

# Canvassing for change

Whether she's running marathons to raise money to plant trees in the local community, or flying to the Outback to source aboriginal art, Fitzrovia gallerist Rebecca Hossack likes to go the extra mile.

**Lauren Romano** meets the former Australian cultural attaché and councillor to talk thinking outside the box

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Rebecca Hossack could charm the birds from the trees she planted herself, but there are limits to even this charismatic gallery owner's powers of persuasion. When we meet at her Conway Street gallery she's still reeling from her breakfast meeting with the Australian High Commissioner because her sporty Dries Van Noten pumps didn't get past the doorman of a certain artistic institution. "I had to wear these hideous matron shoes they gave me!" she exclaims, as she serves me delicious pistachio cake from Honey & Co down the road.



ABOVE: DIONE VERULAM, *BESIDE THE SEA, CORNWALL*, 2016, COLLAGE, COURTESY OF REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY

Hossack is not the type of person to let a thing like a slammed door put her off. I'm not sure what fuels her boundless energy (she's a community fundraiser, an avid spokesperson for Fitzrovia, a board member at LAPADA... the list continues), but it's both impressive and infectious. I imagine there's never a dull moment with her around.

A white cube her Conway Street gallery is not (she has another on Charlotte Street and an outpost across the pond in New York). Hossack set up her first location on Windmill Street in 1988, where she introduced aboriginal art to the UK market. Today a permanent collection of these vivid works is given a dedicated floor upstairs (which opens out onto a lemon tree-filled balcony), while on the ground floor exhibitions showing the works of contemporary artists such as Rob Tucker and Sylvain Lefebvre are held.

"When I opened my first gallery it was all tumbleweed around here. Everyone thought I was mad and that no one would come," she says. It wasn't a career move that even she could have predicted. She'd emigrated from Australia to study law, although stints at Christie's and the Guggenheim in Venice began to sway her towards a more creative path. It was the weather, of all things, that clinched the deal.

"It was a sunny day and I was riding my bike down Charlotte Street. I was so used to living in grey London, but that afternoon it was so beautiful and everyone was outside. Just as I had this happy feeling, I rode down Windmill Street and saw a man hosing the pavement and a sign saying: 'shop for rent, no premium required'. If it had been raining that day I would probably have ended up being a lawyer." The bar's loss was the art world's gain. ▶



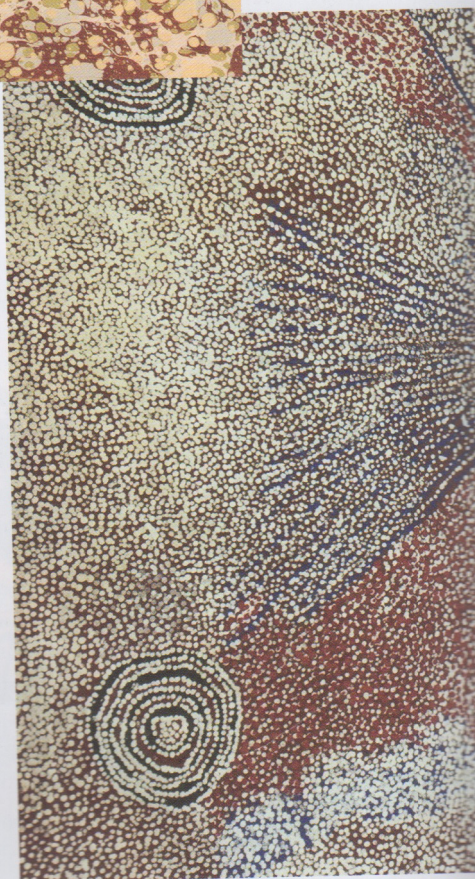


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DION VERULAM, *SEARCHING FOR TRUFF* 2016, COLLAGE; JUKUNA MONA CHUGUNA, *JUMUJARRA – TWO WATERHOLES*, 2010, COURTESY OF ARTIST, MANGKAJA ARTS RESOUR AGENCY ABORIGINAL CORPORAT AND REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY; DIONE VERULAM, *SIESTA SUR L'HE PYRENEES*, 2016, COLLAGE; JUKUN MONA CHUGUNA, *UNTITLED*, 2011, BEFORE; BILL WHISKEY *TJAPALTJA ROCKHOLES & COUNTRY NEAR T OLGAS*, 2006, ALL COURTESY OF REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY

