

Geisha: The Allure of Mystique

- new works by Julie Podstolski explore the mystery of Japan's unique, but declining cultural icons at Kingfisher Gallery, West Perth from 15 September - 10 October

Julie Podstolski says they are "splendid living works of art." She is speaking of geisha, a subject which has consumed her work since 2003 when she first visited Japan. Her works are created in the unusual medium of coloured pencils on paper, a technique which has absorbed her practice to the exclusion of all other mediums. While geisha numbers have been in decline for years, Julie says while the rarified profession still exists she will persist in studying their outstanding beauty and the sumptuous eye-popping colours and designs of their kimonos, worn with elegance and finesse.

Her works begin with photographs. She has visited Kyoto each year since 2003 to tackle the exhausting task of capturing her subject. "I pace the streets from morning until night with my heavy camera hoping to be in the right place at the right time. Long periods of no sightings can be spirit-crushing, however when these women come into view my exhaustion evaporates. It is also risky. If my subjects are greeting one another or standing around chatting as they sometimes are, I have the luxury of time for composition. More often than not they are hurrying from one engagement to another so I click away in the seconds which I have. I enjoy that element of chance. It comes with an adrenalin rush."

After years of intense focus on her subject Julie has come to know many by name, and enjoys following their progress through the various stages of their careers. To



- 'Dichotomy,' coloured pencils on paper by Julie Podstolski.

outsiders geiko (the Kyoto term for geisha) and maiko (apprentice geiko) are unapproachable, beautiful, remote, and contained in a separate dimension from ordinary life. It is this other world which Julie has managed to penetrate.

A highlight of her last visit to Japan in May was being taken to a very exclusive teahouse where costs can range from \$5 - \$10,000 for an evening. Five geisha attended the group. "Three of them I had drawn so as they came in I was able to announce who they were before they did. They were simply gobsmacked Australians knew who they were. It was a rarified intoxicating atmosphere. The geisha were dignified, refined, knowledgeable (one spoke perfect English so we could converse at length). At one point they danced and sang for us. They were delighted that I drew them and were very interested in my art just as I was very interested in theirs. 'Gei' means art. Geiko are custodians of Japanese traditional fine art. They strive for mastery of dance, instrumentation, song, flower arrangement and calligraphy. They are witty and spirited companions, conversationalists and entertainers. In the west there is no comparative profession."

Julie said she had no particular interest in geisha before visiting Japan in 2003, a year which also marked her complete transition to exclusively using coloured pencils. She first began using them after the birth of her youngest daughter in 1994. "I found it frustrating to mix up colours to paint only to have the baby cry." After realising she much preferred working with coloured pencils, she hung on to her oils for years, just in case, only giving them away last year.

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