



Imitating life ... students focus on model Tania Castaing; and (below) artist Wendy Sharpe, on floor, with the class. Photos: Edwina Pickles

PERFECTLY AT EASEL

LOUISE SCHWARTZKOFF MAKES A FEW SMUDGES IN A BID TO UNLEASH HER INNER ARTIST.

ARTISTS, as a rule, are a grubby lot. Their studios are cluttered, their fingernails a disgrace and their clothes invariably spattered with paint.

When I sign up for a figure-drawing class with artist Wendy Sharpe, I want to look the part. An old business shirt I used to wear in high school art class fits the bill. It is still flecked with dried paint and glue.

There is not much to be done about my clean, straight-from-the-office hands but if I shove them into my pockets I look as though I spend my days in the studio and my nights drinking cheap red wine and discussing post-colonial relativism.

The NG Art Gallery in Chippendale is crowded with 15 easels, ready for a mixed bag of pupils from beginners like me to professional artists.

I am pleased to see Sharpe's hands are black with charcoal. She is relaxed and friendly as she introduces herself and model Tania Castaing but it is impossible not to feel a little awed. This is an artist who has won the Archibald Prize, the Sulman Prize and, twice, the Portia Geach Memorial Prize. She paints all over the world and once worked in East Timor as a war artist. If she can't teach me, no one can.

For the next 2½ hours Tania will pose in various positions for the class to sketch. But first, a demonstration.

In pink, yellow and green pastel, Wendy creates a vaguely Tania-shaped figure. The trick, she tells us, is to focus on the whole, rather than individual body parts. "What we are not doing is starting with one bosom,

then attaching the rest," she says. "Get all the shapes blocked in, then you can start to build up and put in a bit of tone and shading. Gradually work around and around, slowly building it up."

It is convincing advice because in a few minutes the drawing has grown from a few indistinct blobs into an excellent likeness. "A weird, rather clown-like Tania" Wendy calls it but to me it looks pretty damn good.

One more lesson before we hit the easels: how to measure proportions. Holding a pencil vertically at arm's length, Wendy measures Tania's height (two-and-a-bit pencils), then turns it to take her width (about a third of a pencil).

"We are trying to look at everything in relation to everything else," she says. "How wide is Tania compared to how high? How big is this compared to that?"



It makes sense in theory but I am not quite clear on the pencil thing. When Tania strips down to a long green skirt, black bra and glittering green mask with feathers, I take her dimensions with a stick of charcoal. Nevertheless, after five minutes of drawing, my pastel sketch has turned Tania's curvy body into an elongated skeleton, as angular as an Indonesian shadow puppet.

There is no time for mortification because Tania has changed into a yellow skirt and Arabian-style headdress with a pink veil.

Somehow, her tranquillity eases my nerves. If she can strip in a crowded room, surely I can cope with the exposure of my artistic shortcomings?

This time, I forget about measuring and estimate the proportions. The skirt flows over the knees in a wonky yellow triangle and the veil is a long swathe of pink. There is

nothing resembling a skin colour in my box of pastels, so I make do with orange and hope for the best. Wendy wants us to avoid line, building detail with blocks of colour and shading. It's tricky.

I cheat and use line to show the toes, legs and folds of material. It doesn't look much like Tania but at least it looks human.

"Good," Wendy says over my shoulder. "Just make that leg a little thicker – there. Yes, very nice."

Several sketches later, it is time for the evening's final task: a half-hour drawing of a seated Tania in red and black trousers.

Things are not going well at my easel. Tania's buttocks have inflated alarmingly. Thickening the thighs makes it worse. Her derriere looks like a beach ball perched on a plinth. Sorry, Tania. When Wendy asks us to lay our work on the floor, I am not the only one avoiding her eyes.

Once I overcome my embarrassment, though, it's fascinating to see so many different versions of the same sight. There is a beautiful soft Tania, a hazy Tania, a very realistic Tania and a stylised Tania. And a fat Tania, of course. Sorry again.

Wendy has something nice to say about them all. I'm chuffed to hear mine called "a nice, strong drawing".

The evening ends with a meal and a glass of wine at the gallery's restaurant.

As I wash my hands to eat, the water turns a satisfying shade of brown. My shirt is dirtier than ever and there is a smudge of charcoal on my forehead.

Perhaps I am an artist after all.

you try it

There are four classes left in the workshop series at NG Art Gallery, 3 Little Queen Street, Chippendale. They are with artists Ann Cape (Wednesday, 6pm), Kerrie Lester (May 20, 6pm), Johnny Romeo (May 23, 12.30pm) and Rachel Fairfax (May 27, 6pm). Evening workshops and dinner, \$75; afternoon workshop and lunch, \$35. Book on 9318 2992. See ngart.com.au.