



One tough sheila: Rebecca Hossack, cultural development officer.

Dream time

It's Rebecca Hossack's dream job — Australia's cultural development officer in London. She spoke with
JANE CORNWELL Photograph by **John Woudstra**.

cess of growing up. It's pretty tongue in cheek."

The appointment is a timely one. "In the '60s it was very fashionable and sexy to be an Australian in London. There was Richard Neville and *Oz Magazine*, Boyd and all those fabulous Australian shows that Brian Robertson was putting on at the Whitechapel. So, since there's been a '60s revival everywhere else, I think that again it's becoming fashionable to be Australian." Thirty years on, Australia has cemented a multicultural identity for itself. Increased self awareness often means less need to impress, and Hossack agrees that "the multi-racial aspect has really transformed any cultural inferiority complex Australia might have had. There isn't that single adherence that we just have to impress the United Kingdom, although London is still an important

country" (where Julie Christie bought a painting) "and staged the !Kung Bushman Exhibition at the Barbican." Hossack's use of the plural picks her out as a team player: although the galleries might bear her name, without her "brilliant staff" she doesn't know how she would have managed. Although one could predict, probably pretty well. Having exhibited all the different Aboriginal communities, Hossack feels that "Aboriginal" as a genre is no longer valid. "Now that we've moved on to individual shows, we try not to mention they are Aboriginal artists and just say they were born in Australia. The work can stand on its own two feet."

Work by Papua New Guinean and African artists has also proven immensely popular, and is indicative of the galleries' remit: to look outside the parameters of Western art. Caricature

Some detractors see Hossack as a plundering opportunist who inflicts culture shock on visiting artists. For most, it's the first time they have left their communities, let alone their country. Eleven ! Kung Bushmen stayed in her tiny flat above the Windmill Street gallery during the Barbican run, as did the Papua New Guinean artist Mattias Kauge. "It was like having Fred Flintstone," Hossack says. "But he came and bought shoes and took it all in his stride. What comes across is the essential humanity of man. We're all contaminated by the Western world, it's naive to think otherwise. No one's living in an island paradise any more."

Part of the proceeds from the ! Kung Bushman show went to Survival International. "Until 1961 it was legal to shoot a bushman. Today they've been kicked off their tribal lands." Hossack was recently the subject of gossip in London art circles for taking the leviathan Barbican to court for breach of contract. The Barbican had demanded that Hossack remove her exhibition for a day to accommodate a Save the Children royal event. She gets out a photo album to illustrate the ridiculousness of the notion — "See how huge it was?" — and says she feels vindicated that her small business refused to be steamrollered. "But we won! I got a full apology this morning with a huge cheque and a bunch of flowers. I will fight my corner if I have to."

Writer Bruce Chatwin was a close friend of Hossack's during the past years of his life, and an exhibition called *Songlines* in 1989 was partly in tribute to him as well as to Australia's indigenous population. "Although I don't think he ever really took to Australia," she muses, "except for the women. Bruce always said he found Australian women sexy because of their mix of gentleness and tough practicality." Hossack is presently campaigning to have Windmill Street and its environs recognised by the "Fitzrovia". "It's such a wonderful area," she enthuses. "Dylan Thomas drank at the pub next door and Con-

AS A young girl growing up in Hawthorn, Rebecca Hossack collected gumnut nouveau and embroidered her dresses with eucalyptus leaves. When her father advised her to find a passion in life, she told him with patriotic zest that she already had one: Australia. Hossack has maintained this nationalistic ardour over 15 years of London residency, exhibiting the ethnographic art of her beloved country in two West End galleries and being mainly responsible for Britain's increased interest in Aboriginal art.

Not that she'd admit it, however. Hossack points out that art from the likes of the Torres Strait Islanders or Balgo Hills communities could be shown in a toilet and still sell. But what this antipodean has done is provide a platform for artists whose work may have previously gone unnoticed.

