LUNA PARK

'JUST FOR FUN'
At the foot of Bellevue Hills is 'Wirian', a Georgian mansion with an imposing facade—heavy double doors protected by a portico, red-pebbled drive and shuttered windows. This rambling old building has become a repository for the trappings of innocence.

Once inside, Martin Sharp's world starts to unfold, like a pop-up picture book inspired by Disney. Rooms overflow with porcelain dolls, vintage toys and fairground treasures. Mickey Mouse, Popeye and Goofy peer out of bookshelves and glass cases. And as the light fades, Tinkerbell blows a little angel-dust into the lives of these inanimate figures.

The drawing room, crammed with art, books, junk, used coffee cups, ashtrays, letters, tapes and dogs is a living history of its owner. Walls are plastered with paraphernalia and photographs, all relating in some way to Van Gogh, Tiny Tim or Luna Park.

Friends scurry in and out, dogs bark and the phone rings... constantly.

It's late afternoon and Mr. Sharp—carnival artist, poster-maker extraordinaire, member of the infamous OZ trinity with Richard Neville and Richard Walsh, collagist, film-maker and Friend of Luna Park—has risen. With tea-stained trousers falling halfway down his bum, a wild-eyed look, bemused expression and cigarette dangling precariously between his fingers, Sharp gravitates towards his favourite chair and sits with his knees tucked up under his chin.

Martin Sharp first came to prominence in the sixties for his artwork in OZ, a monthly magazine of satire and opinion which maligned the sacred cows of the day.

"In Australia...", wrote editor Richard Neville in his book Playpower, ‘... [OZ] was responding satirically to the daily diet of pomposity, intolerance and suicidal idiocy, employing, like most satirists, a frame of reference obvious and applying to all.'

A London OZ was launched in 1967 and ultimately outlived its colonial predecessor.

Sharp was in London when London was sexy, a time when the Beatles made Sergeant Pepper take a good look at himself and Germaine Greer 'cried a lot' writing The Female Eunuch beneath the OZ office. Eric Clapton was upstairs rehearsing with Cream and OZ groupies floated through the office with translucent stares. Sharp's satirical OZ cartoons, tame by today's standards, nearly landed him and Neville in jail.

Everybody was talking about the OZ obscenity trials and what they meant, except for Sharp. He sent his solicitor to the Old Bailey to represent him, was acquitted and subsequently became a guru to the avant-garde—a role which, to this day, makes him cringe.

As with OZ, Sharp had been the resident cartoonist for the Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald and was regarded at the time as 'the most original and potent graphic artist to emerge for over a decade' (In the Making, Thomas Nelson Ltd., 1969). Sharp's prolific output of pop, op and psychedelicism-styled graphics resulted in Big O Posters (Dylan's Blowin' in the Mind, Hendrix's Explosion, Sunshine Superman et al) and record covers for Cream (Disraeli Gears and Wheels of Fire). Along the way to turning London on its head, he experimented continually with collage, pop statues and painting on perspex. He illustrated many books and put out his own book of cartoons.
Then in 1968, Sharp saw Tiny Tim—the Maharishi of Tin Pan Alley and self-styled Eternal Troubadour of Pop—perform at the Royal Albert Hall, an event which was to alter his own destiny. But why? Why would an old-boy of Cranbrook (an upmarket Sydney grammar school) be so fascinated by Tiny Tim of the viny hair?

'I understand him on an artistic level, which is why the connection is so strong. When I first saw him I was doing art book collages... putting Gauguin in a Van Gogh landscape. Tiny was doing exactly as I was, but with songs, and he did it with mastery.

'People understand him for his energy and strangeness but artistically I don’t think they do. He’s ahead of his time and is as great an artist as...’ (he hesitates before delivering his final verdict, then begins to enthuse) ‘... as Van Gogh—who I adore.’

Along the way to convincing the world of Tiny Tim’s true genius Sharp and a fraternity of Sydney artists, including Brett Whiteley, Bruce Goold and Peter Kingston, lived, worked and exhibited from adjoining terraces in Kings Cross. Known as the Yellow House and inspired by Van Gogh, it flourished for two years in the early seventies with an assortment of arts, functions and creative thought. There has been nothing like it since.

Today Martin sits quietly contemplating the future of Luna Park—historically one of Australia’s great landmarks—like a mother over the fate of a lost child.

Luna Park lies at the foot of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, rundown and forlorn. Its famous smiling face which welcomed children for over forty years, has long ago disappeared from its home under the pylons. Sadly for some, the image of the park remains tarnished forever, yet as a piece of history and grim reminder of the past, it has a place in the Australian psyche.

In 1973, Sharp and a swag of artists were commissioned to repaint the face and the Big Dipper of Luna Park in order to breathe new life into the old girl.

'We did quite a few different colour schemes for the old Coney Island and dodgem building, as well as developing ideas for a children’s museum.

