

# JODY GRAHAM

## RE-IMAGINING THE PAST

Jody Graham is a Sydney-based artist whose work encompasses drawing, mixed media, sculpture and installation. Fascinated by the energy, visual chaos and dark soul of the city, particularly its construction sites, industrial foreshore and older buildings, Graham is known for her bold, expressive urban landscapes, exploring themes of impermanence, loss and erasure, “documenting what’s happening before our eyes”.

Jody Graham was born in 1968 and grew up in Baulkham Hills on the suburban fringe of Sydney. Her preoccupation with building sites, heavy machinery and skylines of cranes derives from her father. Peter Graham managed a family engineering firm and had a gift for designing machines. A high achieving athlete, she was invited to study at the Canberra Institute of Sport. But ‘I came to a crossroad’, she says, ‘My heart was with making art.’ Graham graduated with distinctions from Billy Blue in 1991, but gave up her graphic arts career in advertising when she became a full-time mother. She still runs every day and is a highly physical artist with an energetic approach to drawing, whether it be the demands of plein air sketching or her fast-paced, vigorous style of attack in the studio, often to a soundtrack of loud rock music.

In 1995 Graham moved to the Blue Mountains, painting mostly landscapes and studying with Vicky Hersey, Kerry Johns and John Philippides. In 2003, she was invited to submit to the Kedumba Drawing Award. Her figurative work Interior 1 Polarize (charcoal and pastel on paper) was selected by Trustee John Olsen for the Kedumba Collection. In 2004 Pauline (charcoal and pastel) became a finalist in the Dobell Drawing Prize and in 2008 judge Jenny Sages chose the industrial landscape Garden Island (ink and pastel) for the Kedumba Drawing Award, making Graham one of the few artists to have two works acquired for the collection.

While she continued to live in the Blue Mountains, industrial and construction sites became her chief subject matter with frequent field trips to her favourite locations. In 2011, ink and pastel landscapes of the cranes of Cockatoo Island, smokestacks of Port Kembla, poppet heads of Broken Hill and rising apartment blocks in Rhodes were the focus of a solo exhibition Industrial Landscapes at Braemar Gallery in Springwood and works in a group exhibition 3+1 at Lost Bear Gallery in Leura.

The death of her father after a long illness saw her work engage deeply with themes of impermanence and mortality. She was increasingly attracted to Sydney’s older buildings, either doomed or isolated by the city’s frenzied development, feeling driven to “immortalize these relics from the past”. Her Green Ban series of images from The Rocks pays tribute to the industrial actions that saved that area from demolition. Her research into the secret, often dark, history of iconic Sydney buildings includes the early colonial cemetery beneath Sydney Town Hall, explored in textured images with background layers of handwriting, fusing the historic with the personal.

Graham’s most recent urban works in monochrome have become larger and more abstract, with dramatic explorations of blackness through charcoal and pastel, as exemplified by ‘Sentinel’, winner of the Blacktown City Art Prize (Works on Paper) 2014 while her solo exhibition ‘Sydney Drawn’ at the Lost Bear Gallery in Katoomba in March 2015 focused on this latest starker vision of Sydney’s streets and buildings.





'Resort for bad characters' (Sydney Town Hall, 100cm x 150 cm, mixed media on paper, 2014)

*'What a fabulous building this is as it sits on Old Sydney Burial Ground. How many of us realise that when we meet on the Town Hall steps?'*

Jody Graham:

Drawing has always been my passion: a lifelong commitment and an expression of love for the world around me. At its best, drawing provides an experience for both artist and viewer that is captivating and transformative.

My approach often favours the gestural and expressive mark. I enjoy that direct and instant communication between hand and mind: the unmediated connection to an inner dialogue. In the act of drawing, I gather together my thoughts, emotions, memories and ideas

and discover ways to interpret them. I am learning with my eyes and hands as I draw.

In the past year I have become increasingly aware of my tendency to anthropomorphise the built environment. Initially I am attracted to a looming presence in buildings, and many often do have a dark past. The architecture may evoke eerie suggestions and elusive memories that drive my curiosity, establishing an even closer connection to the subject. I am aware of how the windows and doors relate to the total shape of a building and of its decorative, historical features.

