

THE SATURDAY PAPER

PORTRAIT

A visit to the Sydney studio of artist Wendy Sharpe. By *Sarah Price*.

Artist Wendy Sharpe



She begins everything with a drawing. She draws to bring her ideas into the world. To think and to see. Paintings start as dreamlike images, scribbled or sketched from a fragment of thought or idea. She paints in layers, over time. Asks herself questions: What should be there? A different colour? Another shape? She turns her paintings upside down, or views them through a mirror, to see in a different way. There is a clock on the wall of her studio. But she loses time. Hours can pass as minutes, or minutes as hours. Time is mostly unnoticed. She doesn't understand why it sometimes goes fast and, other times, slow.

Her studio is in the inner west of Sydney, on the edge of the WestConnex. She has trucks at her door. Inside, she has 270 square metres of space. There are bits of her everywhere. On the table is a bunch of purple flowers, held in a jug painted with burlesque dancers and her signature: Wendy Sharpe. Her oil paintings hang in the toilet and around the studio walls. Drawings in gouache are propped on milk crates and easels, her charcoal sketches laid out over tables and chairs. There are her notes and books, sculptures and masks, and bits of art she found on the street.

The studio used to be a printing factory. The cement floor is now overlaid with worn rugs and spilled paint. Iron rafters on the ceiling hold a bed of silver insulation, and tubes of fluorescent light. There are chandeliers, hanging from chains. Radio National plays from a speaker. At one end of the room is an honour board from a masonic hall, dating back to 1880. A cover of *The Australian Women's Weekly* from 1936 hangs in the kitchenette. The edition is called: The Artist.

Wendy is at her studio every day, "because where else would you want to be?" She says her role as an artist is, at times, to illuminate and provoke. In 2014 she painted 39 portraits of asylum seekers. The project came from a desire to tell the stories we don't often hear. "Like so many people I am horrified by our major parties' attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. I thought: 'What can I do? These people are presented to us as objects. We need to see them as people.' It's really interesting to me that an old-fashioned skill like drawing can be used for a political purpose or some kind of advocacy."

All the portraits were drawn from life, in sittings that took from two to three hours. The background of every portrait is deliberately blank, to be less intrusive, and emphasise the person. "The people really are from everywhere and look like everyone," Wendy says. "They are all ages and they are all types. You have women with headscarves, African people, very blonde blue-eyed people, Asian people. Whatever you look like, they look like you – which of course they are – they are just people." In the catalogue produced for the collection, the first portrait is of a child, Eva. She says: "Sometimes I feel like I am Alice in Wonderland. In my life, most adults are nonsense. I wish I

could just wake up one day in a home which is my family's, on my bed, surrounded by cosy things, and my cat, who I had to leave behind ... If I were Alice, then Australia would be my land of wonder." The exhibition toured city and regional areas, before being sold as separate pieces, with all money raised going to the Asylum Seekers Centre in Sydney.

Wendy does not usually draw portraits. In her own work, she doesn't put constraints on herself as she would for commissioned pieces. "I've done a billion hours of life drawing. My work is about people and it is always figurative, I'm not an abstract painter, but I'm also not a realist. It is usually what I would call expressionist, so it's emotive, and I try to imbue it with my own feelings or my own attitude to something. That means there can be distortions of colour and that a lot of it is made up." In 1996 she won the Archibald Prize for her *Self-portrait – as Diana of Erskineville*. She has won the Sulman Prize, and twice won the Portia Geach Memorial Award.

Her own work is unashamedly subjective, she explains. She doesn't want it to be photographic. "I want it to feel that it is my take on whatever it is. Sometimes it is completely made-up – poetic images that don't exist anywhere – they are my own feelings. When I'm doing a self-portrait I really don't care if it looks like me at all, it is some woman who's got vaguely my hairstyle and who is probably being shown as an artist. It's not a mugshot of me – it is something either about me, or what is happening to me, or what I want to express."

On the studio wall is Wendy's latest collection, *Paris Windows*, set for exhibition at Darlinghurst's King Street Gallery in August. Every year she works in Paris, living in her sixth-floor apartment in Montmartre. "On the sixth floor there is an unspoken rule that you look into everyone else's house or apartment, and pretend you can't," she says, laughing. "There's a whole world on the fifth and sixth floors." From a distance, she got to know something of the people living opposite, made up names for them and created narratives around their lives.

"I'm really interested in people and in story. With my work, I want to take you to a different place and give you quite a lot of information, but not tell you everything. It's important that there is a sense of mystery – it is what makes you keep returning to it."

Wendy is in the world of a painting even when not at the easel, she says. "If I suddenly get a great idea for something, it is because it has been stewing in the back of my mind, maybe for years. Something sparks, but it didn't come out of nowhere."

She compares her process to that of writing: you might decide in writing that the beginning is the end, or that an entire section needs to go. Painting is the same. Most writing is rewriting and most painting is repainting. You have to edit and make changes. You want it to feel fresh, she explains, like it sort of just happened. That often means destroying it, and working it again.

In her large studio, Wendy will work on a painting or a drawing for a few hours, or days, then put it aside, and work on something else before going back to it. "If you are so in it, you can't see it," she says. "Like any creative process, if you've been doing something for a while, you need to stop and step away. Then you can come back and say: 'Ah, now I see.'"

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