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📷 Wendy Sharpe captures the colours of the circus in her latest works. Picture: Stephen Cooper

Arts

Artist Wendy Sharpe still tumbles for the magic of the Big Top circus

Elizabeth Fortescue, Visual arts writer, The Daily Telegraph
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CIRCUS Oz is on an Australian tour, next stop Tasmania. But some of the circus troupe's essence remains in Sydney where acclaimed artist Wendy Sharpe has captured the heart and soul of the performers in her latest exhibition at King Street Gallery on William.

At various times over the past two years, Sharpe has been a fixture at Circus Oz, drawing and painting the performers in rehearsal, in performance and even in their downtimes between shows, when they fling themselves on crash mats and let sleep help them recover from their superhuman exertions.

Across multiple canvases, works on paper, painted ceramics and even a concertina artist's book, Sharpe has depicted the tumblers, jugglers, fire-eaters and trapeze artists who have made the Big Top their peripatetic home.

Sharpe holds these extraordinary athletes in awe, painting them with empathy and respect for the rigour and dedication that marks every hour of their lives.

Audiences are usually oblivious to the risks the performers take, but Sharpe came to know that an accident can be a split second away from every seemingly effortless and funny circus act. Performers, she says, must stay in perfect form to avoid injury and maintain peak fitness.

“A couple of them told me it takes 10 days to lose it and 10 weeks to get it back,” Sharpe says. “Elite circus performers are like elite athletes and top ballet dancers, and they have to work incredible hours every day to keep to that level.”

Fascinated by the 19th-century tradition of European circus, Sharpe also painted at Cirque d'Hiver in Paris. Following in the footsteps of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, she painted the Cirque d'Hiver Big Top with its opulent chandeliers and its ushers in red velvet and gold brocade. Whether Sharpe's paintings are of Circus Oz or Cirque d'Hiver, they are luscious and extravagant, with costumes, sets, make-up and props all depicted in sensuous colour and the beguiling light of the Big Top at night. “As a child it's magic, but as an adult it's still magic,” she says.

* Wendy Sharpe — Circus, King Street Gallery on William, 177 William St, Darlinghurst; until October 8, 9360 9727, kingstreetgallery.com.au