

# SPECTRUM



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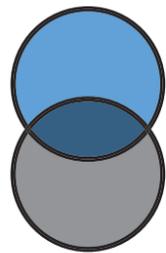
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*'Life's a total experiment.  
You never know what's  
going to happen and you've  
got to be able to move fast.'*

## Martin Sharp

ARTIST

By Joyce Morgan

*As I sit here at my table in my studio at WIRIAN surrounded by the pieces of my life, in this physical febleness, at the beginning of my seventieth year I wonder about the mystery of life... not for the first time, and probably not the last, but there will be a last time. It is not too far away. I am feeble in my body so I very much live in this room, a tube brings me oxygen. My friends bring me food. In these words I hold on to my life. I am not ready to leave, I have things I must do before I go, God willing! 5AM, Sunday 5th Feb, 2012*

The image of Jimi Hendrix, his guitar exploding with red-hot energy, is propped on an easel in Martin Sharp's cluttered dining room. Assessing it across the table, Sharp is revisiting his celebrated work, whose riot of colour and exuberance defined the 1960s. The artist wants to fix the mistake he made when he portrayed the left-handed guitarist as right-handed.

"I didn't know whether he was right-handed or left-handed," Sharp says.

It has bothered him for years that the image he traced from a photograph by Linda Eastman (later McCartney), and splattered with

paint like Jackson Pollock, has never been printed how he envisioned it. Like many of his early works, he created it on the floor of the Pheasantry, the mansion in London's hip Chelsea that he shared with a cast of artistic, bohemian figures, including Eric Clapton, and which provided the creative, collective milieu in which he has continued to live.

Rake-thin Sharp sits attached to an oxygen tube, which snakes its way to a container outside. After years of heavy smoking, he has emphysema. For a while, his friends wondered whether he would see his 70th birthday in January.

Nonetheless, his determination – reckless at times – remains strong. For despite the oxygen tube, in his long, elegant fingers he holds a cigarette. He began smoking again a couple of weeks ago when he began to feel stronger.

"I'm not going to explode," he says. On a cupboard behind him is an article about his late friend Margaret Olley, who when told she could have oxygen or cigarettes opted for the later. A lifelong tobacco habit and a defiant spirit are not all they share. For Sharp's house, Wirian, the Bellevue Hill mansion he inherited through his maternal grandparents, is every bit as remarkable as Olley's former hat factory.

Paintings several deep lean against walls, corridors are full of books, files, photos, CDs; there's a piano, a Buddha statue and one of Olley's straw hats. The walls in his "Starry Night" room – yellow swirls against his trademark blue – invoke Van Gogh's masterpiece.

The dark dining room, where Sharp spends most of his time, overflows with images of the themes and people who have compelled him, not least Sydney's Luna Park and singer Tiny Tim. The disparate layers feel like one of his vivid early collages, works that brought him to attention here and in Britain as a talented, and devastatingly handsome, young artist.

"All my art history is in this room," he says.

On the dining table is a new arrival, a framed photograph of a Virgin Mary statue with a wreath around her neck. It was taken just after Anzac Day outside St Vincent's Hospital, where Sharp has regular blood transfusions. He's titled it *Lest We Forget*.

"Tomorrow I'm going to give it to the nurses," he says. "It's how I like to see an image move."

Overlooking the apparent chaos is a faded Van Gogh print, which once hung in his father's medical surgery, of a solitary figure carrying an easel.

"It's always been with me," he says. "I thought it was a great image of the artist on the road of life."

Sharp, who has never married, worries what will become of his house. Wirian is heir to the spirit of the Pheasantry and the Yellow House, the Kings Cross house Sharp founded in the early 1970s that became a work of art in itself. It has long vanished as an artistic Mecca but he would like Wirian to remain as a haven for creative spirits.

"It has been concerning me enormously over many years," he says. "It seems it should stay here and just keep growing the way it is."

Garry Shead is among the artists who have lived at Wirian. He did so when he returned from Europe in the early 1980s. "That's when I saw this amazing place to live in," Shead says. "There were about eight or nine people living there, they were all characters."

You still never know what or who will emerge from Sharp's jack-in-a-box of a house. Sharp is often described as a recluse but he's rarely alone.

