

Portrait of the artist, and his portrait of Sydney life

Julie Power

Sydney painter Michael Kelly feared the record of his life as an artist – dozens of sketchbooks – would end up in a skip bin, or destroyed by mould or silverfish.

Now 68, Kelly has exhibited 14 times, and his works are held in public and private collections here and overseas.

To support himself, he's sold paintings, driven cabs and taught drawing. But much of his life has been lived in what he calls a "state of flux". That's his term for living in insecure housing with equally irregular income interrupted by illness.

Before moving to a housing commission flat in Woolloomooloo a decade ago, he had squatted in an abandoned ward at Callan Park, and after getting seriously ill, his car.

Kelly has seen for himself what happened when neighbours were out of luck and money.

"Everything gets thrown out in the dumpster," he said.

To protect the sketchbooks, Kelly had put them in storage, under beds, in friend's garages, and the hallway of his flat. "If all my paintings and everything else went up in flames, I'd save my sketchbooks."

Now his first 65 sketchbooks are safe and living the high life on Macquarie Street. They are having the "full day-spa treatment" in their final home, said the State Library of NSW's specialist librarian Mathilde de Hauteclocque.

Fluffed up on pillows by gloved staff, the sketchbooks have been readied to go on show in the Library's Amaze gallery from next Saturday.

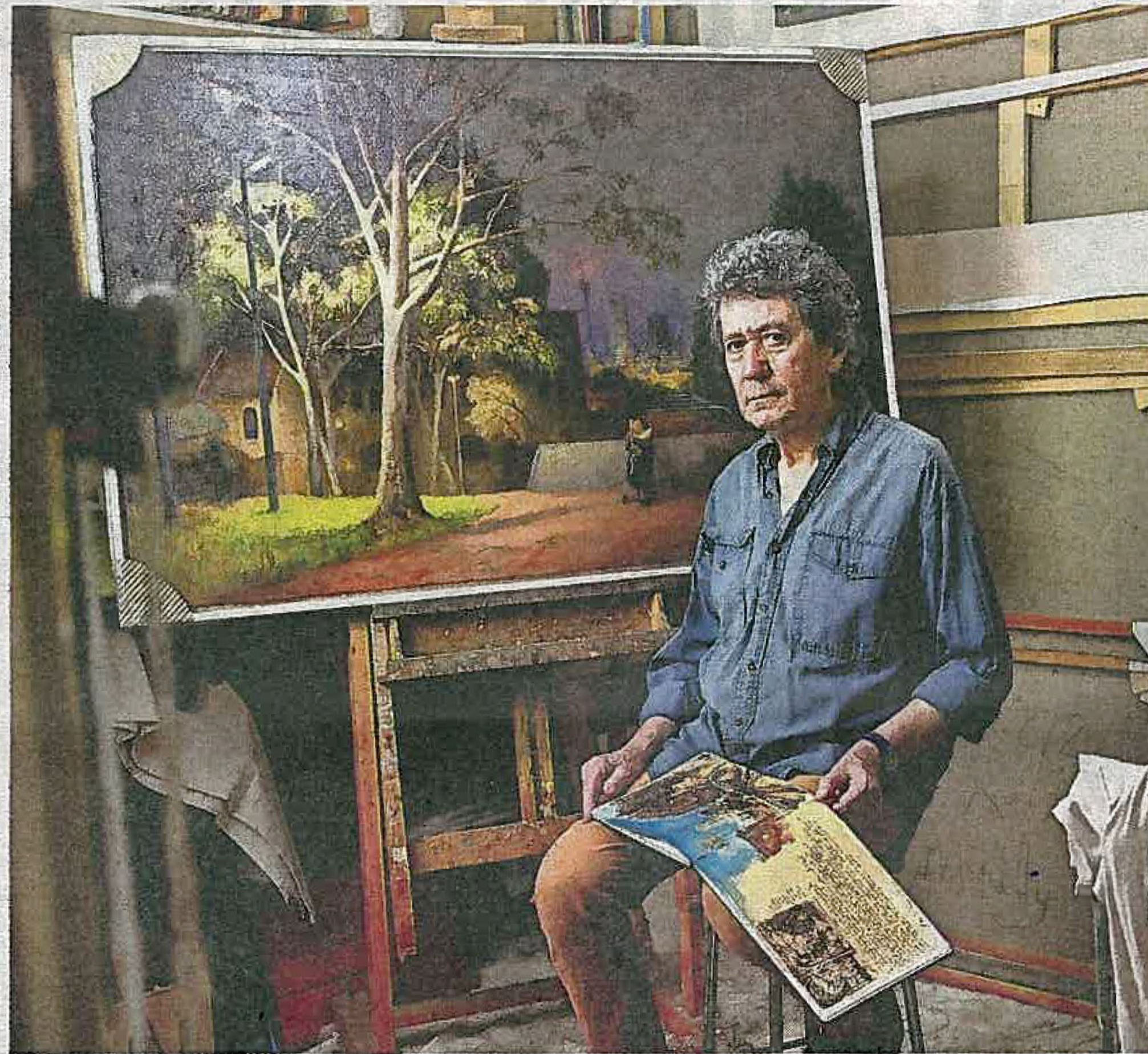
Kelly said he had been "high" with relief since the library acquired two paintings, and took his sketchbooks, which he donated.

