

C N JULY 19, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri will have his dearest wish fulfilled — he's going to meet the Queen. The visit to Buckingham Palace has been organised by Possum's dealer in London, Rebecca Hossack, with a little help from her friend, customer and fellow Australian Dr Malcolm Williamson, CBE, Master of the Queen's Music.

Clifford Possum, who was given a survey show at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1988, is a member of the tribe of desert artists who were encouraged, over 20 years ago, to transfer the imagery used in sand and body painting on to canvas. In the process, a rapidly disintegrating community was revitalised and the Papunya movement was born.

Nowadays, the distinctive dot-and-circle paintings have become Australia's fastest growing art export, with exhibitions taking place in the US, France, West Germany, Italy and, increasingly, in the UK.

The ever-higher prices which these works have been fetching have inspired some dubious exhibitions in recent years, as opportunist businessmen try to cash in on the so-called Aboriginal art boom.

For those galleries and dealers who have tried to work through the official Aboriginal arts agencies and to price works realistically, the get-rich-quick brigade have had a disastrous effect.

For over two years Rebecca Hossack has been the most consistent and committed exhibitor of Aboriginal art in London.

Hossack, Melbourne-born and unmistakably Australian, has held four shows of Aboriginal art, the most recent (until July 21) being a "master works" exhibition featuring paintings by Clifford Possum and other senior artists, such as Charlie Tjungurrayi, Paddy Carroll and Billy Stockman.

Hossack says that this show was mounted with the intention of counteracting the effects of a large, massively-publicised exhibition of Aboriginal art recently held at rented premises in London by a young art entrepreneur. His show was reputedly "London's first comprehensive exhibition of Aboriginal art" and was officially opened by Sir William Heseltine, the Queen's private secretary.

"When we held our first show," Hossack said, "nobody had ever heard of Aboriginal paintings. We worked our guts out with a thick file of personal letters sent to every single person we could think of. We sold really good pieces at very low prices, lower than in Australia.

"Gradually we built up this following among interested people who came along to every show. I've set out to show paintings from Papunya, Yuen-demu, Balgo, Lajamanu, etc, so that, if people kept attending our shows they could see that it was a living, evolving movement we had here.

"I thought this recent exhibition was

horrendous. It was packed with crappy tourist stuff that makes you feel sick. Alice Springs fabric designs crammed in one on top of another.

"And the prices! The prices were outrageous.

"Naturally the show was a flop, but I know that a lot of people went along and said: 'Oh, what we thought would happen has happened. The movement hasn't sustained itself; all the energy is gone.' So the best way I thought I could combat this attitude was to put on a masterworks show with good pieces by painters with proven track records."

Hossack is also planning a large exhibition of Aboriginal art in co-operation with the Arts Council, which will be shown next year in London then hopefully toured to public galleries in Oxford, Bristol and Manchester, bringing these paintings to a much wider UK audience than ever before.

The aim is to slowly accustom British taste to a radical new art form, and to have Aboriginal paintings accepted as "contemporary art of the world" not ethnographic curiosities from Down Under.

Hossack has lots of stories — most of them unprintable — about Australian businessmen trying to get her to join them in money-making schemes involving Aboriginal art. As she has been so "circumspect" for the last two years, these buccaneers send her into a rage.

Only a few weeks ago, she recounts, she received a phone call from an Australian tourist bureau asking her if she could see a certain politician. "They said, 'We think he's got something very interesting to show you.' Soon this horrid little fat man and his horrid little fat wife arrived, unfurled a suitcase and produced these ghastly photographs.

"He said: 'All right, this is Aboriginal art, it's a good investment and really hot property. We've got a company which my wife here will be running while I'm away.'

"I said, 'How much are they?' 'Arr, well, these ones here are \$6,000 Aust.' Little pictures by no-one you've ever heard of! I said: 'Where are they done?' 'Arr, they're done on this station that a couple of friends of ours have got. They've set up a place for the Abos to paint in the woolshed, and

we've formed the company.'

"Who's paid for your trip here?' 'Oh, I'm here on Government business.' 'And who's getting all the money from this?' He said: 'Oh, the company is, my wife and our friends.'

"And he seemed shocked that I didn't say 'Brilliant! Good on yer! We can all make money here.' I said: 'If you look at the price list for the show on the walls you will see that it is lower than what you've asked me to pay, without me even putting on my mark-up. I think you're disgusting, using Australian taxpayers' money to do this. Out! Out! Out!'"

Perhaps the biggest single boost Hossack has received in her attempts to sell Aboriginal art to a cautious market has been the publication of Bruce Chatwin's book, *Songlines*.

Chatwin was a friend and frequent visitor to the gallery, so when he died Hossack asked his widow if it would be all right to title a show *Songlines* in homage to Bruce. She agreed at once and the title made "an incredible difference . . . because suddenly people knew what it was all about."

Hossack is convinced that Aboriginal painting is beginning to influence the mainstreams of Western art. Where so much contemporary art is soulless and cerebral, she contends that the best Aboriginal painting has a sense of the order and rightness of things no less marked than the works of the early renaissance.

If further proof should be needed that Aboriginal art is finding a foothold in the rock face of British taste, Hossack has one final story.

"One of my main collectors here," she said, "a very nice British man, with a beautiful apartment in town, had an enormous Gilbert and George picture, the size of that back wall.

"Then I acquired an enormous Billy Stockman as big as that back wall. He walked in and he was gob-smacked. I said, 'You can have it on condition that you put it where your Gilbert and George hangs'. And he did! So down went the Gilbert and George and up went Billy Stockman, and that was a real triumph."

Perhaps the biggest triumph of all will be when the same thing happens at the Tate.