

'He's part social commentator, part shaman'

After decades as a virtual recluse, nursing his art and his obsessions, renowned pop artist Martin Sharp returns to the public domain with works in three exhibitions.

COVER STORY JOYCE MORGAN

MARTIN SHARP WAS warned he might hallucinate. And he did. Comic faces, grotesque, malevolent, a goblin and a pig's head appeared before him.

This wasn't a flashback to his youth when he created some of the defining psychedelic images of the 1960s, but a side-effect of medication taken during triple bypass surgery two years ago. Some feared the artist would not survive. Sharp's response was more sanguine.

"I kept my eyes wide open. I kept a notebook," he says. "There should be a paper written on it, but there isn't because it's not materially examinable."

Invisible realms – or realms not immediately apparent – have long interested Sharp. He has spent his creative life immersed in his obsessions, among them Tiny Tim and the fire in the Luna Park ghost train, long after the rest of the world moved on.

The art establishment has never known what to make of Sharp, who rocketed to attention in the 1960s with his covers and cartoons for the satirical *Oz* magazine. Some see a figure who burned early and brightly then traded political edge for mystical pursuits and retreated to his mansion.

Others see a major artist whose observations beneath the exuberant colours remain as insightful as his surname suggests. Nick Waterlow, co-curator of a rare solo show focusing on his paintings, called *The Everlasting World of Martin Sharp*, takes the latter view.

"There's a remarkable visual talent that enables him to somehow scan horizons that others don't seem to be aware of," Waterlow says. "He's part social commentator, part shaman ... Because it's often presented in a gentle way, people don't see it as hard-nosed, but it's very observant."

Sharp, 64, peers warily from under a thatch of unruly silver hair. In thin cotton pants, he seems as impervious to the chilly day as he is to what the world makes of him. He talks the way he works: slowly, thoughtfully. Ambiguous sentences trail off or end in a chuckle. At times, he pauses so long it's unclear whether he's said all he wants on a subject or is still mulling.

He doesn't readily relinquish either his thoughts or his paintings. He can take years to finish a work – and then lets go reluctantly. When he submitted a portrait to the Archibald a few years ago, he continued reworking it in the loading dock at the Art Gallery of NSW.



Martin Sharp in the mid-'60s ... "a very, very elusive character". Photo: Robert Whitaker

Within his dark dining-room studio – the darkest studio I've encountered – the initial impression is of chaos. A dining table is heaped with papers, letters, coloured pencils. A Mickey Mouse telephone rings beside a hinged photograph of his parents, who separated when Sharp, an only child, was 17. "That was [taken] when they were apart, but I've put them back together," he says.

People wander in and out of Wirian, the Bellevue Hill mansion where Sharp lives alone in what was once his grandparents' home. His constant companions are two terriers, excitable, young Imelda and older, rangy Pom Pom. Works in progress lean against all available wall spaces: a portrait of indigenous actor David Gulpilil; a homage to Van Gogh's *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*; a three-metre Japanese-style work, *Abalone*. A photo pinned to a wall hints at a tragedy that once unfolded in the house.

But the apparent chaos is deceptive. Sharp readily locates a book of Van Gogh's paintings, given him by his former Cranbrook art teacher, Justin O'Brien, in 1956, and one of his first collages – with a Campbell soup can, pre-Warhol – created while still at school. And when I mention seeing Tiny Tim perform at Newcastle's Castanet Club more

than 20 years ago, he disappears briefly and returns with a recording of the gig.

Sharp spends a lot of time archiving, says his friend and former *Oz* collaborator Richard Neville. "There's a lot tucked away," Neville says. "There's layers within layers. He's always tidying up. He's like a little Stasi officer with information and files and strange correspondence with all sorts of people."

For years, Sydney has glimpsed mere fragments of his work. His impact has slipped under the radar, not least because he rarely exhibits. The pace at which he works and his reluctance to relinquish his work limit his appeal to commercial galleries. But suddenly there's a flurry of interest. Ahead of the solo exhibition, there's a small joint show, *Notes from the River Caves*, with Peter Kingston at the Art Gallery of NSW, and a work in a touring show, *For Matthew and Others: Journeys with Schizophrenia*.

Sharp's life has been filled with strange synchronicities, such as an early encounter in a London bar with Eric Clapton. Sharp wrote on a napkin some lyrics he'd penned, *Tales of Brave Ulysses*. Cream recorded it on their classic *Disraeli Gears* album, the cover of which Sharp designed. He also designed their *Wheels of Fire* album and co-wrote with Clapton the biting *Anyone For Tennis*?

Sharp's four years in London came at the height of the hippie era when visual art, music, politics, fashion and mind-altering substances blended in a crucible of youthful exuberance. "A lot of the ideas that I came across then I'm still working with," he says. "I found a way to work then and I just kept going."

It was Clapton, his flatmate in a bohemian Chelsea mansion, who prompted Sharp to see Tiny Tim in concert at the Albert Hall in 1968. Most saw the American falsetto crooner as simply a novelty act; Sharp saw something else. And it has prompted him to invest years – and much of his own money – producing music by him, a film about him and images of this curious muse.

