west, and I work with a short lunch break until about 6.30pm. I do this virtually every day. I used to have a studio at home, but I find the walk between the house and the studio is not just good healthwise, but it also is good thinking time.

Your 2011 retrospective at S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney was one of the most successful exhibitions held at the museum to date. Do you feel that this has placed more of a spotlight on your work? Were you surprised by the public reaction?

Even though I have had so many exhibitions over the years, this one was the most nerve-racking, given that it covered over 25 years of work, and presented an overall career of work, rather than just a single idea or series. There is a short film, 'The Imagined Life: the Art of Wendy Sharpe', and a book of the same title which was released at the same time. It was difficult to help select an exhibition to give an overview of my entire career. Unfortunately we had to leave out some key works to make a more cohesive show. I was delighted by the response.

You've often said that you are ruthless in selecting only the best works for each of your exhibitions. How important do you feel this is to the overall scheme of presenting yourself as an artist? Do you feel all artists should take this approach?

Yes, definitely. This is brought home even more strongly when I was helping Jane Watters, the director of S.H. Ervin, select my work for the retrospective. If something comes up for auction, or appears in an exhibition somewhere, I want to be sure that I will be happy it is representing me, no matter when it was painted. ■

Wendy Sharpe is represented by King Street Gallery on William, Sydney; Buratti Fine Art, North Fremantle; and MARS Gallery, Melbourne

www.kingstreetgallery.com.au
www.buratti.com.au
www.marsgallery.com.au

EXHIBITION
 Wendy Sharpe Paintings Burlesque
 9 October – 3 November, 2012
 King Street Gallery, Sydney

01 Dressing Room, 2012, oil on linen, 96 x 102cm
 02 Glitta Supernova as Queen Bee, 2012, oil on linen, 96 x 102cm
 03 Cherry Lush, 2012, oil on linen, 56 x 76cm
 04 Demoiselles Darlington, 2012, oil on linen, 182 x 182cm
 05 Antarctic Studio, 2012, gouache on paper, 51 x 35cm
 Courtesy King Street Gallery