*Most of the time I tend to work on more than one drawing at once. I prepare supports for 4 to 5 works, then go and pursue my subject matter, returning to the studio to draw up the beginnings of each building. Once the bones of each building are down, I set them up in a way next to each other that would work if they were hanging together. So each drawing visually feeds into the next. After all works are set up, I move from one drawing to the next in no apparent order. I relate this process a bit to cooking, stirring all works as they shape and bind. Eventually one work seeks out for more attention, I then focus on it. It feels like one work will bubble up before another, then the next might start to bubble up and so on. Working this way gives me the chance to move between drawings, often spotting what needs to be done on other works out of my peripheral vision. I keep evolving the drawings this way until they begin to take on a life of their own. At that point I am mostly dedicated to one work, spending more time contemplating what I can do to support the path the drawing has taken.*

When selecting a building to draw, initially I think about its overall shape and the feeling that conveys to me. Is there something special about the building that stands out? It may have a quality about it which reflects a mood. I imagine a building as living, often seeing faces and becoming aware of moods and feeling an energy about its presence. I attribute human qualities to buildings and streets as well as to locations.

I look at how the building relates to its surrounding. Sometimes the buildings I draw appear to stand guard and loom out over the street. Sometimes the buildings are inconspicuous and attract me because of that. I am constantly on the lookout for what could be hidden away—a gem waiting to be discovered. Older buildings interest me as well as those that are in a state of decay. I like to see evidence of history and use, the discarded, the forgotten and the once loved; I want to record what was possibly once great.

The desire to do this became stronger when my father passed away in 2012. This was when my subject matter changed. I find myself drawn to older buildings and streetscapes which have become meaningful anchor points for me for memory and stability in a constantly changing chaotic cityscape.

I sketch the building on site before I create bigger works back in the studio. I like to do this very early in

the morning for many reasons. Mostly I simply love watching the city wake up, especially on weekends when there is a different energy. Not the normal hustle and bustle of getting to work but a more relaxed weekend energy, even a sanguine energy. I feel as though I am in my own theatre, watching the cleaners come out, the homeless stir, night workers travelling home, and the light of a new day emerges. Fantastic stuff! Immersing myself in this special time is one of my absolute pleasures, as is sourcing out new buildings, visiting them often, hopefully exploring inside and researching their history, architecture, use and so on. I develop a relationship with the building and become familiar with it, walk around it, check out what's happening either side of it, how it is constructed, its former use and current use and so on.

I am not surprised when a building has a colourful, chequered or tragic past. This is often apparent to me from the onset, even before I do any research. The building's history will be evident in its external features. Some examples of this include 'Resort for bad characters' (Sydney Town Hall, 100cm x 150 cm, mixed media on paper, 2014). What a fabulous building this is as it sits on Old Sydney Burial Ground. How many of us realise that when we meet on the Town Hall steps? To build on such a location is common overseas but not as much here. For this work I researched records and discovered names and accounts of how people died. The use of text in this work gives actual accounts of some of these names and other details. Using brushwork on top of the text I have buried much of this information leaving only scant traces of evidence, similar to archeologists using brushes to gently uncover remains of graves when excavating.

Old Sydney burial ground was a site known as a 'resort for bad characters' when it was in use (1792 - 1820). Once closed, the cemetery became neglected and by 1837 many of the headstones had been vandalised. The cemetery became "a resort for bad characters at night" and by day stray pigs, goats and horses wandered among the graves, many of which lay open. Unpleasant smells arising from the grounds became unbearable in hot weather. Many blamed clandestine burials and grave robbers opening graves to steal leaden coffins. It was also recorded in a committee report that men utilised the old burial ground to answer the call of nature. Another special feature of Town Hall for me is the magnificent clocktower. I am curious about who still uses these great time pieces to check the time. Are they a thing of the past? Once they were the centrepiece of every town, now they can seem like a headstone too.

*Locked In* (right) became a very personal work on many levels. It began in the same way as many others. I set off on foot early one morning in the area where I live, Newtown/Enmore. On this occasion I wanted to get away from the main roads to find out what might be tucked away in the back streets. I was rewarded with a spectacular two story corner building which included a large chimney as well as front and side gable rooftops.

