



Picture: JOHN MINIHAN

Rebecca Hossack with the painted totems at her Windmill Street gallery

# West End gallery defies protests over sacred poles

by Patricia Miller

WEST END gallery owner Rebecca Hossack is to go ahead with an exhibition of Aboriginal works of art, despite protests from Australia that it includes sacred objects.

Ms Hossack faces criticism from Aboriginal leaders who object to bark paintings and pukamani burial poles being put on display.

The poles are made from hollow tree trunks and painted with the totem of the person who has died. The bones of the dead are chopped up and put into the tree trunk which is left standing in the earth. The spirit thus passes down the trunk into the land.

Rebecca Hossack plans to display the poles like a forest of Eucalyptus trees in her Windmill Street gallery, off Tottenham Court Road. They will be a memorial to all Aboriginals killed since European settlement.

Ms Hossack has collected the bark paintings over six years during her trips to the Australian outback.

Aborigine leaders say they must prevent exhibits that they consider holy being put on display.

Mike Wevers, spokesman for Aboriginal law and culture, said: "We have to make sure that none of the artefacts are sacred to our beliefs.

"If some are discovered to be sacred, then these exhibits cannot be allowed on display."

Rebecca Hossack insists: "I have had all of my objects checked with Howard Morphy of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. He's the world expert. I can see

why the pukamani poles might cause trouble because they are tombs, but the bark paintings should be no trouble because they are not an authentic form of Aboriginal art.

"The original bark paintings were on the walls of huts but the missionaries asked for small versions to take away. In that sense the paintings are influenced by Western tastes. One is a death scene. If they object to that I will withdraw it."

Sacred tribal artefacts have caused problems in the London art world before.

In 1988 Bonhams were forced by a storm of protest to withdraw a Maori shrunken head. The head was sent back to New Zealand after a farewell ceremony at the New Zealand High Commission.

As a result of the controversy, rival auctioneers Christie's decided that they would not deal in human remains.

The modern paintings from Balgo Hills in Western Australia that Rebecca Hossack is currently showing are not thought to be in contention. They are stylised landscapes executed entirely in dots in the fashion of impressionist Georges Seurat.

"Although the subjects themselves are sacred, the paintings are all in dots specifically to stop non-Aboriginal eyes from seeing the sacred mysteries," Ms Hossack explained.