So it seems only fitting that the very first cultural development officer at the Australian High Commission is none other than Rebecca Hossack. She says it's her dream job. With a remit to raise Australia's culture profile in Britain, this woman *The Daily Telegraph* called "one tough sheila" (probably because she insisted the paper refrain from announcing the position before the high commission was ready — they went ahead anyway) starts in December.

You get the impression that the tag just makes official what Hossack has been doing for years. Mixing unbridled, knowledgeable enthusiasm with approachability and legal savvy (she's a qualified barrister), Hossack is in the process of developing a cultural strategy that will embrace all art forms.

Jim Payne, the High Commission's public affairs officer, says: "We've recruited an arts professional for extra expertise with forward planning. Rebecca fits the bill perfectly." At her eponymous gallery in Camden's Windmill Street, Hossack treats browsers, customers ("Hi, Paul! Have you come to get your painting? Isn't it beautifully stretched?") staff and in-

interviewers as old friends, and takes the failure of a newly installed phone system in her stride. "I'm just so thrilled to have the opportunity to display Australia's wonders" she says, her excitement evident. "We have so much to offer."

When the position was advertised, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express* went to town with imperialistic mirth. "So they do give a XXXX for culture," chuckled the former, while the latter wheeled out Australia's erstwhile cultural attache, Les Patterson (aka Barry Humphries). "XXXX the lot of them," he allegedly spluttered. "They're a bunch of poofers and pillow biters." Given that much of the British press sees yoghurt as having more live culture than Australia and its sun, surf, sport and beer, does Hossack think she's got her work cut out? "I think all these articles are slightly affectionate," she laughs. "I imagine it like a rite of passage, an older brother to a younger sister who is in the pro-

cess. Though London is still an important business centre and culture follows money."

Rebecca Hossack arrived in London to study law in 1980, armed with two degrees and one overnight bag. "I had nothing — not a sausage," she remembers. After an unsatisfying stint at the bar, she trained at Christies, which awarded her a studentship at the Venice Guggenheim ("My first job was to polish the Brancusi"), and, back in London, she organised the first exhibition for artists in Wapping. "At that time — before the developers moved in — it was one of the largest artistic communities in the world." Riding her bike down Windmill Street one day, Hossack noticed an empty shop for sale and it's been an upward spiral ever since. A second gallery opened in St James in Piccadilly, in 1991, and an adjacent sculpture garden completes a wildly successful artistic trifecta.

"It had been hard enough — but we've done it!" she says. "We did the first-ever Aboriginal show in this

parameters of Western art. So, is Rebecca Hossack a curatorial Anita Roddick (of the Body Shop)? "I'm a great individualist, and I find that what makes life really exciting is when you meet someone and feel their dignity and their uniqueness. I don't want artists that look like everybody else. The one common thread is that they are people who follow their own drum, and, because of that, we have a lot of outsider artists. Art is about spiritual fulfilment and Western art is becoming too cerebral to do that. When Duchamp gave up art to play chess, he said it all."

Displayed on stark, white walls, the deep rich colors of the Outback present investment potential and aesthetic appeal for the boardroom. Hossack accepts a limitation in British tastes: "When in the past I've shown something bright and orange and wonderful, it hasn't sold. The pictures that do are more muted: the blues and pinks, the soft, smoky British colors."

stable used to live in this building. Camden has agreed to rename it on the map, so it's only a matter of time."

Hossack believes a new, hybrid form will emerge as Western artists appropriate from other cultures. "You should see a work of art and feel joyful," she says. "It may not be a fashionable view, but I think it is really important that art has direct contact with here" — she places her hand on her stomach — "rather than here." She taps the top of her head.

Rebecca Hossack is relishing the task of enriching Britain with the vast array of film, literature, performance and visual art that has always been prolific in Australia. She says she is amazed at the number of expat Australians who are "doing amazing things in the UK. It's brilliant — this isn't an easy country and they're everywhere you go. I think that coming from a country with such wonderful space gives you a lack of angst and a sense that anything is possible."