



Model Liberte La Femme poses at Parliament on King. Picture: Richard Dobson

Arts

Naked models spice up a Sydney night out

Elizabeth Fortescue, Visual arts writer, The Daily Telegraph
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It's a rainy Tuesday night in Sydney. In a dimly-lit bar in Pitt Street, patrons have sunk into the recesses of huge Chesterfield lounges. Others perch at tiny bar tables.

With a drink in one hand and a stick of charcoal in the other, they are glancing rapidly between their sketchbooks and two young men in feathered headdresses, stiletto heels and not a great deal else.

Drew Pallott, MC/ringmaster in this establishment for 11 years, keeps the crowd happy as Edith Piaf's love songs float out of the sound system.

Some patrons are eating food they've ordered at the bar. Some are chatting as they draw. One young bloke is tapping out a story on his laptop, seemingly fired by the creative energy around him.

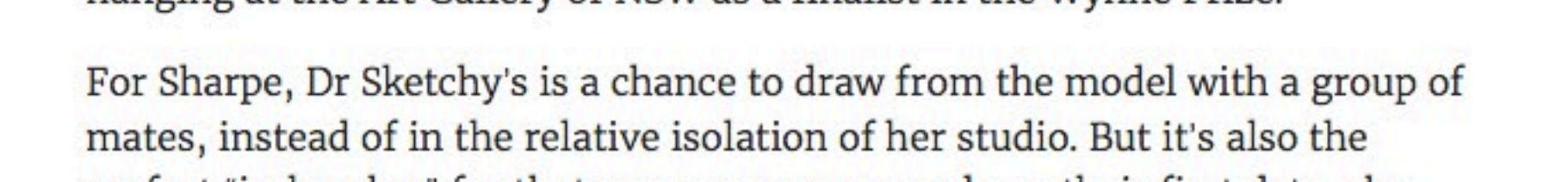
It's a typical night at Dr Sketchy's Sydney, at the ArtHouse Hotel, says producer Alisa Angell.

Dozens of people from all over town are here, part of a trend to bring life drawing out of the studio and into the mainstream where anyone can enjoy it no matter what their level of skill.

Bent blissfully over their sketchpads are mothers who have fled their sleeping household for some "me time".

Young office workers flirt and gossip while they do probably their first drawing since primary school.

Art students sit and draw in quiet concentration. No matter who they are, everyone seems to revel in the bohemian atmosphere.



Wendy Sharpe paints Andrew Batt-Rawden at the Yellow House in Potts Point. Picture: Richard Dobson

