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Art attack

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A day in the life of an ...



Photos: Andrew Shaw

... art dealer

by Damon Syson



'It's like I'm married to England but having an affair with Australia'

THERE'S a freshly-painted image of a crocodile on the pavement outside the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. "It's Kalpurru, the Aboriginal rain god," explains Hossack, 46, adding that Jimmy Pike, the artist who painted it, had promised it would bring a big storm. He was right. When I arrive, the paint is barely dry and a torrential downpour has just started.

When it comes to Hossack's career, the gods have been more benevolent. She admits it has often been a case of throwing caution to the wind. Born and raised in Melbourne, she gained degrees in law and history of art before coming to London in 1981 to study for the Bar. Deciding her real passion was art, she took an art diploma course at Christie's. She spent most of the following five years working in an antiquarian bookshop, cataloguing art books. At one point, she was so strapped for cash she slept in the basement.

Things took a dramatic turn when she was cycling down Windmill Street in Fitzrovia, and saw a "shop to let" sign. She stopped and talked to a man washing the front step, who turned out to be the owner. He offered her a 20-year lease. "I had no money," Hossack recalls, "but it was the Eighties when it was easier to borrow. I went to a bank and they gave me a £20,000 overdraft. I'm still so grateful to the bank manager."

The Rebecca Hossack Gallery opened in March 1988 and somehow the business stayed afloat during the recession. In 1991, Hossack opened the Sculpture Garden in St James's, Piccadilly, and in 1995 she was appointed cultural attaché at the Australian High Commission in London.

Fans of Barry Humphries's Dame Edna Everidge will be aware that this was the post held by Edna's alter-ego, slovenly bon viveur Sir Les

Patterson. "Barry is a fantastic man, a truly great Australian," says Hossack. "He sent me a postcard saying, 'All the best, Becky, with love from your unworthy predecessor, Sir Les.' Everywhere I went I used to get jokes about Sir Les." One joke she tired of, however, was this: What's the difference between Australia and a yoghurt? There's culture in a yoghurt.

It was Hossack's aim to change people's perceptions of Australia. "It was a hell of a lot of work," she says. "But I really enjoyed it, and there was tremendous support from the Australian expat community. The highlight of my career was taking Aboriginal artist Clifford Possum to meet the Queen."

Hossack gave up the post in 1998, though she still does whatever she can to promote Australian culture in Britain. She and her English husband, writer Matthew Sturgis, live above the Windmill Street gallery. Her typical day starts with a jog around Regents Park, (she's training to run the New York marathon for a cancer charity), then comes the day-to-day business. This ranges from hanging new shows to planning future events (sometimes three years in advance), overseeing her website, looking after the

26 artists she represents and a host of other responsibilities. It's chaotic.

The gallery, with clients including Griff Rhys Jones and Anita Roddick, was the first in Europe to show Australian Aboriginal art. "It's been a huge educational process," says Hossack. "When we first opened, I'd send out press releases and people would say, 'Aboriginals? I thought they were dead.' They literally had no idea. Our aim is to show the richness and diversity of Aboriginal life."

Every year Hossack returns to Australia for a month to work with a different community. The result is her annual SongLines season.

The gallery is not entirely devoted to Aboriginal art, however. For nine months of the year it concentrates on showing artists, both British and Australian, working in the Western tradition.

Along the way Hossack found time to engage in a long-running tussle with Camden council, over a gum tree she planted outside her gallery. The tree became a local *cause célèbre*, especially when the council turned up at midnight and took it away.

In 2000, Hossack opened another gallery, around the corner in Charlotte Street.

Although she still misses Australia, she thinks it unlikely that she'll ever leave London. "In a funny way you can learn more about Australia from here," she says. "You need to go away to get a true perspective. The Aboriginal renaissance, for example, is a phenomenon. But if I were living there I'm not sure I would have grasped the significance so much."

"I love Australia, but I know if I lived there I might not feel the same way. This way, it's like I'm married to England, but I'm having an affair with Australia."

● Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 35 Windmill Street, London W1. www.r-h-g.co.uk

Pros & Cons

Pros

- Working with artists; the sense of wonder you get with new paintings.
- Visiting communities around the world.

Cons

- Having to mix your passion with commerce.
- When, through nobody's fault, a show doesn't sell well.

