



Wendy Sharpe's powerful portraits of humanity

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Wendy Sharpe at work

Artist Wendy Sharpe lets Spectrum into her studio space as she works on her art exhibition, *Seeking Humanity* featuring portraits of asylum seekers.

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The topography of Ivy's happiness is unfolding on an easel in Wendy Sharpe's chaotic St Peters studio. "You've got beautiful eyes," says the artist, a bohemian vision in orange cardigan, print skirt, floral apron and green tights. There's a hint of purple in Sharpe's hair. "I want to get the shape of your eyes and also your lovely hair."

For too many years, Ivy's dark eyes reflected sadness, pain, fear and uncertainty: a tormented life in her native Zimbabwe; eventually, in April 2012, a flight to Australia; the arrival at Sydney airport where she applied for protection; then nearly two years of uncertainty before receiving a humanitarian visa in November, 2013.

Now though, those eyes sparkle, although she is still too cautious to reveal her last name. "You don't look sad, you look happy," says Sharpe, fingers smudging burnt sienna, raw umber and yellow ochre to form Ivy's paper face. "I am," says Ivy. "I'm a happy person."



Faces of humanity: Wendy Sharpe is working on a series of portraits of refugees and asylum seekers. *Photo: Dallas Kilponen*

Not only has Ivy become a happy person; in Sharpe's hands, with chalk, pastel and paper, Ivy has become Ivy. Not an asylum seeker. Not an anonymous number in a Department of Immigration and Border Protection file. Not derided as a "queue jumper" or worse. Ivy has become Ivy, a woman with dreams and prospects, heart and brain.

Sharpe has given form and character to Ivy and 38 other asylum seekers in *Seeking Humanity*, which will open at The Muse exhibition space in Ultimo next month.

"We're not allowed to see who these people are," says Sharpe, 54, caressing Ivy's paper lips with her index finger. "There are a lot of people thinking, 'I'd like to actually know who some of these people are, just a story of one or two people'."

Sharpe approached the Asylum Seekers Centre in Newtown early in 2014 with the idea of unfolding the stories of individual asylum seekers on paper. She would draw from life, rather than from photographs.

It's what she almost always does. "All my work is about people; I am interested in people, as anyone who's a human being should be. It's actually about spending time with people and meeting them," says Sharpe, who won the 1996 Archibald Prize for *Diana of Erskineville*, ironically, a self-portrait. "You obviously can't say that you can know someone in two or three hours ... but you do really get a feeling of what sort of person they are."

In *Seeking Humanity*, text panels will sit beside the pastel drawings. They'll reveal a name, although, in most cases, an assumed name rather than a subject's real name; most of the 39 asylum seekers are still waiting to hear whether Australia will give them protection and are concerned that revealing their identity could jeopardise their application.

One woman, an African woman, when asked what name she'd like to take for the project, replied: "I'd like to be called 'princess'." In her native language, her nickname means "princess".

But the text alongside the drawings will reveal things of greater substance than mere names. "[It will show] their hopes and dreams and things they like to do," says Sharpe, who drew most of the subjects at the Asylum Seekers Centre. "It [will] turn them into real people." These are people who do the same things we like to do. They like to dance or sing. They play soccer and learn the guitar and bake cakes.

One, a man from the Middle East, likes to dance. He wore a lairy checked jacket and bright tie for his appointment with the artist. He told her of his visit to a dance studio in Parramatta Road where he asked a beautiful girl to dance with him. They danced, to something sedate, then the music changed. Suddenly it was fast and Latin American and he was struggling to keep up with the beautiful woman. Turned out she was an award-winning salsa dancer. The engineer signed up for a salsa class.

An African teenaged boy in baseball cap, jeans and red sweatshirt told Sharpe of his love for football – soccer. She asked if, in the portrait, he'd like her to draw a football emblem on the t-shirt poking out from underneath his sweatshirt. No, he said, "I would like a Superman t-shirt." An African woman told her about the stars. "She said, 'Where I come from, we don't have very good electricity, so on nights when there's not much electricity I like to walk out and look at the stars; I love the stars.'"

