



At home with Wendy Sharpe

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Leave your modesty at the door and enter the fantastic, extroverted, colourful world of this quaint Federation cottage.

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These walls do talk ... artist couple Wendy Sharpe and Bernard Ollis. *Photo: Jacky Ghossein*

Wendy Sharpe needs little encouragement to show off her nipples - at least 20 of them. Arranged in neat rows upon a ceramic tray, they are the work of potter and friend Janna Ferris, who came up with the idea of immortalising Sharpe's breasts in clay.

"She showed me a plate where she'd cast figs and everyone was saying, 'They look like nipples,'" Sharpe says. "And she thought, 'Why don't I actually do nipples?'"

“It's possible to get a house full of ... exotica from Newtown.”

Far from being merely decorative, the tray has a practical purpose, too.

"It's a bit like one of those plates with little spikes where you put roast meat to carve," Sharpe says.

"It could drain off the fat or the oils or whatever you don't want."

The nipple tray is not the only surprise inside Sharpe's home, which she shares with fellow artist Bernard Ollis. It's also not the only depiction of bare breasts in the Federation-era Erskineville terrace with its quaint name, Federal Cottage, carved into the sandstone pillars either side of the front gate.

Voluptuous nudes - many self-portraits by Sharpe, who won the 1996 Archibald Prize for her *Self Portrait - as Diana of Erskineville* - adorn almost every wall of the house.

She has also won the Sulman Prize and the Portia Geach Memorial Prize twice (among others), is a regular finalist in the Archibald, Sulman, Wynne and Dobell prizes, and went to East Timor in 1999 as an official war artist.

Sharpe says the inner-west suburb has changed dramatically, transforming "from a rough place with a pub on every corner, with bikies, and really, really heavy, to being now incredibly gentrified".



Wendy Sharpe and Bernard Ollis at their home in Erskineville. Photo: Jacky Ghossein

The couple say the house reflects their extroverted and optimistic personalities. "I think we're both voluptuous, intense, dramatic, energised and full of character," says Ollis, a former director of the National Art School in Darlinghurst. "There are minimalists out there and we therefore have to be maximalists. Wherever there's a gap, we put something there to energise the space."

Stepping inside the couple's bright-yellow front door is like entering a theatre set.

The long hall, lined with paintings spanning their careers, leads to the downstairs bathroom door, whose window panes depict portraits of Adam and Eve - their nudity preserving the modesty of the room's occupants - painted by Wendy. The couple's handiwork can also be seen on painted tiles in the bathroom and kitchen, as well as on furniture and crockery.

Sharpe added a second floor to what was a single-storey house, but has retained its original features, including high ceilings, decorative cornices and its rabbit-warren layout.

The couple also resisted the temptation to knock out a wall to create larger, better-lit living spaces.

Not only does the maze of smaller rooms provide space to pursue individual activities in peace, it also reduces the heating bills.

"It is quite a cold house, like a lot of Federation houses actually are, so it's nice to be able to close it up and warm it up," Sharpe says. And a cold house is a blessing during summer in Sydney, Ollis points out.

Sharpe has lived in the terrace for more than 20 years, and the couple agree that it was a challenge to adapt to shared living when Ollis moved in 10 years ago.

"The first thing was I was overwhelmed by Wendy's personality, which flooded the whole space," he admits.

But Ollis says he has slowly stamped his personality on the home, adding his own possessions and artworks, including a Tchaikovsky portrait he painted as a 12-year-old. It hangs on the golden walls of the lounge room alongside two large paintings of Sharpe - a nude self-portrait and a brightly coloured work by Ollis.

In one corner, a 1950s lustreware woman holds a lampshade aloft, while a large dresser is decorated with pottery animals. Paintings are occasionally moved, especially when either of the prolific couple has an exhibition such as Sharpe's career retrospective, held earlier this year. "You could actually spend weeks walking around here as a curator trying to move things in and out," Ollis admits.

"But our time is precious and we want to get to the studio. It's lovely to have all these things around and we enjoy it when we come back, but we don't want to spend every day dusting and moving and changing."

Sharpe used to paint upstairs but 10 years ago she bought a large warehouse in nearby St Peters that has ample space for both artists to create works. "It's such a big space that I'm able to have a rich and interesting space, which I call the beauty nook," she says.

Not surprisingly, Sharpe's nook is opulent, with a velvet couch and plush drapes, but she says: "The area where I paint I don't have all that because I find that distracting."

Sharpe and Ollis are among the artistic couples whose works are on show for *In (Two) Art: 30 Artist Couples* at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in The Rocks until August 12.

Two days later, an exhibition of Ollis paintings inspired by Paris will open at NG Art in Chippendale.

Meanwhile, *Wendy Sharpe's Antarctica* opens tomorrow at the National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour. The one-week display features more than 100 paintings created during a six-week voyage to Antarctica last summer on board the *Aurora Australis* as a guest of the Australian Antarctic Division. The show aims to raise money for the Mawson's Huts Foundation to conserve the huts used as the main base for two years of the 1911-14 Australasian Antarctic Expedition led by Sir Douglas Mawson.

Sharpe's painting *Self-portrait in Antarctica with Penguin and Mawson's Huts* was a finalist in this year's Archibald Prize.

Back in Erskineville, an extraordinary arabesque doorway leads into the orientalist room, showcasing a copy Sharpe made of *Death of Sardanapalus* by French painter Eugene Delacroix.

A quarter of the size of the original, which hangs in the Louvre, it still dominates an entire wall with its fantastic depiction of the Assyrian king watching as guards carry out his orders to kill his servants, concubines and animals.

The room is lit with what Sharpe describes as a "pink jellyfish" - a Venetian glass light shade with leaves sprouting from it that she unearthed in an eastern suburbs junk shop.

The kitchen is equally extravagant, with classical nudes by old masters such as Correggio, Rembrandt and Titian - copied by Sharpe to practise her craft - competing for space with spice racks and spatulas.

In summer, the couple sit out on the north-facing verandah surveying their lush, overgrown garden. A large grapevine provides shade from the harsh heat, but sheds its leaves in winter to allow the sun to shine.

Tribal masks from Papua New Guinea compete for wall space with buxom beauties, while papier mache skeletons from Mexico hang either side of the kitchen window.

Although the couple are inveterate travellers, and had only just stepped off a plane from Paris, some of the most exotic items in their house have been bought locally.

"Although we've travelled a lot - we've got lots of things from different places - it's possible to get a house full of interesting exotica from Newtown," Sharpe says.

But the City of Light holds a special place in their hearts. Both Sharpe and Ollis did artist residencies in Paris early in their careers and visit so often they recently bought an apartment in Montmartre. "It's kind of a dream to do such a thing and a bit crazy," Ollis says. "Our accountant has said, 'Why are you doing this?'"

The couple agonised over whether to buy or take the more sensible course of renting but, one day while walking in the Marais, Ollis observed: "You don't always have to be sensible."

"And it's true," Sharpe says.

"You only live once and if you can, you should. What else are you going to do?"