"I was just amazed by his intelligence," he says, "the songs and his ability to perform them and to be funny and deep."

Perhaps Sharp sensed a kindred spirit, someone doing in music what he was doing with collage images, rearranging the past and the present, linking high and pop culture. "I've always loved comics and cartoons," he says. "You can certainly express serious things in simple images." As he has in his painting *Snow Job*, for example. The funfair clown face is overpainted with thick snowballs, alluding to Sharp's belief in an alleged cover-up behind the investigation into the Luna Park fire.

His work is loaded with levels of meaning, says artist Peter Kingston, who worked with Sharp on *Oz* in Sydney, at Luna Park and at the Yellow House artists' mecca at Kings Cross



in the 1970s. "Most of the things come with humour and a sting," he says.

But Kingston, who was at Cranbrook with Sharp, is baffled by his friend's devotion to the late singer. "I get a bit sick of Tiny Tim, especially in his car," he admits. "He just turns on the ignition and Tiny Tim starts up."

Not that Sharp is fazed: "People say to me, 'why do you waste your time? You're better than him ...' Well, I don't think so for a start. And it's all part of my work."

And that's the point. Sharp's work is as interconnected and overlaid as his collages, not a linear progression. It seems to animate the White Queen's words to Lewis Carroll's Alice: "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards."

His image memory is remarkable, says artist Luke Sciberras, who has worked closely with Sharp for a decade. "He's like a Google engine of art. He has a vast knowledge of art and history and literature from which he can pastiche a very poignant image."

Yet Sciberras finds his friend unfathomable: "If anyone says they know Martin very well, I'm sceptical. He's a very, very elusive character."

Sharp is like an ancient alchemist probing the symbolism of events, whether it's the death of Princess Diana, a more recent preoccupation, or the ghost train fire at Luna Park, which took seven lives in 1979. He has stuck by his conviction that the fire was deliberately lit and was an act of evil. He has developed a lasting friendship with Jenny Poidevin, whose husband and two sons perished in the fire.

Poidevin says Sharp's loyalty has sustained her over the years. "Just to know there's someone else there who felt the pain. And I think Martin did feel the pain. It taught me a lot about friendship and loyalty," she says. "Some of the other families [affected by the fire] have also found solace in Martin, a sense of someone to talk to."



Creative obsessions ... Martin Sharp's *Seventeen Minutes to Four* (1965).

Courtesy Ivan Dougherty Gallery

For a man obsessed by the Luna Park fire, perhaps there's no darker synchronicity in Sharp's life than events that occurred at his home in 1991. Sharp was working on a poster for an exhibition on Luna Park about 3am and telling a friend how he'd given shelter to a woman who had just parted from her boyfriend.

"There was a haze in the air ... suddenly I realised it was smoke and the fire was under where all my Luna Park records and Tiny Tim things were," he says.

Sharp and his friend ran downstairs, extinguished the fire and made a terrible discovery. The ex-boyfriend had entered the downstairs room in which the woman was staying and lit the fire.

"I could hear a little noise from her. The guy was next to her," Sharp recalls. "... We got air into the room. He came out. He leaned on the lamppost up there and said, 'Where's my skin?' " The woman died in the fire, the man some hours later.

He has pondered since the symbolism of

the two deadly events. "I did relate it to [Luna Park] ... I look as an artist. I had to think there's so many coincidences going on and it's such a deep, mysterious thing."

The two deadly fires and the deeply religious Tiny Tim are among the influences that have led Sharp to describe himself, hesitantly, as a Christian. "I am quite surprised that I do," he says. "It's not something you think when you're young."

Indeed, as a young man he created some of his best-known images, of Bob Dylan, Jimi



Perfectionist ... Martin Sharp touching up an untitled painting in 1990. Photo: Michelle Mossop

Hendrix and alluring flower children, was sued for obscenity and became the scourge of the establishment.

Now he has an Order of Australia and speaks of his admiration for the Queen – the same Queen he once caricatured with a smile-mask over her face. He's impressed by her dedication. "That's where the system is working well," he says.

But he is not easily pigeonholed as simply a hippie-era radical turned conservative. He cares deeply about indigenous issues, is lacerating about the Bush Administration and signed an open letter two years ago calling for truth in government and demanding that the Prime Minister and politicians stop being political clowns.

Sharp has always viewed the world through a different pair of goggles, Neville says. "He doesn't like being particularly trendy, so that always makes him a bit contrary. He's not a chardonnay-swilling, heart-on-the-sleeve leftie by any means. He's an outsider really, but with a Tory propensity."

Sharp walks me up the path and sees me into a cab. "I haven't got too long to go, I don't think," says the man who survived a triple bypass, a fatal fire, the '60s and, until recently, three packets of cigarettes a day. "I'd better get my work done. There's a responsibility to what one knows."

He waves as tiny Imelda wiggles in one arm. A solitary figure cradling an unruly, youthful spirit.

Notes from the River Caves: Peter Kingston and Martin Sharp is showing at the Art Gallery of NSW until November 19. *For Matthew and Others: Journeys with Schizophrenia* opens at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery on Friday. His solo show, *The Everlasting World of Martin Sharp*, opens at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery on November 16.