The building had a presence above the many others I had been eyeing off that morning. This was the one, and I knew it instantly. I did my usual plein air drawings. Sketching onsite helps me understand the architecture. It is also when I begin to romanticise about inhabitants past and present. After staking out my new subject I raced back to the studio to start work while my excitement level was high and fresh. Often I have the support ready to go so I can just walk into the studio and get cracking. These large works like *Locked In* usually take a few sessions to complete and it was during the second that the work began to take on a life of its own. I like to work with long uninterrupted slabs of time—it allows my thoughts to flow and on this occasion this went in an unexpected direction. My mind started to wander and obsess while drawing. I had not heard from my troubled partner for the best part of the day, which was highly unusual. He had had been in recovery for years from alcohol addiction. He had a dangerous relapse history which had resulted in frequent hospitalisation. I could not shake the nagging feeling that he had started to drink again. This anxious undercurrent in my mind went on for hours while I kept drawing. Eventually it became too much and I rang my sister to offload some of the madness in my head. While talking to her I noticed I had completely drawn over and blocked in the doorway of the building. I jokingly said to my sister: 'I've blocked in the doorway of my house, people can't get out now!' She replied, 'Well, who is locked in then?' I immediately understood what she meant. I looked at my work and liked the direction it had taken, it embodied a very deep and personal meaning for me. After one more brief session I finished the work. *Locked In* is a term I relate to Korsakoff syndrome, also known as wet brain. On that occasion my partner had been on a long bike ride. A few months after making this work he began to drink again.

Right: *Locked In*, Charcoal & pastel on paper, 126cm x 114cm, 2015





*Little Queen, Charcoal and Pastel on Paper 126cm x 114cm, 2015*



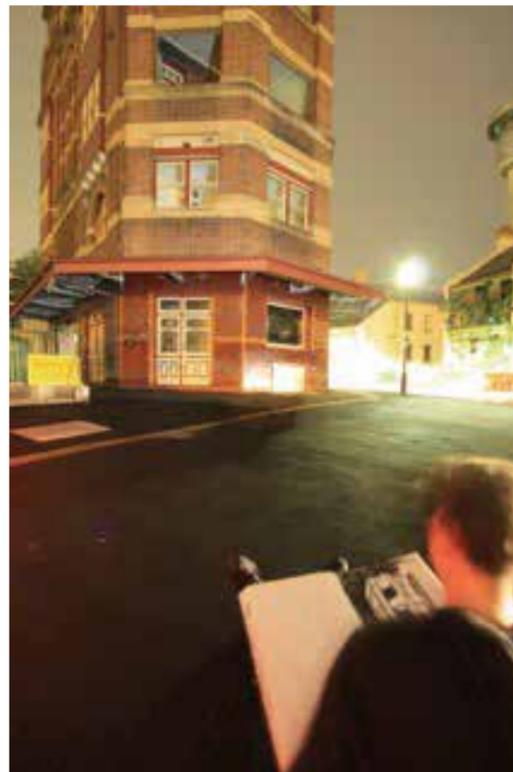
*Left:  
Grand Demoiselle,  
Charcoal & pastel on paper  
126cm x 114cm 2015*