Sharpe drew lawyers and engineers, teachers, business people and mothers cradling babies. "I've drawn some people who are still in a very sensitive and delicate state. Some people might say: 'I have been very sad and I'm in a very difficult situation but I want to be presented in a positive way; how I'll be in the future'."

Others have found some peace and contentment. A multi-lingual designer from Eastern Europe told Sharpe how happy he was. "He's absolutely thrilled that he's working in a gelato factory where he has to get up at six o'clock in the morning. It's so wonderful because he's got a job and [he works with] nice people."

It's what migrants have always done. Started again, with nothing. Just like Sharpe's parents did when they migrated from England in the early '50s.

For Ivy, 58, starting again initially meant sad, difficult and lonely times. She came on her own, leaving her three grown children in Harare. For a year and a half, the former teacher lived in Manly, which was some small consolation. She had English, which gave her a start many do not have, and began a nursing course. But her back started to give her trouble. Now she's studying for a diploma in community services. She wants to be a case-worker for other migrants; in the meantime, she's volunteering teaching English to asylum seekers. "I have a big desire to help people as a carer."

"Let's get more of this pink because it's really nice," says Sharpe, adjusting a shawl draped over the back of the chair on which Ivy sits in her striped shirt.

Ivy's history is complicated. "In my country if you are a teacher you are vulnerable." She laments the devastation wrought on her home town, Harare. But her reasons for flight are more personal than political. Her body bears the scars of a knife-wielding, abusive husband. In Zimbabwe. It's usually the woman who is blamed for domestic violence. "You go to the police, they tell you, 'Oh you again, please, go and be nice to your husband so that you don't get beaten'," says Ivy. "There was no option; I tried all the options when I was back there but he would always find me."

Once, Ivy could not tell her story without weeping. "Now I can talk about it just as history, just as a story. It doesn't bring any bad memories." Sharpe addresses a small issue with the portrait, wiping away Ivy's paper eyes, as though she were wiping away her tears: "They were in the wrong spot. I had her face too long."

Says Ivy: "I think I'm a strong person."

Sharpe's hands are blackened with pastel now as Ivy's face emerges before her. "I think you are too. I can't imagine, really. It's not like going for a holiday."

Melanie Noden, the Asylum Seekers Centre CEO, hopes that Sharpe's works will provoke people to walk for a while in someone else's shoes – "to look inside yourself and imagine you were in that situation; we're talking about children and mothers, fathers, brothers, grandmothers, sisters. We're talking about people".

Noden believes that governments have used labels such as "queue jumpers" in a deliberate attempt to dehumanise asylum seekers and so make it easier for harsh, job-lot decisions to be made about how they are treated – harder to do when they're seen as individuals with stories and dreams. "It's not just to live in safety, which is such an important human right," says Noden. "It's also about their dreams to become part of our community, to rebuild their lives and go on to do great things in a safe, welcoming environment."

Sharpe, whose works are typically exuberantly coloured and voluptuous, flaunting the burlesque and the theatrical, breasts and lips, night lights and languor, initially thought she would use charcoal for her asylum seeker series. Until her first subject arrived for a sitting in a bright red and yellow sari. "I thought, 'That's ridiculous! I can't draw that in black and white'."

Now she lifts portrait off easel and turns it to show Ivy how she looks. "Ohhhh," says Ivy, exhaling deeply. "I'm so amazed when I look at this. I'm so beautiful!"

For 39 people whose lives have been shadowed by fear, poverty or trauma, sitting for Sharpe has been an empowering experience. Ivy says that, over the past few years, there have been many times she has felt useless. "Most times I've felt really like I'm worthless."

Now, she says, "I feel important".

"As you are," says Sharpe.

***Seeking Humanity* is at The Muse, Sydney TAFE, Ultimo, February 17-March 12. Selected works will be at Penrith Regional Gallery, April 11-May 24. Money raised from sales of the works will support the Asylum Seekers Centre.**