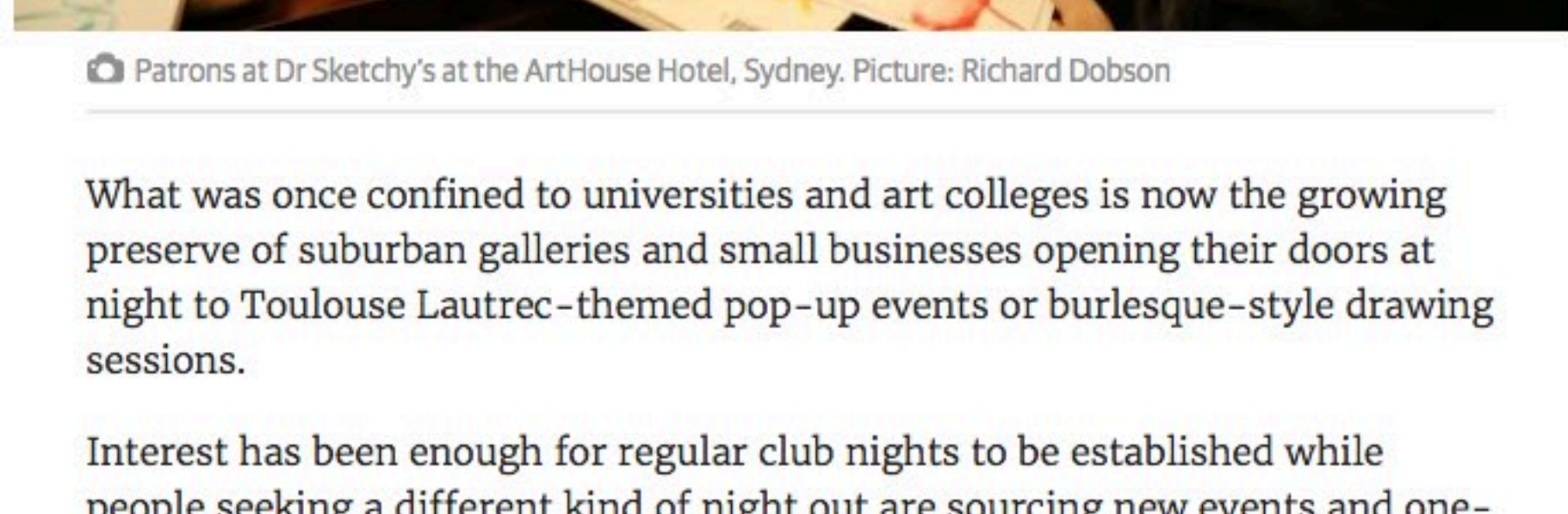
Amid the eclectic hubub you will often spot a famous artist. Archibald Prize winner and official Australian war artist Wendy Sharpe and her artist partner Bernard Ollis are regulars. So is Robert Malherbe, one of whose paintings is hanging at the Art Gallery of NSW as a finalist in the Wynne Prize.

For Sharpe, Dr Sketchy's is a chance to draw from the model with a group of mates, instead of in the relative isolation of her studio. But it's also the perfect "icebreaker" for that nervous young couple on their first date, she said.

"You don't feel you're just in the audience of a cinema," Sharpe said.

"You go into a totally different world. You really feel part of it. There's something really great about that."

The scene is just one among many being played out across Sydney, with life drawing evenings (often mixing cocktails and dinner) attracting a growing number of customers to cafes and clubs each week.



Patrons at Dr Sketchy's at the ArtHouse Hotel, Sydney. Picture: Richard Dobson

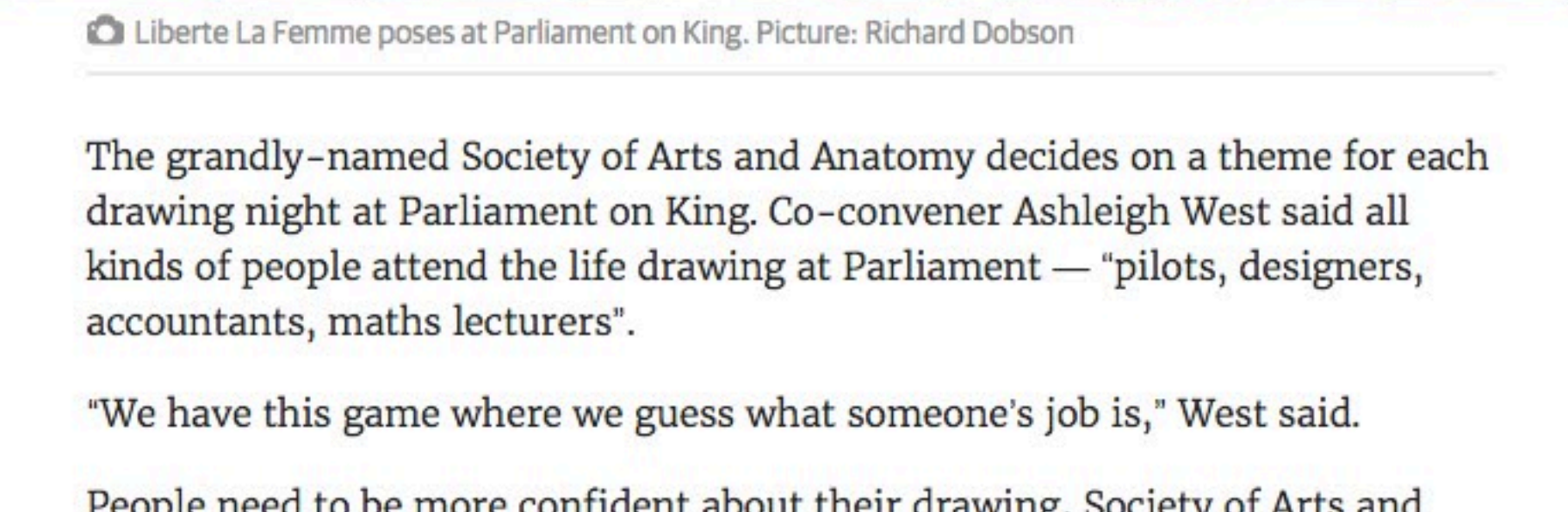
What was once confined to universities and art colleges is now the growing preserve of suburban galleries and small businesses opening their doors at night to Toulouse Lautrec-themed pop-up events or burlesque-style drawing sessions.