► She didn't have a penny to her name when she signed the 20-year lease. Was it a case of ignorance is bliss? "It's a really good way to start a business because I didn't know about rates and utilities, all I could think about was throwing the best opening party. It's actually a miracle," she adds. "The day after I signed the lease was Black Monday, the worst day in the history of the economic universe. I waltzed into Barclays bank and got this lovely man called Paul Castle and I said: 'I'm from Australia and I want to open an art gallery but I don't have any money. Can you lend me £20,000 and you can come to the opening party?'"

Honesty turned out to be best policy: the overdraft facility was secured and the party thrown. She tells me that at the time the art scene in London was very conservative, the YBAs weren't yet on the scene and even the contemporary galleries played it relatively safe. The critics didn't really know what to make of her first exhibition. It featured the work of Royal College of Art student Ann Carrington, who made a crocodile rug out of old shoes and giant horse heads out of salami.

Over the years Hossack discovered the jeweller Pippa Small, displayed works by the late potter Ann Stokes and





launched paper cuts and collages by Rob Ryan, revolutionising the traditional remit of the gallery.

Today she is interested in “anyone who is individual and not following fashion”. This month her Conway Street gallery will be presenting new collages by Dione Verulam made from old lithographs, monoprints and book binding papers, as well as paper and pigment yogis by Katherine Virgils. Meanwhile over at the Charlotte Street site, Canadian artist Ross Bonfanti will hold an exhibition of concreatures – sculptures made from concrete stuffed soft toys. The autumn season will also see a collaboration with local grocers Ben’s House. After the owner was turfed out of his premises to make way for luxury flats, Hossack invited him to rebuild his shop in the gallery.

“If it had been raining that day I would probably have ended up being a lawyer”

Supporting the local community is second nature to Hossack, who lives just around the corner in a little mews house surrounded by flower pots and trees. So charming is its kerb appeal that it has gained a reputation as a tourist attraction. “Every morning my husband Matthew and I would come out of our house and find people taking photos. After a while I decided to investigate and I found out there’s this website called Secret London and it had listed my house as the number one attraction,” she says. “Barnes is number two. The whole of Barnes! And Highgate Village comes in at number three!” she howls with laughter. “It must be because of the flowers. I tell all my friends with big posh houses in Notting Hill that Warren Muse is one of the most instagrammed houses in London!”

She admits she’s not really at home enough to appreciate it. “Looking at my schedule I should be a tax exile,” she jokes. Over the next few months she’ll be doing the rounds of art fairs in Seattle, London, Toronto, New York, Singapore and Miami.

Despite her busy schedule, Hossack manages to squeeze in an annual trip to the Australian Outback. While there she often invites aboriginal artists to come to London for a residency. One of her most treasured pieces from such a project is a door painted by the late Clifford Possum, which takes pride of place upstairs in the Conway Street gallery.

“I first went to Alice Springs before aboriginal art had been shown in the UK as I felt that it would resonate with a London audience accustomed to minimal or conceptual art,” she explains. It was there that she met Clifford who agreed to come to London to exhibit his work on the condition that he could meet the Queen.

The sequence of events that followed would be improbable if they had happened to anyone other than Hossack. To cut a long story short, she upheld her side of the bargain, but only because fate intervened and the Queen’s cousin, George Lascelles, happened to wander in off the street on the opening night of Clifford’s show. “Story of my life! Magic happens. If it stops happening, you know you’re on the wrong path,” she says gleefully.

“We went to Moss Bros to buy Clifford a suit. He got a top hat that he stuffed with paint brushes and an open necked shirt. He wore white trainers that he painted possums on. Actually, now that I think about it, they let him into Buckingham Palace with trainers on!” You can’t charm them all... ■

*Katherine Virgils: The Infinite Lightness of Being and Dione Verulam: Recent Work, 5-29 October at 2a Conway Street, Fitzroy Square, W1T; Ross Bonfanti: Concrete, 5-29 October, 28 Charlotte Street, W1T, rebeccahossack.com*