"He doesn't venture from his place much," Shead says. "Life comes to him. He has charisma that draws people to him."

During one morning recently, eye surgeon John Gregory-Roberts, a friend since childhood, arrives with



Scan Martin Sharp to see a gallery of his artworks.

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seafood for lunch. A prisoner telephones, to whom Sharp offers words of comfort. In the kitchen, I encounter Jason Holman, who as a Waverley College schoolboy survived the 1979 Luna Park ghost train fire in which his four school friends perished. Sharp has never stopped seeking justice for the survivors of the fire he insists was deliberately lit.

Holman opens a window so I can hurl empty oyster shells on a midden outside – no doubt the only active shell midden on ritzy Victoria Road. Also at Sharp's insistence, I put an empty Balmain bug shell in a freezer.

"I want to study it later," he says.

Sharp studies all manner of subjects others overlook, from the mundane to the mystical. Lately, he has been studying oxygen.

"It's not combustible," he says.

When I return a few days later, he insists on conducting an experiment. He holds the end of his oxygen tube and repeatedly flicks it with his cigarette lighter.

Combustible or not, a flame shoots from the end of the tube. And I fear the dining room is set to be consumed by energy more explosive than that from Hendrix's guitar. Sharp throws the tube to the wooden floor, jumps to his feet and stamps out the flames. He picks up the blackened plastic tube and concedes his alarming experiment has failed.

"Cancel that argument," he says. "Life's a total experiment. You never know what's going to happen and you've got to be able to move fast."

Experiments of a more creative kind have been central to his art. His graphic "Magic Theatre" edition of the underground magazine *Oz* broke the mould for magazine design, according to critic Robert Hughes. His cover for Cream's *Disraeli Gears*, with its wings from Durer, was an experiment in fluorescent paint.

His image of Bob Dylan, in which Sharp inverted a letter from the singer's best-known song, captured the mind-blowing hippie, trippy times. Sharp doubts he'll get around to reworking his Dylan image, although he'd like to fix the lettering so "Mr Tambourine Man" can't be misread as "Mr Urine Man".

"Martin is fastidious with the way he paints," Shead says. "To do one painting he'll take years. He'll go

over it. It's a magnificent obsession ... He's striving for perfection."

Shead, a friend since art school, likens Sharp to Toulouse-Lautrec, whose best-known works are his posters. Shead recently painted a new portrait of Sharp for the Archibald Prize. Indeed, both artists were hung in this year's prize, Sharp with his portrait of actor and friend David Gulpilil.

Despite his health, Sharp continues to conjure images and rework old ones. Art critic John McDonald has commented that it is not that Sharp lives in the past but, rather, that for him the past remains permanently alive.

With artist Peter Kingston, Sharp is developing a set of boxed prints based on portraits he produced as a Cranbrook schoolboy. The menacing portraits, including of a hitman, a wharfie and a toff, glower down from the dining-room walls. The boxes will be covered in extracts from Sharp's old school reports.

"He's more of a print artist, in many ways, and it's oil paintings that get big prices," Kingston says. "Martin has a beautiful line – he can pick up a pen and draw anything. I do regard him as a great artist, one of our finest."

Yet Sharp has had few exhibitions. He's never fitted the gallery mould – and the art world has never known where to fit him. Nor is he a natural talker; his hesitant sentences frequently end mid-stream. Yet he writes eloquently and lately he has been writing a lot. He hands me a notebook, in which he has penned recent reflections in his open cursive hand:

"I am not one of these so fashionable these days who think there is no God, as if the universe just fell out of the sky, or one found it in one's pocket ... Here we are, in the midst of the creation, endless mysterious, unknowable, magnificent, beautiful and terrible. How? Why? One can only be humble to the creator and hope to be useful whilst one can. I have always found friendship one of the greatest vehicles of usefulness."

The friends keep phoning and appearing at Wirian. Over several visits, Sharp appears more energetic each time. He has abandoned the oxygen, is pacing around the house, his snow-white hair topped with a jaunty tartan tam-o'-shanter. He pulls out books and articles, drawing attention to a novel by Hermann Hesse, a speech by Patrick White, a photo of Henry Lawson.

"I'm busy, I'm back to work again. I'm totally thrilled," he says. "I never would have thought art would lead me into all these endless realms of thought. But here we are."