Interest has been enough for regular club nights to be established while people seeking a different kind of night out are sourcing new events and one-offs online through Facebook groups such as Sydney Life Drawing where groups like The Society for Art and Anatomy and the Gypsy Art Club vie for attention.

At Parliament on King, a tiny cafe/bookshop/drawing studio at the hip end of King Street, Erskineville, Thursdays are life drawings nights.

Proprietor Ravi Prasad first offered life drawing at Parliament about two years ago.

"It was basically a private thing. Then a society formed around it," Prasad said.



Liberte La Femme poses at Parliament on King. Picture: Richard Dobson

The grandly-named Society of Arts and Anatomy decides on a theme for each drawing night at Parliament on King. Co-convenor Ashleigh West said all kinds of people attend the life drawing at Parliament — "pilots, designers, accountants, maths lecturers".

"We have this game where we guess what someone's job is," West said.

People need to be more confident about their drawing, Society of Arts and Anatomy co-convenor Nena Salobir said.

"People are so down on their capabilities, and yet people who say they can't draw do something so unique," she said.

The difference between Dr Sketchy's and Parliament is that Parliament's models are nude.

On a recent Thursday night, model Liberte La Femme was fulfilling a lifelong desire to pose on a red and white checked tablecloth with a vintage Vespa and a picnic basket.

A dozen sketchers — an almost capacity crowd at this small venue — cradled sketchbooks and sipped wine while La Femme posed and Italian crooners came evocatively over the sound system.

Half way through the evening, Prasad offered bowls of soup while La Femme, in a robe, chatted to the circle of patrons before once again taking up a pose.

Anastazia Bobis, a recent graduate of the National Art School, was at Parliament for the first time.

"There's lots of life drawing classes but this is more personal and homely," Bobis said.

Enrico Scotece, a lecturer in design and photo media at the University of Western Sydney, is there every week.

He believes people are "looking for something different" in a night out.