It was like they were adult children, safely launched into the world, he said.

When de Hauteclocque first visited Kelly's flat last year, she leafed through the sketchbooks with her "acquisition librarian hat on".

What she found exceeded her expectations: "You only needed to open these to see Sydney in all its guises and colour."

Kelly's sketchbooks, each the same size and numbered, were rare, she said.



They documented an artist's career in an unbroken continuum. They also contained what she said was a remarkable historical record of the people and places he'd visited.

When Kelly returned to Sydney in the early 2000s because his adult son was ill, he found it hard to get re-established.

"Gallery owners would die, studios would close, and I began a life of flux," he said. "As my life went up, went down, I sold a picture, or I didn't."

Whether he had secure housing or not, flush or broke, he kept drawing and studying.

Michael Kelly at home; journal pages featuring Port Campbell, Victoria, and Sydney (below).
Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

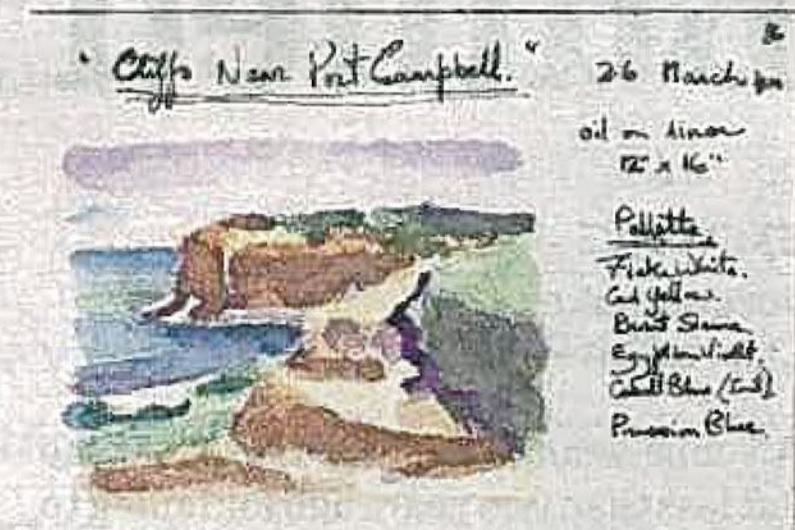
Overseas or on the streets of Sydney, on the bus or sitting at the local drop-in centre, he drew what he saw.

"When I didn't have a proper studio, I could always draw the life around me because I paint what is around me, what is accessible."

Describing himself as a serious

painter who is equally serious about art history, his sketches range from studies of the great masters such as Rembrandt in galleries overseas to gritty streetscapes.

They include the homeless queuing for food on the streets near where he lives, drawings of an unusual dog called Tascha, which drank



tea out of a cup for breakfast each morning, and his mum and her cat in regional NSW.

"It's not all just food vans and drop-in centres," he said. Many sketches include regional NSW and Victoria, and date back to the six years when he drove taxis and the 15 years when he taught drawing at TAFEs in Victoria.

The books include drawings in pen and ink, notes, quotes, lists, ideas and the names and samples of watercolours, including Van Dyke brown, Flake white and Egyptian violet.

They include studies and sketches for future paintings, such as a landscape of William Street with the Horizon apartments designed by the architect Harry Seidler in the background.

Many faces age on the page over the years, as Kelly returns to sketch them. "They're all friends or acquaintances," he said.

Living in a state of flux and drawing those around him had not always been a hardship, he said. If anything, it provided more interesting faces to draw than the models used at life-drawing classes.

Kelly said he had started drawing and looking as a boy, and has never stopped.

When he didn't have access to a studio, the sketchbooks filled the gap.

When Kelly spoke to the library about the books, he realised their true importance. "They used to be a place to put ideas for future work, then they became the work itself," he writes in the library's *Open Book* magazine.

His advocate and gallerist Frances Keevil said Kelly had stuck to his style and his calling as an "unapologetic landscape and urban artist and a historian". He could have made his art more commercial, but he had stuck to his beliefs.