'It became very much a Yellow House approach. I was and always have been, as an artist, interested in its artwork and cultural value. I fell in love with the place.

'It started to take off again and did really well. Over time a lot of people showed interest in Luna Park for its real estate value. There was a struggle for the land by different parties. I saw it escalating and then there was the fire.'

In 43 years of faultless operation, Luna Park had never had a serious accident, then in the space of two months, two separate incidents occurred which were to leave an indelible mark on this piece of harbour foreshore for over a generation.

In April 1979, a car jammed on the Big Dipper and was hit by the car behind, injuring 14 people. Seven weeks later the ghost train fire burnt the heart out of the fun park. Seven people died, six of them children. The children’s mother, Jenny Godson, was the only member of the family to survive.

'When I examined the events surrounding the fire, I realised that a perfect crime had been committed. It made me question just how healthy is our society when it lets a crime like this slip by.’ To this day, Sharp, the founder of the Friends of Luna Park and widely regarded as an expert on the subject, insists that the Luna Park fire was a blatant act of terrorism.

'Luna Park was on a weekly tenancy and developers were waiting in the wings. The fire was a result of that conflict. The whole system failed. It was so corrupted it couldn’t act... Only those in the immediate vicinity know what really happened.'

Judging by the press clippings on the park, the details of company ownership and corporate affairs inquiries he has collected over the years, it is clear Sharp has taken an obsessive interest in the subject.

After two hours talking to Martin Sharp, the bottom had fallen out of my world and I was lost in his vision. His eyes have the disconcerting habit of
staring off into space or focusing on the minutest detail. Our conversation meanders through Coney Island, down the Big Dipper 'where most of us took our first launch into personal courage', and winds up smack bang in the metaphysical representation of God, the universe and everything via the fire.

Sharp’s perception of events tends to have a polarising effect on people, so he is careful with his words. 'While people will believe in the presence of evil watching a movie, they won't believe it in real life, when it comes to the crunch.

'If anyone did set the ghost train alight and had any real understanding of the spirit world, they would have realised they were defeated on the night of the fire. Evil had peaked to a certain height of success and one could detect quite a bit of gloating going on. Then at the point where it seemed evil had become triumphant, the thumb came down.'

While some might think that a few too many brain cells have been lost to those heady days of psychedelia, Sharp’s intellectual observations on the spiritual effects of the fire cannot be overlooked.

It is 13 years since the fire and the City of Sydney has handed the park over to the people for public recreation. A boardwalk will be built right around Lavender Bay which will stretch to the steps of the ferry wharf. There will be an area leased to games and rides operators and the rest of the park will be open 24 hours a day, with the promenade littered with cafes and restaurants.

'There might be a children’s museum built with a history of the park and hopefully a memorial to sober the place up a bit. That'll take it back to square one.'

After three, four hours, who knows? What's time anyway. In Sharp’s world, time has little significance. It's time for another cuppa. I could have sworn the order of the universe had changed since my arrival. Little iodine nussled up against my leg, or was it one of the dogs? Popeye gave me a wink and a painting of Mr. Godson (of the family who died in the fire) stares at me vacantly from the mantlepiece. That's reality.

And what of Tiny Tim?

In 1976, Sharp combined his twin obsessions when he brought Tiny Tim to Australia to stage a record-breaking singing marathon at Luna Park. He filmed the event and today Street of Dreams remains in a rough-edit stage. Street of Dreams travels the history and scandal of Luna Park. Through the life and songs of Tiny Tim, Martin Sharp’s eyes search for the truth... and an end to the film, which may not be too far away now that Luna Park’s story has come full circle.

Over the past thirty years or so, Sharp’s erudite eye on Australia has reflected our culture with a wry humour uniquely his own. He, like Richard Neville, grew up through the ambivalent period that was the pop culture of the sixties. Now he finds himself where he’s meant to be—putting finishing touches to a work-in-relief on Tiny Tim.

'I think we're all here for a purpose and it's usually what we're best at. Many people don't discover their gifts and abilities. Van Gogh discovered his late in life, when he was 28 years of age. His training as a preacher beforehand meant that his work would be based on fantastic truths. It was his destiny.

'When I'm painting well, I feel most at peace, I just try to put things together that make sense. At other times I'll be looking for the mood to be creative and it might take months to get the flow. Sometimes it doesn’t matter what I do, I have to accept that the tide has receded and just clean up the house so I can build the platform for the next stage.

'Hopefully it'll come back again and it usually does. However, for Brett [Whiteley] the tide went out and didn't come back again. These things happen and remind us that life is incredibly fragile. Life is so convincing, as though it will go on forever, but one day it'll just stop. We're addicted to this lifestyle of lights, television and motorcars in a system that is creating its own destruction. Our world is so beautifully art-directed, yet when we think about its destruction, we send off faxes made of the very materials we're trying to save.

'We'll always live on the edge.'

Mark Cushway
Photography by Brad Sutcliffe