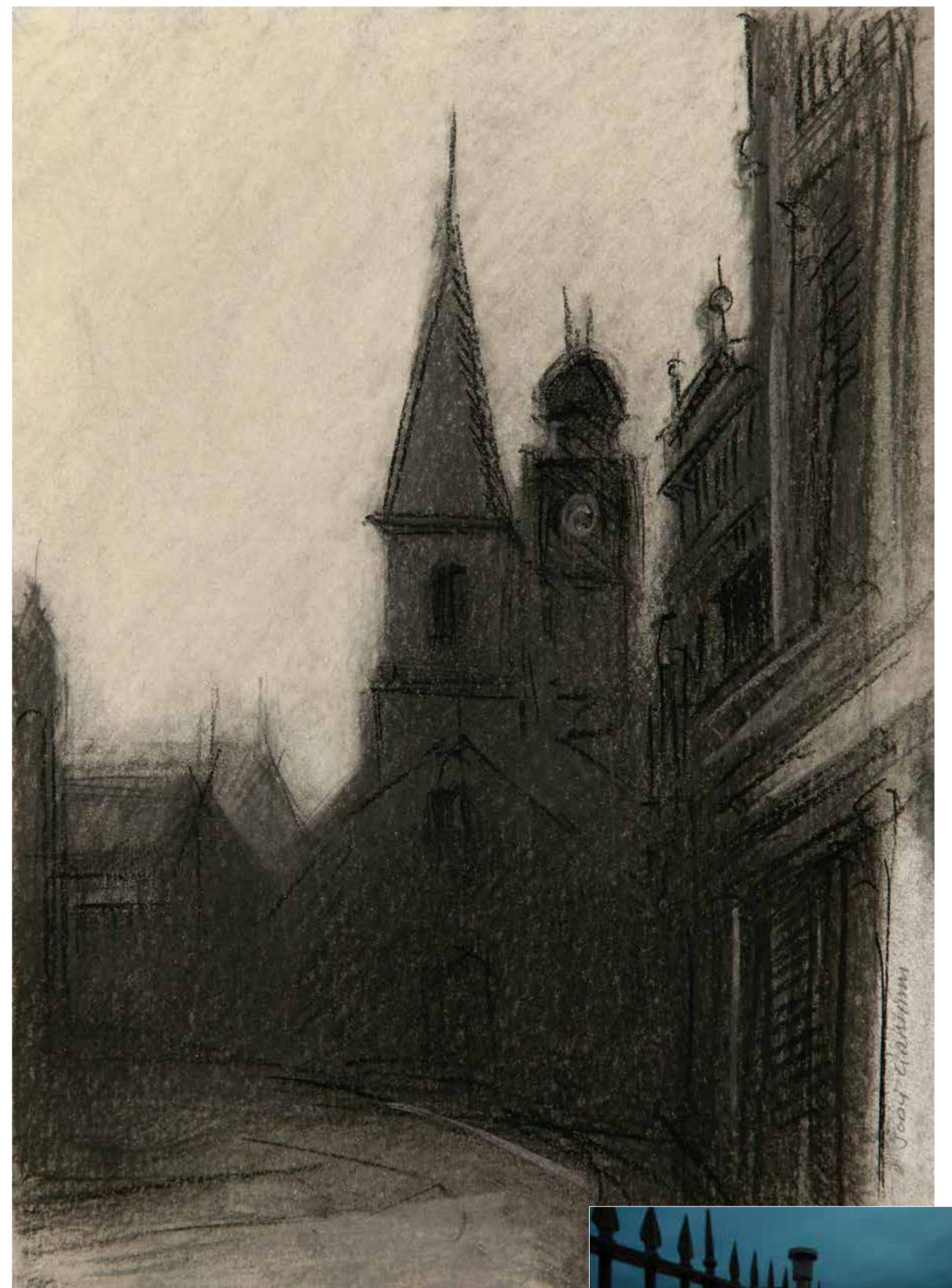
*Below,  
Left to right:  
George St, Sydney, Acrylic,  
Ink & Pastel on paper, 38cm x  
28cm 2015*

*Jody drawing at dawn  
Surry Hills, Acrylic, Ink &  
Pastel on paper, 38cm x 28cm  
2015*

*Town Hall, Sydney, Acrylic, Ink &  
Pastel on paper, 38cm x 28cm  
2015*

The birth of *Little Queen* began when I decided to travel to the north end of King Street to check out the impressive Victorian architecture. While undertaking this, a corner building inadvertently stuck out. I considered it and it wasn't long before I realised this building was once treasured. A corner store I expect, one that I imagined that had sweets and lollies in jars. The whole shape of this building, including how the upper level windows related to the jutting out collapsing awning, overhanging a darken entrance all looked very lifelike to me. I saw this building as distinguished, loyal and waiting patiently to be noticed. Calling out to be remembered. It got my attention! The utility pole out the front added to the charm, as these too will soon be a thing of the past. Making this work involved lots of rubbing out, redrawing of lines, moving of windows and changing the architecture until I felt I had captured the expression and feeling of the building.





Above: *Bells and Smells, Ultimo*, Charcoal and pastel on paper 23cm x 17cm 2015  
Opposite page: *Winter Morning*, Charcoal on paper 23cm x 17cm 2015

Jody Graham is represented by Lost Bear Gallery [www.lostbeargallery.com.au](http://www.lostbeargallery.com.au)  
And .M Contemporary gallery, Sydney  
Photographer of art work Graeme Wienand  
Photographer of location shots Scott Leonard