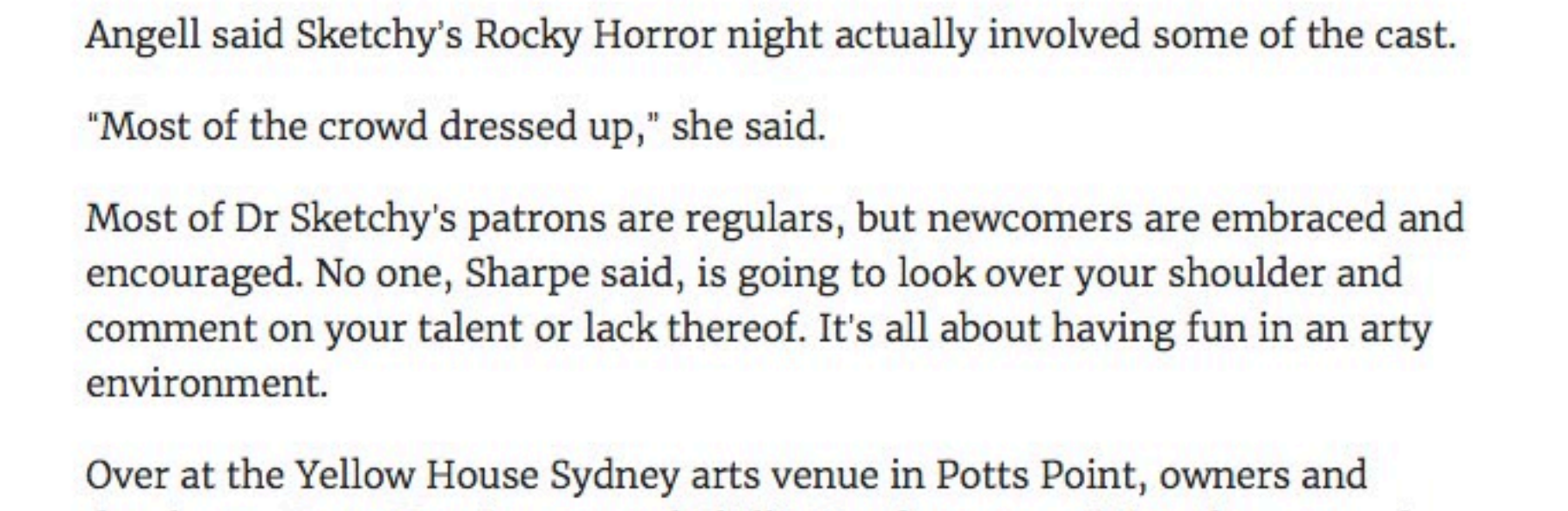
"It beats watching TV," Scotece said.

Among the Parliament regulars is prominent sculptor Alan Somerville whose two bronze Diggers face each other across the western end of the Anzac Bridge at Blackwattle Bay.

Parliament on King is "an amazing place", Somerville said.

"It's always a bit wacky, but it's fun. It's a beautiful atmosphere," he said.

Somerville is a self-taught artist, but Sharpe is the inheritor of centuries of life drawing tradition as taught at many art schools. She's well-known for her feisty, romping paintings of the human form.



Life drawing sketches. Photo: Bob Barker

For Sharpe, the non-judgmental atmosphere of Dr Sketchy's means everyone feels free to give life drawing a go.

"It stops it from feeling like it's some weird, elitist thing," she says.

And if anyone's not ready for the full-monty life drawing experience, Dr Sketchy's models wear costume — even if it's scanty.

"It's much more fun. It's not set up to do a foreshortened sketch of someone's toe," Sharpe said.

"When I was a student I was always interested in having models in costumes."

