

IN SHARPE RELIEF

Artist Wendy Sharpe at work in the Mitchell Library, and (below) some of her paintings of the library, and (insets left) how the renovated library will look.



ARTIST WENDY SHARPE IS CREATING A UNIQUE RECORD OF ONE OF SYDNEY'S GREAT INSTITUTIONS, WRITES ELIZABETH FORTESCUE

Back in the 1970s and '80s, an artistic young lady from Sydney's northern beaches would travel into the city with her father.

Their destination? The sandstone edifice of the Mitchell Library, whose classical facade gazes across the Royal Botanic Garden to the Opera House sails.

While the father researched his well-known series of Sydney history books, the daughter took in the hushed, bookish atmosphere of the Mitchell Library, which is part of the State Library of NSW.

The father was Alan Sharpe, the late historian, and his daughter Wendy would become one of Australia's most prominent artists.

Wendy Sharpe has won the Archibald Prize with a flamboyant self-portrait. She has been an official Australian war artist, held countless exhibitions and crisscrossed the world with her artist partner Bernard Ollis. Today, however, Sharpe is back in the

117-year-old Mitchell Library, and this time it's as part of a very special project.

The library asked Sharpe to record and respond to its \$15 million building renewal project, which is under way and will see the institution internally transformed under plans created by the architecture firm Hassell.

"The main thing is it's going to reinstate the old beautiful bits, but also add new, open, modern (areas). Which is exactly what you'd want," Sharpe says.

Sharpe's artist residency gives her unprecedented access to the back-of-house spaces at the library, as well as permission to work in areas being stripped out and refitted.

When the building reopens some time next year, it will no longer be the rabbit warren of smaller spaces that resulted from many decades of ad hoc internal divisions. Instead, the Mitchell will be open and light-filled, with double its current exhibition capacity. Curators will be able to put much more of the 2.8 million-

object Mitchell collection on permanent or rotational display. Few people realise the extent of the Mitchell's collections of everything from books and maps to artworks, e-books and digital archives, according to Maggie Patton, the library's manager research and discovery.

When the Mitchell reopens, the main entry to the new galleries will be to the left of the current entry to the historic reading room. The architectural plans provide for a new public learning space.

Even the rooftop of the Mitchell will be rebuilt. An existing staff luncheon area will be made into a restaurant/function centre. Sharpe has already painted the glorious Harbour view from up there, characteristically including herself in the composition with an outrageous red and white sunhat on her head.

The cost of the renovation — the first major building project at the Mitchell in more than 50 years — is being picked up by a small group of private philanthropists including Michael Crouch, after whom the new galleries will be named.

The Mitchell has a focus on history, and Sharpe has adjusted her usual way of working to accommodate this.

Take her painting of the Harbour view.

"If I was just doing it for an exhibition of my own, then I would take liberties and change it around and half

make it up," Sharpe says.

"But because I know it's going to be used partly as archives for the library, I feel that I have to be a bit more topographical."

Sharpe has also filled page after page with portraits of reading room users, buried in their books or absorbed on their laptops. Even with these drawings, she is aware of depicting a moment in time.

"I'm aware that in only a few years people will say, 'oh! They had computers like that then,'" Sharpe says.

A delightful aspect of Sharpe's residency at the Mitchell is her decision to make all her artworks on concertina artists' books and Chinese scrolls.

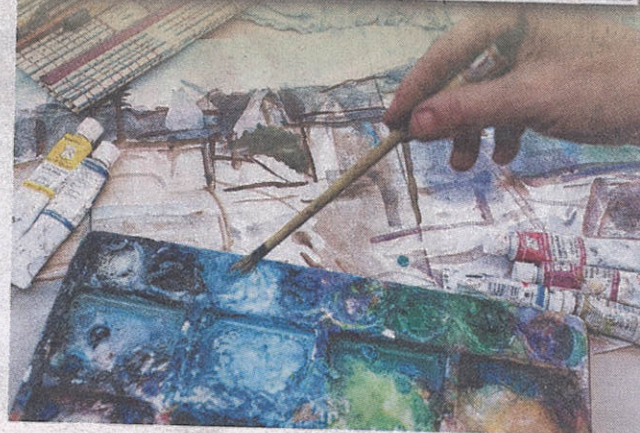
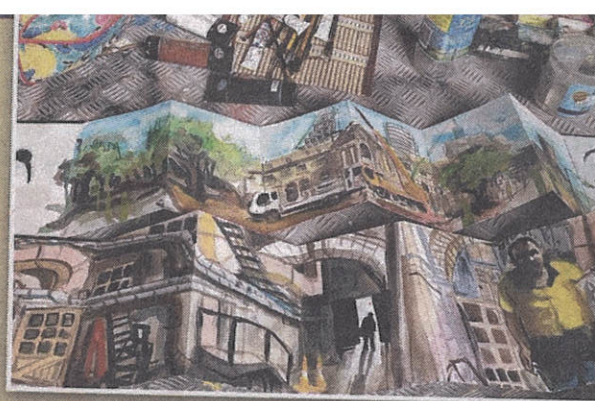
"I love books, I love little special things," Sharpe says. "So I thought it might be nice to make them all in books."

Some of the large concertina books unfold to reveal Sharpe's paintings of beautiful long views, mostly done in the medium of gouache.

But this week she is drawing in tiny concertina sketchbooks that would nearly fit in a matchbox. Bought on the internet, these mini-books are an obvious source of delight for Sharpe.

"Today I'm going to draw tiny objects in this. Isn't that going to be lovely?" she says.

Some of Sharpe's beautiful books will be acquired by the Mitchell for its permanent collection.



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