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Faith, hope and a friendly bank manager

Expatriate Rebecca Hossack is taking on London's stuffy art world. So far, it's Miss Hossack's game

INTERVIEWING REBECCA Hossack over dinner is not a task for the easily deflected. Although we ate early, in a restaurant which was empty when we sat down, Hossack was soon launched into her conversational stride.

"So-and-so will be furious when she knows we were eating here," she said, mentioning a close friend of hers. "I suppose you know she secretly adores you. But the unforgivable thing you have done is to take me to her favourite restaurant."

The experience of knowing Rebecca

Hossack, Melbourne-born owner of a successful London art gallery, is not one for the fragile or retiring personality. Before long the Italian owner of the restaurant had been drawn to our table, as though by a magnet, and had felt encouraged to speak at rather unnecessary length, I thought, about his amatory prowess.

"Is she one of your girlfriends, too?" my dinner guest demanded, motioning towards a particularly steamy-looking waitress.

"But, of course," the owner replied, glowing with male vanity.

"Maybe it's your strange gaze

which attracts them," Hossack then suggested. "Has anyone ever told you that you have eyes just like a kangaroo's?"

Hossack can be a disconcerting companion, not least to those with inflated male egos. Luckily for me, she can laugh at jokes at her own expense, too. Some weeks ago, in a review of her gallery's excellent exhibition of Aboriginal art, I had ventured to write: "With a little help from the gallery owner, Australian herself, I was able to discern emu and kangaroo tracks and the courses of creeks and billabongs. Odd, petal-like shapes ▶

symbolise fire, and the initiated can pick out also equivalents for women roasting lizards and small marsupials by the fireside. What an idyllic alternative to taking women to expensive restaurants these images provide."

Within hours of my review appearing in *The Spectator*, Hossack had organised a complaint by telephone to me, which emanated, supposedly, from the Friends of the Marsupial Society, and had circulated an equally convincing press release for a new book I was supposed to have written, *Marsupial Symbolism in Art: A Learned Treatise*. A bit of professional fun helps the art world go round. Australians should need little convincing that the London art world is inclined to be stuffy.

By now, Hossack's tall form and striking face have become well known to other inhabitants of London's Fitzrovia. The area takes its name from a famous pub, the Fitzroy Tavern, which was a former haunt of some other larger-than-life figures of British art. Augustus John, Dylan Thomas, Nina Hamnett and other notorious revellers drank there regularly in the '30s and '40s.

The Fitzroy Tavern is at the junction of Windmill Street, a short thoroughfare in which Hossack's gallery is located, and Charlotte Street, where the artist John Constable once lived. The area is not short of associations with past art, or past and present-day bohemia; Soho could be looked on simply as a continuation of Fitzrovia, or vice versa, since the two areas lie directly opposite each other to either side of Oxford Street.

Hossack is unconventional, rather than truly bohemian, although she described herself as such when she arrived in London to continue her law studies for the Bar at the Middle Temple. The impact of Hossack's flowing skirts and tresses among what she describes as "a number of short-haired, serious-looking little men in suits and glasses" is not too hard to visualise.

Before her arrival in Britain, Hossack studied law for five years at the University of Melbourne, as well as art history for three years at the Australian National University in Canberra. Three weeks were to prove



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long enough for her, though, among the serious students and faces at the Middle Temple.

As she explained to me: "I knew so many of the wonderful paintings in British museums and art galleries simply from reproductions. Now I couldn't bear to spend even one more

day without looking at the real thing."

During the two years that followed, Hossack began to put her art history knowledge to good use as a freelance organiser of exhibitions. She was headhunted to become part of a gallery partnership, only to emerge a year or so later feeling financially scalped by the experience.

"Probably I was too trusting and didn't make use of my legal training to ensure all the details of our deals were in writing. Perhaps I'm fatalistic, but I prefer to trust people and just see how things work out," she explained.

How they worked out, in practice, left Hossack with a hefty overdraft, but also with a lengthy lease on promising-looking premises: "I felt so cross about everything, I was more determined than ever to make a success of it."

The Rebecca Hossack Gallery has been running for two years now. After more than 20 exhibitions, the owner admits she is still learning, but is at least paying her way while she does so. The gallery space, on three different levels, is impressively large and is always spotless and beautifully lit. Bohemianism doesn't extend to business.

Nevertheless, her success is earned the hard way, because Hossack has chosen, typically, to proceed via the most difficult route, taking on promising but little-known artists rather than established names. A gallery program such as hers requires faith, energy and a friendly bank manager. To succeed along this road requires as much optimism as acumen.

London has never been the easiest of cities in which to sell the work of young or avant-garde artists. The climate there, like the present British government, is staunchly conservative, and there are very few serious collectors of contemporary art. From where, then, does Hossack get her belief in the necessity for art in everyone's lives?

Her father, a Melbourne surgeon, is a former chairman of the Council of the Arts and a lifelong friend of such Australian artists as the late Fred Williams and Clifton Pugh. "My father bought his first Clifton Pugh for about \$20 at a time when a straight choice had to be made between that and a vitally needed Hoover. There

wasn't money at the time for both." One doubts, somehow, whether a 30-year-old vacuum cleaner would have appreciated in value some 2000 times, as has the Clifton Pugh, but the fact remains that, at the time, buying any work of contemporary art seemed a considerable gamble.

If investing in contemporary art seems — and is — something of a risk, running a gallery which deals exclusively in that commodity exposes the owner also to every kind of vicissitude of fortune. How is the stock-market doing? It's just one factor that has a great bearing on art sales. And what may happen to rates of exchange when showing work from overseas?

Hossack employs other lively young women and encourages them to show initiative, yet, fairly clearly, remains the ultimate guide of the gallery's fortunes. I suggested to her that sometimes she must wake up in her flat above the art gallery and wonder why she has settled in England — on winter days especially.

"My parents live in Hawthorn in a comfortable house. I love the climate

and the beaches in Melbourne and the smells of the countryside, gum leaves particularly. I am the eldest of four sisters and the only one, so far, who has worked away from Australia. The other day I found a 1978 newspaper clipping from *The Sun* showing me with my boyfriend of the time, a football player. We met at law school. But all that seems such ages ago now. If I hadn't left Australia, there are so many interesting things I wouldn't have done and new friends I wouldn't have made."

My dinner guest went on to tell me that she is a former pupil of Geelong Grammar, where the act of winning a national poetry prize helped her escape the disciplinary consequences of "some rather bohemian behaviour". Before that she attended St Catherine's in Melbourne.

It was at this time she first met Jane England. By odd coincidence, Jane England's father is also a doctor in Melbourne where she, too, studied art history before moving to England and opening her own modern art gallery in London, at about the same time as Hossack's opened. Both the young

women told me that being an Australian in London is a help, rather than a hindrance, in cutting through the complex taboos of the English social system.

While English people can, on the whole, place each other pretty precisely in hierarchies of wealth, upbringing, social standing and the like, exuberant Australians always confuse them.

Everyone here expects Australians to be outspoken and unconventional and Rebecca Hossack, for one, does not aim to disappoint them. Her greatest concession to British taste so far is in her choice of dogs: a pair of squat, pedigree English bulldogs.

For a tall, willowy woman, the choice of such low-slung beasts comes as a mild surprise. Wouldn't a pair of afghans look more visually appropriate? Bulldogs are supposed to symbolise British, not antipodean, tenacity. What could have attracted her to a brace of brutish-looking bulldogs called Stella and Moon?

How silly of me not to have spotted the obvious answer: the dauntless duo remind her of wombats, of course. ■