

Cowboys and Aborigines

The increasing awareness of Aboriginal art both in Australia and abroad may tempt some to think that dealing in such works is a licence to print money.

Indeed, it seems that some Aussie businessmen are packing a painting or two along with their toothbrush when they come to London, hoping to make a quick buck.

Invariably they end up on the doorstep of Rebecca Hossack who runs a small gallery in London's west end.

"It's quite funny really," says Australian born Rebecca

"Every week I get these businessmen trying to sell me Aboriginal paintings."

They would have Rebecca and other gallery owners believe that dabbling in Aboriginal art is "money in the bank". What they don't count on is Rebecca's intimate knowledge and love for Aboriginal art.

"What they try to sell me is commercial rubbish. Just like something from Bayswater Railings but these people think that because it is Aboriginal it must be good.

"There are bad Aboriginal paintings, just like anything else."

Rebecca, a Melbourne University law and art history graduate who found the art world preferable to the legal profession, decided to open an art gallery two years ago with the intention of promoting Australian art.

But when she went home to find suitable material she was disillusioned with what she saw from white artists.

"It was very derivative. There was nothing new. I thought Australia was such a remarkable country why weren't they drawing on their resources."

But Aboriginal paintings were a different matter entirely.

"They just blew my mind. There was nothing like it in the world.

"These people have a lot to teach us about the land and treating it with respect. Each of these paintings is worship of the land and has a reverence for a particular place.

"If only we had that sort of reverence I think the world would be a better place.

"And that's why I think this movement is so important."

The gallery's first exhibition of paintings from the western desert people two years ago attracted wide



Rebecca Hossack with one of the paintings from the Songlines exhibition

interest from artists and students but was hardly a financial success. A second exhibition last year attracted more commercial interest, mainly from small budget buyers looking for paintings of around £200.

Her third exhibition, featuring works from the painters of Balgo Hills in the remote north west of Australia, has just opened but once again it is not expected to be a financial bonanza

"English people are used to softer colours. These paintings are certainly not interior design pictures for the average English house.

"But I don't care really. I think they are so important they should be shown."

Rebecca's motive for hosting this latest exhibition is to dispel a growing cynicism from the art world that the movement has sold out.

She admits she was disappointed by the way the movement had degenerated on her last visit to Australia. Artists appeared no longer interested in quality but simply churned out their work, lured by the Federal Government's policy of buying every work that is produced.

"This is wrong. You cannot subsidise art. It is patronising to the good painters who are committed to their work.

"A lot of Americans have become disillusioned with the movement because there is no discrimination between good and bad."

Such criticisms are aimed more at the "Toyota mentality" artists of the tourist traps of Alice Springs than the people of the isolated Balgo Hills.

This settlement of 500 people on the edge of the Tanami Desert is so far off the beaten track, Rebecca had to charter an aircraft to reach it. Her endeavours

were rewarded with eighteen "fabulous" paintings which now make up the Songlines exhibition.

Most of these are expected to fetch around £500 but two national gallery pieces are valued at around £7000. Rebecca hopes that the Tate Gallery may be interested in acquiring one.

So why would be an Aboriginal painting, painted by traditional aboriginal people, end up in the home of contemporary art?

"That's another misconception. It is contemporary art. One London critic really made me angry last year when he said why didn't these people (the desert aborigines) go back to doing non-portable, non-commercial work. It was so patronising.

"These people are modern Australian black artists and they are painting in the full knowledge that these paintings are going to be hung on the walls all over the world and helping to spread the word that Aboriginal culture is not a stoneage culture but that it is alive and well."

In the meantime, Rebecca is waiting for June to come around when a British real estate agent is hoping to "make a killing" from paintings he acquired in Australia.

"He told me he expects to sell them for about £20-30,000 a piece.

"I think he will be in for a shock."

Ross Stokes

Songlines, Paintings from Balgo Hills, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, until April 13. Also on show at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery is a stunning collection of black and white Aboriginal portraits taken by British photographer Nicholas Adler.