

The Sydney Morning Herald

CULTURE ART & DESIGN ARTS

This was published 4 months ago

Sentimental journey

By [Steve Meacham](#)

October 14, 2019 – 1.40pm



Wendy Sharpe may well be one of Australia's best-travelled artists.

Since June alone, she's worked in France, the Arctic and Ukraine, where she's been exploring the Jewish branch of her family tree.



Wendy Sharpe with her work at Manly Art Gallery. RENEE NOWYTARGER

Her exhibition, *Wanderlust*, at Manly Art Gallery and Museum features paintings and drawings from landscapes as varied as Antarctica, Egypt and Mexico, and include "a Chinese scroll" from her recent Arctic residency.

Such restlessness has also inspired the program of this year's Sydney Chamber Music Festival, which features Sharpe's work, described by artistic director Bridget Bollinger as "vibrant and voluptuous".

Sharpe's next work trip will be to the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Next month's journey has been inspired by the achievements of the Australian woman dubbed "Africa's Mother Teresa" by *The New York Times*.

Now 95, obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr Catherine Hamlin co-founded the Addis Ababa Fistula hospital with Kiwi husband, Dr Reg Hamlin, in 1974.

Almost half a century later, it remains the world's only medical centre dedicated to providing free surgery to poverty-stricken women suffering terrible injuries from childbirth.

Last year, Sharpe was asked to provide a painting for a charity auction to raise funds for the Sydney-based Catherine Hamlin Fistula Foundation.

"I had no idea what fistula was," Sharpe says. "I had to look it up."

Before the 20th century fistula was one of the risks of childbirth everywhere, though it is virtually eradicated in affluent countries.

"If you were a pregnant woman living on a remote Australian sheep station in 1900, it didn't always end happily," Sharpe says. "Now in Australia, if a baby is stuck inside a woman, she can get a caesarian. But if you live in a remote village in Africa, the baby either dies inside you - or the mother incurs terrible internal injuries as the baby is removed."

Often the mother dies along with her baby. Even if she survives, her life is ruined - through terrible pain and the shame of incontinence.

"Before surgery some of these women have lived in the most appalling agony and squalor for years," Sharpe says. "I decided not only to donate an artwork, but to do whatever I could."

After the auction, she volunteered to provide two limited edition prints of recovered patients to be sold by the Hamlin foundation.

"They're amalgams, based on photographs the foundation sent me," Sharpe says. "They show hope. Often the terrible internal injuries can be repaired with surgery. But what the foundation is trying to do is eradicate it altogether by training Ethiopian midwives."

Then Sharpe discovered the foundation offers regular supporters the chance to visit the hospital in Ethiopia, witness the work the charity does, and, maybe meet Hamlin, who still lives in the cottage she shared with her late husband.

Sharpe signed up and will stay on once the official tour is over to produce works that will be exhibited and sold at a fundraising auction in March.

"I'm really hoping to meet Catherine," Sharpe says. "She's a wonderful person who, with her husband, has dedicated her life to ending the suffering of these poor women. I plan to work solidly for a month while I'm there. They will be positive images, showing the women once their pain and suffering is over."

Though Sharpe and Hamlin have yet to meet, they share a connection through the 2013

Archibald Prize, when Sharpe's raunchy depiction of burlesque star, Venus Vamp, was hung alongside Sally Ryan's portrait of Hamlin, formally seated in a chair with the Ethiopian flag.

“I think Catherine would find my portrait quite shocking,” Sharpe says when the coincidence is pointed out. “But I’m sure she has seen things that would shock the hell out of me.”

Sharpe is under no illusions about the challenging nature of her upcoming trip. “I’m going to find this trip to Ethiopia distressing, but I’ll meet people quietly doing incredible things with kindness, compassion and dedication,” she says. “My task is to honour the work they do.”

Wendy Sharpe: Wanderlust, Manly Art Gallery and Museum until October 20.

[Sydney Chamber Music Festival, Manly Art Gallery and Museum, Oct 18-20: Catherine Hamlin Fistula Foundation](#)



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