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NEW SOUTH WALES

# Media Release

## Precious personal sketchbooks of artist Michael Kelly find new home at NSW State Library

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The most precious possessions of talented Sydney artist Michael Kelly – 65 personal sketchbooks – have just been donated to the State Library of NSW and a selection will go on public display for the first time, from 16 March.

As a 68-year-old living in public housing, Michael was concerned his treasured artist's books, which document his extraordinary life and art, could end up in a dumpster, so he offered them to the State Library.

According to State Librarian Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon: "Michael's sketchbooks are incredibly special! They give a rare and intimate insight into the life of a prolific living artist over a 30-year period."

"I am thrilled his first 65 sketchbooks (up to 2016) are now part of the Library's collection, and that visitors can see and appreciate Michael's beautiful work this month in our Amaze Gallery," says Caroline.

Michael Kelly first started keeping sketchbooks in 1985 when he was in his second year of art school at East Sydney Tech (now the National Art School), and they are still a vital part of his practice. He says: "If all my paintings and everything else went up in flames, I'd save my sketchbooks."

His sketchbooks document his everyday life, and include sketches of people and places, written anecdotes of dreams, travels and life experiences, artists' quotes and ideas for paintings.

"My sketchbook was like my studio when I didn't have a studio. I'd always be thinking of things to paint, things I could make pictures out of," he says.

Specialist librarian Mathilde de Hauteclocque, who has worked closely with Michael, says: "What makes the sketchbooks extra special is the accompanying intimate writings where he records his life experiences, dreams and vulnerabilities alongside his art practice."

His books also comprise sketches of displaced and transient people living rough and queuing at shelters, train stations or food vans. Some show a world seen through the front window of a taxi he was driving for income at the time.

"These people and places are rarely depicted with tenderness in fine art and offer a significant artistic record of marginalised communities throughout the 1990s and 2000s," says Mathilde.

Michael has held 14 solo exhibitions and exhibited in numerous group shows in Australia and overseas.

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The Library has also acquired two of Michael's paintings, one of which will be on display in the Library's Amaze Gallery along with a selection of his sketchbooks, from 16 March to 15 September 2024. Other items on display include: original artwork for the children's book *Horrible Harriet and the Terrible Tantrum* by Leigh Hobbs, beautiful bookplates (1930–50) designed and printed by Ella Dwyer, and a rare miniature portrait of Sophia Wiseman by Charles Rodius.

Read more about Michael Kelly and his sketchbooks – as told from the perspectives of specialist librarian Mathilde de Hauteclercque, a life-changing friend and the artist himself – in the autumn issue of the Library's magazine, *Openbook*.

**For more information, interviews and publicity images, please contact:**  
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