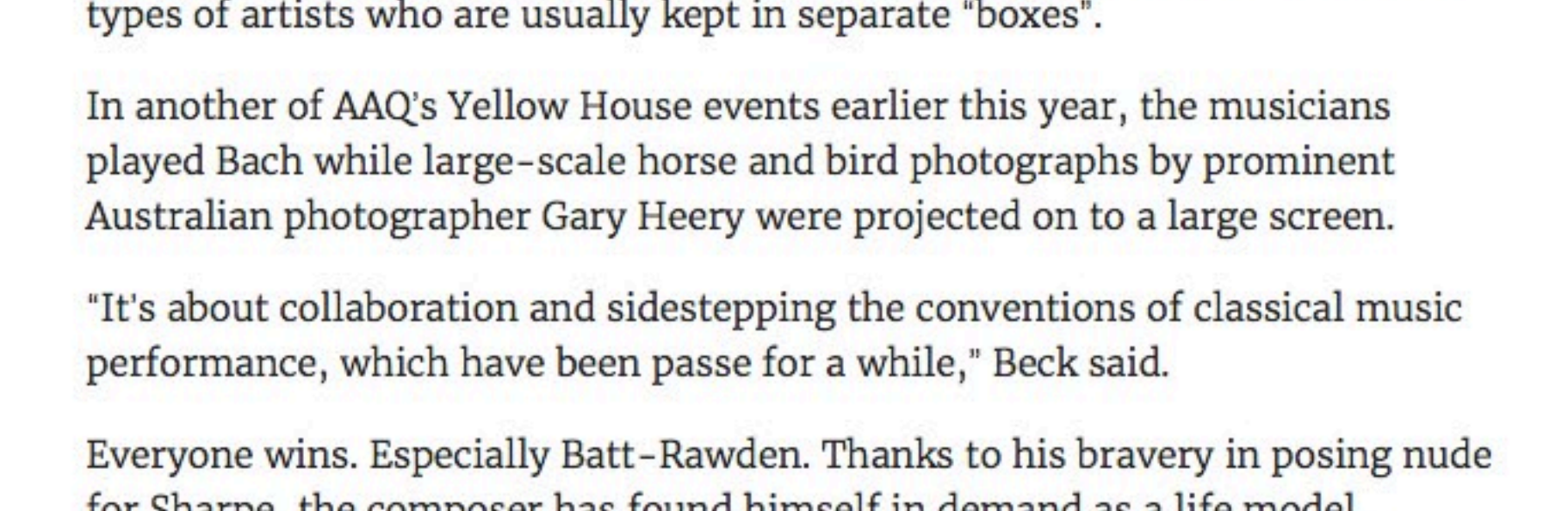
Every session at Dr Sketchy's is carefully themed. There's been a Game of Thrones night, a My Little Pony night and a fairytale night, among many other memorable nights. According to Pallott, models have included everyone from sword-swallowers to dancers.

Angell said Sketchy's Rocky Horror night actually involved some of the cast.

"Most of the crowd dressed up," she said.

Most of Dr Sketchy's patrons are regulars, but newcomers are embraced and encouraged. No one, Sharpe said, is going to look over your shoulder and comment on your talent or lack thereof. It's all about having fun in an arty environment.

Over at the Yellow House Sydney arts venue in Potts Point, owners and developers Janet Pennington and Phillip Bartlett are reviving the atmosphere of the salons that rich, competitive Parisian women ran in their homes during the Belle Epoque. As part of this endeavour, the Australian Art Quartet this year began a three-year artist-in-residency at the Yellow House, specialising in collaborations with other artists that invite a more intimate participation by the audience.



Performance artist Clementine Robertson, musician James Beck and artist Wendy Sharpe at Butt Naked Salon, the Yellow House. Picture: John Appleyard

Butt Naked, for example, was a recent performance by the AAQ with performance artist Clementine Robertson, composer Andrew Batt-Rawden and Wendy Sharpe.

"A broad spectrum of people are looking for a way to connect and engage with the arts, people who might not be attracted to going to a big venue," Pennington said.

"People love the intimacy of this type of experience, to be close to the artists, feel their emotions, and the vibrations of the music. They love the ability to discuss the experience with others in a smaller group."

While the audience was invited to sketch during the Butt Naked performance, few actually did. There was just too much else to experience. The AAQ under artistic director and cellist James Beck played various classical scores and a contemporary piece by Batt-Rawden called 27. As for Batt-Rawden, he posed nude while Wendy Sharpe painted him directly on to the specially-prepared interior walls of the Yellow House. Clementine Robertson lay on a plinth at the opposite end of the room in a white gown which a continuous drip of beetroot juice gradually turned blood-red.

It was a tour de force of top-quality artists working in harmony to create a special evening and, according to Sharpe, a rare coming together of different types of artists who are usually kept in separate "boxes".

In another of AAQ's Yellow House events earlier this year, the musicians played Bach while large-scale horse and bird photographs by prominent Australian photographer Gary Heery were projected on to a large screen.

"It's about collaboration and sidestepping the conventions of classical music performance, which have been passe for a while," Beck said.

Everyone wins. Especially Batt-Rawden. Thanks to his bravery in posing nude for Sharpe, the composer has found himself in demand as a life model.

"I've got five bookings in the next two weeks," he laughed.