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State Library's love letter to late Sydney artist Peter Kingston

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The State Library of NSW is staging a heartfelt tribute to iconic Sydney artist, Peter Kingston (1943–2022) with 70 of his original artworks — collected by the Library over 40 years — set to go on public display for the first time from Saturday 8 June 2024.

Peter Kingston the exhibition provides an intimate glimpse into the creative life of the prolific artist best known for his vibrant and joyful depictions of Sydney, its harbour, Luna Park and the Opera House.

According to State Librarian Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon: “We’re fortunate to hold Australia’s best collection of Peter Kingston’s extraordinary artist’s books. It’s moving to know he was preparing a selection for the Library before his untimely passing, and we’re pleased to share these in this must-see exhibition.”

Peter’s interest in artists’ books can be traced back to his childhood love of comic strips and May Gibbs books. He believed a book had to have text and image, and loved collaborating with friends, fellow artists (including his sister Fairlie Kingston and Martin Sharp) printers, binders and box makers.

His richly illustrated ‘Shark Net Seahorses of Balmoral’ (2012) is one of 10 artists’ books on display. It includes stories by poet Robert Adamson who recalled childhood swims at Balmoral Beach and the seahorses watching blue gropers through the nets.

Co-curators Elise Edmonds and Mathilde de Hauteclocque sought to provide a more personal look at the artist whose work “brought so much colour, wry humour and nostalgia to the everyday aspects of our city.”

Visitors can hear Peter’s “spirited voice” through oral history excerpts recorded in 2018 where he talks about his love of the Opera House, battle with agoraphobia and his beloved home studio of 50 years in Lavender Bay.

Image: Poolin 84 (detail), by Peter Kingston

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“Visitors will see the shades of light and humour in his work but also the underlying melancholy,” says Elise. “Peter loved the world of things made with care — like wooden ferries of his childhood — and regretted progress that put such built or natural environments at risk.”

Other exhibition highlights include:

- A pristine set of hand-coloured etchings of iconic Sydney scenes from 1980s;
- ‘A-Z Alphabet book of phobias’ (c 1989) which helped to cure his agoraphobia;
- The visitor’s book from Lavender Bay (1975–79) filled with recipes, notes from friends and visitors and sketches of his famous friends like Brett Whiteley;
- ‘Foxie Tails’ artist book (1989) in collaboration with Martin Sharp, featuring drawings and etching of Peter’s dog Sweetie; and
- Sketchbooks from hospital where Peter was being treated for cancer from 2019 — “he drew everyone who drew blood from him,” says Mathilde.

No more artworks will be created at Peter’s ramshackle house once crowded with tools, toys, cinema equipment, brushes, artworks and memorabilia. However, it lives on in the Library’s archive, thanks to his sister Fairlie’s permission to document it for historic and artistic significance. A selection of these photos will be displayed for the first time.

Peter Kingston is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW from 8 June 2024 until 18 May 2025. Opening hours: until 8 pm Monday to Thursday, and 5 pm Friday to Sunday.

sl.nsw.gov.au

Interviews with curator Elise Edmonds available on request.

MEDIA INQUIRIES:

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Image: *Poolin 84* (detail), by Peter Kingston

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