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Wendy Sharpe's rare, intimate landscapes celebrate Australia

By Steve Meacham

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Painting 'en plein air' – as the French Impressionists termed it – always sounds such a relaxing experience. However sometimes painting outdoors is fraught with danger.

Just ask multi-award winning artist Wendy Sharpe, who visited South Australia's Flinders Ranges with fellow artists from Sydney gallery King Street Gallery on William.

The Flinders will forever be associated with Sir Hans Heysen. Australia's first celebrity painter revealed their artistic beauty in 1926, capturing on canvas the changing colours of its rocks and stark majesty of its gums. Yet Sharpe's images are different.



Artist Wendy Sharpe, born on January 26, says gouache is her preferred medium. JAMES BRICKWOOD

“It had been raining incredibly for a few weeks before we got there,” Sharpe says on the phone from her apartment in “the untouristy side” of Paris’s Montmartre, where she and her partner, fellow artist Bernard Ollis, live for part of each year. (Their main home in a fashionable inner Sydney suburb “has gone from Chico rolls and Kraft cheese slices to quinoa and quinces since I bought”, she adds.)

But back to the Flinders. “They were uncharacteristically green. It looks as if I’ve taken poetic licence, but that’s how it was: green shoots poking through red earth with rolling clouds and dramatic light.”

Sharpe is not known for landscapes, let alone gum trees. Her fame is mostly based on her large figurative works, usually oil on canvas, and mainly set in urban surroundings.

“I’m interested in people so virtually all of my work includes people,” she explains. “We’re an urban nation and I love cities. The bigger and more dense the city is, the more I like it.”

So, in the context of her prolific career, her “intimate” Flinders images, created in the field, are rare, she says.

However, gouache (pronounced gwash) is her preferred medium when it comes to studies or finished works which have to be captured quickly.



Self With Bees, Flinders Ranges. “There’s an approaching storm. I’m the little figure in black on the right. The dots in the background are the swarm of bees I’d just escaped from,” says Sharpe.

Those include her work for the Australian War Memorial with Australian peacekeeping troops during their Timor Leste independence mission; two trips to Antarctica as guest artist for the Australian Antarctic Division; and frequent travels to danger-edged destinations such as Uzbekistan, Syria and Iran – subjects of a forthcoming exhibition.

Sharpe was just 25 when she came to national attention with her first solo exhibition *Sex and Death*.

A year later, in 1986, she was awarded the prestigious Sulman Prize; then won a travelling scholarship to the Cite Internationale des Artes, which began her love affair with Paris.

Born on January 26, she won the Archibald Prize in 1996 for her self portrait *Diana of Erskineville*, which Edmund Capon, then director of the Art Gallery of NSW, described as “probably the raunchiest painting to win the Archibald”. Her green bra was prominent and she was surrounded by naked breasts, a common theme in her work. (The breasts are often her own.)

So acquaintances were surprised when they saw the landscapes. “People said, ‘I didn’t know you painted gum trees’. But if you can paint figures you can paint anything.”



Red hills, grey sky, with emus. "I was excited to see a group of emus in the paddock in front of me. Something I have rarely experienced," Sharpe reveals.

What was Sharpe's big drama in the Flinders? If you look carefully at her work *Self with Bees*, you'll spot a small black figure on the right, hiding under a soaring gum. To the left is a cloud of black dots.

"I was sitting painting when a swarm of bees started to fly around me, trying to get into my T-shirt," Sharpe explains.

"I shooed them away, but they kept returning and trying to crawl in. Eventually I had to pack up and run. They didn't follow me. They just kept swarming around where I'd been sitting.

"Later I realised I'd used a fancy wildflower soap when I'd showered that morning. They must have thought I was the biggest flower they'd ever seen."

That's one of the reasons Sharpe loves gouache. It's a quick-drying medium, ideal for hasty exits. Think of it as an opaque watercolour with gum fixative, which means the colours don't run if you suddenly need to dash from a thunderstorm or a swarm of bees.

On this Australia Day, Sharpe will be working on *Paris Stories*, which opens in Brisbane on March 5 at Philip Bacon Galleries.

More typical Sharpe urbanscapes can be seen at Sydney's SH Ervin Gallery in the Rocks as part of *Destination Sydney reimagined*, featuring eight other prominent Sydney artists spread over three galleries (until March 17).

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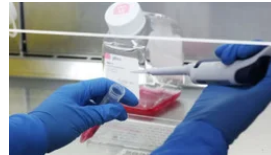
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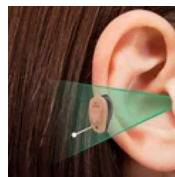
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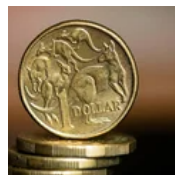
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